Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague—A portrait of a 17th century lockdown

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The COVID-19 pandemic, already the subject of numerous contemporary novels, has also made a 2001 work of fiction worthy of re-examination. That book is *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* by Australian-American journalist and novelist Geraldine Brooks, which treats the Derbyshire village of Eyam in 1665–66 and the decision by some its far-sighted figures to quarantine themselves.

Extant records indicating how a small village faced the bubonic plague, rather than a large city such as London, provide Brooks with material about 17th century English society, and the relation between the emergence of natural science and then current religious orthodoxy and superstition.

In a 2020 interview about the book with the American-Australia Association, Brooks explained the extensive research she conducted before attempting this turn to historical fiction, her first novel.

Asked about comparisons with today's pandemic, she says: "The narrow lesson is the extent of leadership in that village by the young minister and his predecessor. You're in the thick of the wars of religion but they came together to lead the community through this thing." [1]

Brook was referring to the fact that Eyam's village minister was an Anglican. His predecessor, a Puritan, was removed from this position after refusing to abide by the religious Act of Uniformity by Charles II's government. The Act was imposed after the restoration of the British monarchy in 1660, following the English Civil War and the Puritan revolution.

The Anglican minister and the Puritan, however, collaborated to persuade the parish to voluntarily agree to quarantine the village and prevent the plague from spreading to the surrounding countryside.

Our current experience of COVID-19 makes Brooks' novel very readable. It throws a light on what is happening today, where scientific ignorance is promoted globally as an economic imperative (saving the market, saving profits), even though the knowledge exists to eliminate the pandemic.

Formerly a journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and later a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans, Brooks turned to creative writing with this novel, which after a slow start, gradually won a wide audience.

March, her second book, won her the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It is about the US Civil War experiences of the absent March family father from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). Brooks' next novel, *People of the Book*, showcased numerous voices concerning the Sarajevo Haggadah—a Jewish prayer book, rescued from oblivion and passed to a book conservator who discovers a hidden history.

Caleb's Crossing (2012) is also set in the 17th century and concerns the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College. It was followed by two more historical novels: *The Secret Chord*, about the biblical King David, and *Horse* (2022), concerning a famous 19th century racehorse named Lexington.

While the rural village of Eyam seems the unlikely scene of a protracted lockdown against the plague in 17th century England, this actually did occur.

George Viccars, a visiting tailor, was the village's first plague victim in 1665. He died after receiving a consignment of material for his work from plague-stricken London. It must have contained the rat fleas that carried the dreaded plague—bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Following Viccars' death, at least 42 other inhabitants of Eyam died that year.

When the plague returned the next summer, the minister told his parishioners that the village must be quarantined. By August 1666, there were six deaths a day and entire families were wiped out. Altogether 260 residents from 76 families died in Eyam. Despite this, hardly anyone broke the cordon. The village probably prevented thousands of deaths more widely.

Dr Xavier Didelot, co-author of a detailed 2016 study of Eyam's records, has noted: "The importance of person-to-person infection showed isolation was the right thing to do. By staying within the confines of their community, the inhabitants of Eyam did indeed stem the spread of the epidemic, albeit at a tragic cost to themselves."

Inspired by these events, Brooks' novel is narrated by Anna Frith, an 18-year-old widow with two young sons, who survived by working as a maid to the village minister Michael Mompellion and his wife Elinor, and occasionally for the Bradfords, a wealthy local family.

Brooks bases Anna on a passing reference in the actual Eyam minister's surviving letters. The story relies on her strengths, as the key protagonist, to provide a believable account of the

historical background.

The most important of these strengths is that Anna, against the odds and despite her humble station, knows how to read and write. This ability, highly unlikely for a woman of her class, has been fostered by Elinor Mompellion, who, as her employer and under conditions of the village's quarantine, becomes a close friend.

This unusual bond centres around providing health services to the cut-off village, including taking on the role of midwifery, something for which the two women are quite under-prepared. Anna has some experience birthing lambs, and Elinor has books outlining current medical theories.

Under the pressure of necessity, the two of them increasingly work to link together practical and theoretical knowledge, which says something about the state of contemporary medical science at the time.

In her 2020 interview, Brooks touched on the level of medical knowledge in the 17th century. "They didn't have a germ theory of disease, but it was amazing what they did know. They knew distance and time were protective… they did figure out" to get rid of "things that are infected, that a person had touched," she explained.

Furthermore, scientific method was encroaching more and more confidently on preserves previously forbidden by religion. As historian of 17th century thought Basil Willey points out, the hold of medieval religious restrictions was declining during this time: "In general it may be said that the reason why scholasticism was held to be an obstacle to truth was because it seemed to discourage further enquiry along experimental lines." [2]

It is not an unacceptable stretch for the novel to focus on the nursing efforts of the two women in the face of the plague. However rudimentary, their work reflects something of the nascent scientific endeavours of the times and a developing new outlook.

Yet in the village, religion and concomitant superstition still hold sway. The villagers desperately seek answers for their terrible plight in mysticism and look for convenient scapegoats who they brand as witches, even though the minister, Michael Mompellion, denounces this as the work of the devil.

The villagers might turn to charms and spells, but Anna and Elinor continue their healing mission, working to deepen their knowledge of herbs and remedies, experimenting with distillations, while they tend to the sick and survivors as well.

What was it like for them to confront the unknown extent of suffering and death brought upon them by the plague and grope to find a way forward, however harsh?

Tragedy dogs their footsteps. Anna survives but her Christian faith does not.

"All of the texts and Psalms and orisons I had by rote were gone from me, erased, as surely as hard-learned words written with painful effort onto a slate can be licked away with the lazy swipe of a dampened rag. After so many unanswered prayers, I had lost the means to pray," Anna says near the end of the novel.

Brooks says in her 2020 interview that she has been strongly criticised for the conclusion of the story, which has Anna escape far beyond the confines of village life in Derbyshire. But Brooks stands by her authorial decision and insists that it was historically possible.

It is enough to say that Anna continued to bring life to others, as well as to pursue a path to further expanding her knowledge. In this she is not a 21st century imposition on the past, but a fair representation of the times, which must be the first duty of the historical novel.

Comparing the 17th century to the classical period of Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC) and Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (c. 99–c. 55 BC), historian Willey notes: "To be rid of fear—fear of the unknown, fear of the gods, fear of the stars or of the devil—to be released from the necessity of reverencing what was not to be understood, these were amongst the most urgent demands of the modern as of the ancient world; and it was because it satisfied these demands that scientific explanation was received as the revelation of truth. Not immediately received by everybody, we should remind ourselves." [3]

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague sensitively and effectively captures this spirit and its complexities and contradictions.

Footnotes:

1. American-Australia Association interview with Geraldine Brooks

2. and 3. Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background—Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion*, 1934