

Crisis becoming positive in year of wonders



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Crisis inevitably comes with anguish and grief, but it is possible for positive outcomes to stem from such events. The plague year in Geraldine Brooks' "Year Of Wonders" is a primary example of this phenomenon, as we see devastation unfold that is laced with the brightness of exceptional characters. Despite the deaths of almost a third of the villagers and the near crippling grief experienced by those remaining, the positive transformations and extraordinary strength and positivity seen in certain characters, as well as the new lives that began, offer an optimistic view of humankind. One of the novel's key messages is that humankind has an exceptional ability to transform in a positive way. This is primarily shown through Anna's transformation, as we see her meek exterior dissolve to reveal a vibrant, tenacious woman. She must deal with the restrictive confines of a rigid class system, but with the assistance of the ever understanding Elinor and her growing self-belief she becomes Elinor's "friend" as opposed to her maid and her "fear" of the Bradford's turns to pure distaste. This is seen at the novel's end, where Elizabeth "pushed past" Anna twice throughout their interaction, a gesture that indicates her sheer dismissal of Anna and lack of respect for her. Anna rebutted her rudeness by using the same doorway as Elizabeth, a discrepancy Elizabeth was clearly uncomfortable with, and it was through this small movement that Anna's steely self-confidence at the plague year's end was illustrated and her new perspective on the redundancy of social class shown. Further transformations are seen in Anna's work life as she begins the novel as a lowly maid, working for the Mompellions and at Bradford hall, and ends it working for an esteemed medical professional. It seemed as though she would simply never have the opportunity to break free of the boundaries placed upon her by her absence

of education. Fortunately, “ as (Anna) loved to learn, (Elinor) loved to teach”, and it was through Elinor’s patience and knowledge that Anna’s scientific understanding grows to the point where she is able to become a midwife at the novel’s end, moving from “ birth to birth” and defying the constraints of her upbringing. Michael Mompellion also undergoes significant change in the text, as his misguided religious beliefs disintegrate with the death of his wife and he “ feeds on the gall of (his) own grief”. Modelling himself off Anna’s own transformation, he rises from the depths of his despair and once again sees the importance of “ bring(ing) life to others”, pledging to continue his caring, kind approach to the villagers and overcoming seemingly insurmountable grief to do so. Overall, both Anna’s and Michael’s transformations are admirable in their own way and both offer an uplifting message to readers. As well as demonstrating the incredible transformations people are capable of, Year of Wonders illustrates the power of community and the strength and life that can arise from such togetherness. Michael calms the dying fruitlessly, working himself to the point of collapse to ensure “ none should die alone”, and the way in which he sticks doggedly to this pledge shows exceptional strength of will and soothes many souls in their dying moments. Michael also plays a major role in bringing the people of the village together, selflessly encouraging the quarantine potentially saving many lives and “ find(ing) words to salve (their) sorrows” as he brought them together to pray and share their grief with one another when they most needed support. Elinor is another character full of warmth and energy, and throughout the course of the novel she shares these traits with all manners of people, her kindness and lack of bias encapsulated by “ her little Eden”. The fact that “ all manners of flowers flourished there” reflects the support

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offered by Elinor to all classes of people throughout the novel, and how her tender care allows characters such as Anna to “ shine” far brighter than they thought possible. Michael and Elinor bind the community throughout the novel and with the help of others create a sense of unity invaluable during times of catastrophe. Another uplifting message offered by the novel relates to the cycle of life and death, as the shattered remains of the village continue to be punctuated with bright specks of new life. In the novel’s first chapter Anna describes a walnut shell that “ already sprouts a sapling” in the town’s main street, immediately establishing the idea that while numbers of the dead are devastating that life will still flourish in the village as is the inevitable way of nature. In the midst of the plague year when numbers of the dead are rising rapidly and Anna is dealing with the crippling grief of losing loved ones, she assists Mary Hadfield in giving birth to a healthy new born. Anna marvels that “ in that season of death, we celebrated a life”, her experience acting as another reminder to readers of the continuation of life. Anna loses both of her children at the beginning of the novel, a heart shattering occurrence that rendered her devastated and alone. The fact that at the novel’s end she takes possession of the Bradfords’ baby further offers the positive message that life goes on no matter what, and that devastation is capable of being punctuated by pure joy. And so “ Year of Wonders” ends leaving readers with several indications of the power of life amongst death, celebrating nature’s way of overcoming disaster and offering hope to crushed citizens. Ultimately, the desolation experienced by many in Geraldine Brooks’ “ Year of Wonders” is outweighed by key ideas that offer optimism to readers. Through her depiction of several exceptional characters

and focus on representing life as well as death, Brooks creates an uplifting novel full of vibrancy and hope.