

Humanity's capacity  
for change as shown  
in year of wonders



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Humankind has the potential to undergo significant change, and instances of crisis often act as catalysts for such transformations. The once meek and complacent Anna Frith becomes a woman of exceptional bravery and compassion in Geraldine Brooks' historical novel *Year of Wonders*, as in the course of her journey she changes many of her own views and challenges others' perceptions of her. She overhauls many of the key pillars of her existence, meaning the changes she experienced were all-encompassing, demonstrating to readers the extraordinary malleability of human nature. The first important alteration Anna endeavoured to make was in regards to her relationship with men and her class status as a lowly maid, both features of her life that fed into her lack of independence and power. This transition is marked by the change in how she refers to Elinor, from "Mrs. Mompellion" at first to "my friend" later, and using her first name. This change in address indicates that she becomes comfortable with her equality to Elinor and that she deserves such a position. It was Elinor, in fact, who was the main influence on Anna's defying of class boundaries, as Elinor's own past mistakes led to her acting as a surrogate mother to Anna and helping her to see her value and potential. By treating Anna as an equal and educating her, articulated by Anna when she says "for as I loved to learn, she loved to teach", Anna is exposed to a world previously closed off to her by her lack of means and she is consequently able to interact with all classes of people and get a job that is not menial. Much of Anna's transition from lower class to classless also stemmed from her perception of herself, a perception Elinor is key in shaping, as she began to view herself as just as worthy as the wealthy consequently forcing those around her to challenge their views, seen when Elizabeth Bradford visited Michael in the novel's first chapter. While Elizabeth

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"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. This was a discrepancy Elizabeth was clearly uncomfortable with, but one that illustrated Anna's steely self-confidence at the plague year's end and her new perspective on the redundancy of social class. Unfortunately, members of society such as Elizabeth will always view Anna as lesser than themselves, but Anna's successful career and solo journey at the novels end prove that her resolute nature far outweighed a few doubters. If it were not for the rapid crumbling of her religious faith, Anna's intelligent, open mind would have never been able to challenge her puritan upbringing and eventually turn to science as the more logical alternative. She begins to question her faith early on as she realises Anys' "fornication and blasphemy branded her a sinner" despite her altruistic work in helping the villagers with their ailments and wellbeing. If it were not for her admiration of and respect for Anys her initial doubts about religion would perhaps never have arose, rendering Anys essential in her painstaking journey from puritan to atheist. The "dark and light" in which she "had been taught to view the world" began looking distinctively grey although she continues to go to church and see the plague as the doing of God until very late on in the novel when her mind is freed by the realisation the plague may be "a thing in Nature merely". Anna's unquenchable thirst for knowledge and self-reliance filled the void opened up by the disintegrating of her faith, as she left the certainty and comfort it offered to pursue her desire to become wordly and educated - a plight impossible without the ever patient teachings of Elinor. It is almost

impossible for Anna to release herself from a lifetime of teachings, however,  
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partially because of her admiration for Mr. Mompellion and the sermons he continues to preach until the novel's final pages. Even then, when her faith has turned into hope, she still refers to the "Plague" with a capital "P", suggesting that there is still a trace of her subconscious that sees the disease as a hopeless force similar to that of how she now views God. As she breaks the binds her strict upbringing placed upon her, however, she proves that it is possible to change in a way that opens one up to a myriad of exciting opportunities. Furthermore, there are many small instances of change Anna experiences throughout *Year of Wonders*, all which relate back to her fear of certain activities that stem from traumatising life experiences. Firstly, she confronted the idea of dabbling in herbal remedies, scared of becoming a "widow...turned witch" but eventually overcoming her self-consciousness in order to ease the pain of those in great suffering, displaying exceptional compassion and benevolence. Elinor's powerful role modelling assists her decision greatly as she encourages Anna to help her in discovering remedies and applying them to the wrath of the plague. Anna was then gently pushed, once again by Elinor, whose kind, calm tone as she says "we will do the best we can by Mary Daniel" coaxes Anna into acting as a midwife to the first time mother. She is desperately afraid because of her own mother's death in childbirth but the experience sparks her passion to move "...away from death...from birth to birth" in the novel's epilogue - a passion she would have never discovered if it was not for the mentoring of Elinor. She overcame past traumas once again when she went down into the mine to assist an orphaned child in surviving, battling with her fear of darkness and death and emerging injured but triumphant. On these three occasions, Anna's selfless desire to assist those more in need than herself

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overcame her crippling fears, proving an enduring valiance far greater than what most can claim and most certainly proving mankind's capacity to change. Ultimately, Geraldine Brooks illustrates humankind's exceptional capacity to be moulded and shaped through the character of Anna. This is demonstrated through Anna's psychological and social transformations as she emerges from the plague year having opened up doors she never knew existed and having been "tempered and made strong."