

Staying strong in times of catastrophe



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Humankind has the capacity to show extraordinary strength and compassion in times of catastrophe. Michael Mompellion in Geraldine Brooks' "Year of Wonders" is a primary example of such a person, as despite his misguided religious beliefs he possesses a steely determination and desire to help those in need that renders his actions throughout the plague year commendable.

Michael takes on the role of leader in the plague year, a job that comes with much hardship and despair. It is he that encourages the villagers to quarantine themselves from the outside world when they become aware of the plague's presence, and he uses his sermons to preach this selfless suggestion to many reluctant villagers. He reasons that "because of us, hundreds (may) die who might have lived", and through protecting outsiders from their village potentially saved the lives of hundreds of strangers. His constant usage of "us" and "our" throughout the sermon suggests he has the best interests of the villagers at heart and that he is purely altruistic in his intentions. As the plague year progresses, he continues to lead the villagers as he brings them together on a regular basis allowing them to stay connected to one another and share in their despair and grief when they most need support. He encourages the villagers to continue to "meet at the Delf" when they feared contagion, keeping them connected through adversity and consequently easing their pain. He is overall quintessential in ensuring the togetherness of the villagers, as he gently led them to each other through torrents of emotion and offered them support and comfort.

Furthermore, Michael is a pillar of astutely comforting words and bottomless empathy as he soothes the dying fruitlessly throughout the text. At its very

beginning he pledges that “ none should die alone”, a sentiment that proves extremely difficult to follow through with, but he continues to tend to the dying with his unyielding perseverance weighing on him to the point of collapse. He soothes those in bitter pain by reassuring those such as Jacob Merrill that “ if we slip and fall, He understands our weaknesses”. He attempts to save those lost in bitterness and resentment, including Anna’s very own father when he “ tr(ies) to appeal to any shred of good left deep within him” in response to Josiah robbing those on deaths doorstep of their most precious possessions. In his quest to squeeze every ounce of good from each and every person and event in the plague year, Michael made many villagers horrific deaths a little less painful and appealed to the decency in many a lost soul.

His most controversial decision in Year of Wonders was that to force his wife Elinor to remain abstinent in punishment for her premarital affair and consequent terminated pregnancy. From his perspective, “ Elinor’s lust caused the loss of a life”, a crime so terrible in the eyes of God that by forcing her to live part of her life with her “ lusts unrequited”, he was in fact desperately trying to save her soul so she would go to heaven. While such a punishment is repulsive to modern audiences, Michael believed he was in fact saving his beloved wife, acting in her best interests and assisting her in regaining the respect of God. The fact that he stuck firmly to his “ resolve” despite the trials and stress of the plague year is most admirable. When she dies regretful and guilt stricken that he is no longer able to see light amongst the darkness of the plague. His misguided religious beliefs disintegrate with her death 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. And so we see that Michael's punishment of Elinor was an act purely of love, and watch him rise up from his anguish in a most admirable manner as a stronger and more balanced human being.

Michael's actions throughout the plague year all stem from a place of selflessness and care, as he is portrayed performing admirable deeds on a daily basis by soothing the dying and comforting grief stricken survivors. He has exceptional faith in the goodness of human nature and brings out the best in many. This is encapsulated when he declares, "the plague will make heroes of us all," a statement that most certainly applies to him.