

## College Book 2002-03

### SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, BY DISCIPLINE, FOR *Years of Wonder* by Geraldine Brooks

#### **Administration of Justice:**

Research one or more of these forms of punishment: stocks, cucking stool(both described on p. 194), impalement (pp.203-4).

What would be a fair punishment for Josiah Bont (Anna's father)for his theftand for burying Christopher alive?

Research the harsh penalties for meetings of five or more persons for any worshipother than Common Prayer (p. 98)

(p. 98) Research the law that dissenting (Puritan) clergy should keepat leastfive miles from their old parishes so that they might not stir up differences.The Episcopal Church today has a similar rule for former priests and bishops.Interview concerning this?

#### **Anthropology (Cultural):**

Compare and contrast death rituals of British culture (or Western European)with those of Algerian (or Arab).

Research death rituals of the English from the 1600s to the present. How havethey changed?

Provide your definition of "culture", In what sense did culture shape the villagers' decisionsto remain isolated in their community?

Research modern-day witchcraft (called Wicca). What do Wiccans believe?

Discuss the harem as it existed in Algeria and other Arab countries. Contrastthe harem with current marriage practices.

Research the practice of polygyny (taking multiple wives) as it is practicedin cultures of the world. Anthropologists believe that polygyny is actually themost preferred form of marriage, yet not the most commonly practiced. Why doyou think this discrepancy exists? Can you separate your understanding of whyhaving multiple wives works for many cultures from your own ethnocentric feelingsabout romantic love?

#### **Anthropology (Archeology):**

Research classical archeological sites with burials in the area of Eyamor London. Does any of the sites show evidence that these were plague burials?How do we know?

#### **Architecture:**

From descriptions in the book, draw Anna's cottage, Bradford Hall,and the harem in Oran.

#### **Art:**

Paint Elinor's garden (p 35).

Sketch or paint the scene in which George Viccar's clothes and the green-goldgown he made for Anna burn with "flames of bright vermillion" (pp 49-50).

Paint the landscape of Eyam (p 65).

Paint or sketch Anna and the "miracle" of the rose petals (p. 71).

Paint or sketch the Delf, where church services were held outside.

**Biology:**

Does vinegar kill contagion (p. 103)? Why or why not?

The World Health Organization reports that plague still exists and there are 1000-3000 cases each year. Where?

Does the Ebola virus qualify as a plague?

What, if anything, is the difference between plague and epidemic?

What is a kestrel?

**Business:**

(p 23) George Viccars paid sixpence/week for his room. How much was a sixpence? When did England convert to pence and pound, and why?

(p27) George reported that he had seen colleagues driven to destitution because their wealthy, aristocratic customers defaulted. How common was this?

**Chemistry:**

Find formulas for making soap (p.8)

**Child Development:**

Discuss ways to teach children about hygiene and avoiding contagion of infectious diseases.

During stressful times, such as the plague for the Eyam children and war and terrorism in our own, how can adults help children to deal with their fears? Discuss how children may be aware of trouble even if adults do not discuss it in front of them.

**Communication:**

Give the rector's sermon calling for voluntary isolation (pp. 99-100).

Give the rector's sermon on closing the church and holding services outside (pp 167-8).

**Dance:**

Choreograph a dance that expresses the following themes: loss, grief, healing, and hope

Research and perform period dances of the 1600s in England and/or Algeria.

**Economics:**

(p 218) " . . . we were sorely depleted already in trades of all kinds." Comment on this. Give examples of similar situations in other times.

**English:**

The Oxford English Dictionary is a multi-volume reference book available in the library. You can look up a word and find not only what it means but how and when it has been used in the past. Using the OED, find out when was the first recorded use of these words: *plague*, *leeches*, *carter*.

(p 6, 8) " . . . If there's one thing I can't stand anymore, it's the scent of a rotting apple." Is there symbolism here? What are the various places in the book that Anna mentions this?

What would you be willing to give up for your family? For your community? For your country?

**FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY ESSAY WILL BE THE FOLLOWING:**

(p 9) " . . . For the hour in which I am able to lose myself in someone else's thoughts is the greatest relief I can find from the burden of my own memories." What book do you retreat to when you would like to "get away"?

(p 13) Compose Mompellion's incendiary sermon about the Bradfords.

(p 15) " . . . Anna Frith, a woman who had faced more terrors than many warriors. . ." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

(p 19) It has been said that the real rector of Eyam had two children whom he sent away. Should that have been included in this novel? Why or why not?

The King's favorite poet was the Earl of Rochester (p 28). Who was the Earl? Find an example of his work.

(p 110) Colonel Bradford said, " . . . my life and the lives of my family are of more consequence to me than some possible risk to strangers." Comment on this. Can you think of other examples from literature? From real life?

(p 114) Bradford wouldn't allow any of the servants to stay in the stable or well house. Why not?

(p 115) " . . . And so the rest of us set about learning to live in the wide green prison of our election." Beautiful words, aren't they? How else could Brooks have said the same thing? Find other examples of beautiful language in the book.

(p 115) Anna only left the village a half dozen times a year yet she felt trapped. Why?

What do you think happened to Michael after Anna went away? Write a short paper describing his life.

Read Daniel Defoe's book *A Journal of the Plague Year* and compare it to *Year of Wonders* .

It has been said that Anna is an unlikely heroine (because she was a member of a lower class in a society with very rigid class lines). Do you agree or disagree?

Imagine that the story of Eyam and the plague year has been told, not by Anna, but by one of the other characters. Would any of them make a good story?

Samuel Pepys wrote in his journal about life in London in the same time period. Read some of his journal and compare/contrast it with *Year of Wonders* .

Author Geraldine Brooks said,

"Whether we also shall one day look back upon this year (2001 – after September 11) of flames, germs, and war as a 'year of wonders' will depend, perhaps, on how many are able – like the passengers on United Flight 93 or the firefighters of New York City – to match the courageous self-sacrifice of the people of Eyam."

Would you describe 2001 as a year of wonders? Why or why not?

All of the characters in the novel have failings and as a result they are all fully human. Are you surprised by the secrets Elinor and Michael each reveal to Anna about their marriage? How do they change your feelings about the characters. Or do they?

If you were in a situation similar to that of the Bradford family, and if you had the money to get away, would you go?

In the story, the reader knows from the beginning that most of the villagers die. How does the author create suspense?

What lessons could we learn from the Eyam villagers?

**Fire Science:**

Research the Great Fire of London (1666).

*Hint: go to [www.askjeeves.com](http://www.askjeeves.com) and ask "when was the Great Fire of London?" There is an excellent account of firefighting at that time and in other times of history at the site listed with the words "LondonFire".*

**Geography:**

(p 23) Trace George Viccars route from Canterbury to Eyam. Why do you think he settled in Eyam?

(p25) The closest city was Chesterfield, 14 miles away. Find Chesterfield and Eyam on a map.

(p26) Find Peakkrill and Kinder Scout on a map. Also their elevations.

(p 106) Trace the Bradfords' escape to Oxfordshire.

Trace Anna's escape from Eyam to Bakewell to Liverpool to Oran on the Barbary Coast.

**Geology:**

Verify that there were lead mines in the area around Eyam.

(p 171) Research the custom of nicking. When was this used? Where else?

(p 173) Miners are superstitious men. Find some other superstitions they shared. (See Diane Gustafson in the Library, whose father was a miner.)

(p 181-2) Research fire setting to free the ore.

**History:**

(p 7) " . . . The Puritans . . . had the running of this village then. Research the Puritans and their beliefs.

(p 38) " . . first cause (to be thought a witch) is that she meddles in medicinals." Compare this with the Salem witch trials.

(p 48) "Sadd colors (black, dark brown). Since the return of the King . . ." Research and compare life under Cromwell and at the Restoration.

Keeping in mind that this story takes place a quarter-century before the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts, what is the role of the Gowdie women in the novel? What is it about them that drives their neighbors to murderous rage?

**Journalism:**

Write two versions of Eyam's isolation story, one for the New York Times and the other for the National Enquirer.

Write a newspaper interview of Christopher Unwin, the man who was buried alive.

Write an account for a London newspaper about the Great Fire. For a newspaper article from that time, go to <http://www.adelpha.com/~davidco/History/fire1.htm>

**Math:**

See page 76. Find statistics throughout history for infant mortality.

(p 46) George Viccars weighed 14 stone. How many pounds is that?

Make a chart to show the decline in Eyam's population. Use the data found on these pages in the book: 97, 217, 254 (paperback edition).

**Music:**

Identify the elements which convey, through music, different emotions. Choose or compose a brief piece to show grief, joy, hopelessness, and relief as expressed in the novel.

**Nursing:**

Why didn't Anna get the disease? She tried on the golden green dress George had made for her (p. 32).

How does the medical profession view herbal remedies?

Twins were born stillborn, fused at the breastbone (p. 38). What is the earliest known case of conjoined twins? Why are they called Siamese twins? What happened to Chang and Eng (*original Siamese twins*)?

The Puritan minister believed that sickness was sent by God to test and chastise (p. 39). Comment on this.

Anna refers to "sticky eye" (p. 39). What condition was she referring to? How was/is it treated? What do you think was in the salve Anna used?

Discuss midwifery in history, especially at this time (p. 48).

The plant rosemary was burned to purify air (p. 51). Is there any scientific basis for that?

Wolf's bane was poison (p. 52). One could eat it and die by nightfall. Yet its wort (what is a wort?) could be used for joint pains. Discuss plants which can be taken in different ways, some harmful, some helpful.

Nettle beer strengthens blood (p. 53) Is there any basis for this? How about starwort and violet leaves for lungs? Silverweed to cool a fever? Cress for stomach? Bat-weed for glands? Vervain for the throat?

Research barber surgeons in history (p. 74).

Research use of leeches. When was the practice stopped?

Could the poppy have accounted for Anna's survival?

Avicenna is mentioned as a Muslim doctor on page 154. Was he a real person or a fictitious character? *Note: centuries ago Muslim or Mussulman was used for Muslim.*

**Philosophy:**

(p 28) Anna says, ". . . if you are drowning in a sewer, your first concern might be that you are drowning, not how vile you smell." Relate this to the novel.

(p 29) ". . . knowledge is not itself evil, it is only the use to which one puts it that may imperil the soul." If you have read *Colors of the Mountain* by Da Chen, compare these two books. If you haven't, find another book that agrees with the statement above.

**Psychology:**

(p 178) Elinor says, ". . . You must school your mind and not let your fears be your master."  
Discuss how fears can affect us, physically, emotionally, and mentally.

(p 178-9) What can be done to alleviate claustrophobia?

(p 218) ". . . Some slaked their dread in drink and their loneliness in wanton caresses." Find articles in psychological journals which deal with these subjects.

Where do superstitions come from?

**Real estate:**

Research land ownership in England in 1666. If there were no living heirs, what happened to the real property?

**Religion:**

What is the origin of the belief that illness is caused by God's wrath? What groups have believed that?

Research flagellation and tell where and under what circumstances it was practiced.

(p 239) Discuss fire as either cleansing or as a symbol of rebirth.

(p 241) Which Psalm is excerpted on that page? *Hint: get a Bible concordance from the Reference section of the Library and look up one or more words from the passage.*

(p 279) Using a religious encyclopedia (either general or Encyclopedia Judaica or The New Catholic Encyclopedia), compare and contrast repentance and atonement.

**Sociology:**

How do people struggle to retain their humanity in a situation like the isolation of Eyam? Can you find examples from real life, perhaps the Jewish Holocaust?

How did people of varying socioeconomic levels and belief systems deal with the plague? Can you think of other situations to discuss?

How can superstitions affect a community?

(p217) "Those of us who were left feared each other and the hidden contagion we each might carry. People scurried, stealthy as mice, trying to go and come without meeting another soul." At the very time the villagers needed each other, they feared contact. Discuss this.

**Spanish:**

Write in Spanish one of the rector's sermons. See pages 99-100 for the content of his sermon calling for voluntary isolation and pages 167-8 for the sermon about closing the church and moving outside for church services.

Research in Spanish language materials about witchcraft and the Inquisition.

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Would you describe 2001 as a year of wonders? Why or why not? Discuss this in Spanish.

What lessons could we learn from the Eyam villagers? Discuss this in Spanish

What do you think happened to Michael after Anna went away? Write a short paper in Spanish describing his life.

**Theatre Arts:**

Imagine that Southwestern College is going to present a play based on Year of Wonders and you have your choice of characters to play. Whom would you choose and why? Prepare a monologue for your character.

**Travel and Tourism:**

Imagine that I come to you as a client in your travel agency. I want to go to England for one week and I especially want to travel to Eyam. Find me an airline and airfare plus sites to see in London. Suggest some hotels with a range of prices per night. Finally, tell me how to travel to Eyam.

**Women's Studies:**

Discuss the feminist undertones of the story. How does each female character – Anna, Elinor, the Gowdies, and Aphra – exhibit strengths that the male characters do not?

Related websites about the book Years of Wonder A virtual tour of the plague village, Eyam

<http://www.cressbrook.co.uk/eyam>

The nursery rhyme, "Ring around a rosie" comes from Eyam

<http://www.travel-wise.com/europe/eyam/eyam.htm>

Much detail on this site, even down to who died when

<http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DBY/Eyam/Wood>

Read about the plague in London

<http://www.britainexpress.com/History/plague.htm>

The plague in England

<http://www.education.guardian.co.uk/higher/humanities/partner/story/o,9885,585086,00.html>

Information on the Stuart monarchy

<http://www.historyonthenet.com/Stuarts/stuartsmain.htm>

The English plague of 1665

<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/plague/index.html>