

Year of Wonders Study Guide

Year of Wonders by Geraldine Brooks

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Plot Summary

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague is a fictional portrayal of actual events that occurred in the small English village of Eyam in 1666. When a plague strikes the village, residents make the extraordinary choice, led by a young priest, to quarantine themselves to prevent further spread of the disease. The story is told through the eyes of a young maid, Anna Frith, as she witnesses the disintegration of her small community as death takes its toll on every family, including her own.

Before the plague starts, Anna is a young widow with two small boys. Her husband, Sam, had died in a mining accident. Anna works as a maid at the rectory and occasionally at the local estate, Bradford Hall. The plague begins when she takes in a lodger, who has cloth imported from London for his tailoring. He dies soon after the bolts of cloth arrive, and his death is quickly followed by those of Anna's sons and neighbors. Soon, many in the village are sick. Recognizing this as a plague, the pastor, Michael Mompellion, asks the villagers to take an oath agreeing to quarantine the town to prevent the spread of the disease. Michael and his wife, Elinor, spend most of their time tending to the sick and praying with the dying. Anna often accompanies them.

Some villagers turn to superstition and blame the plague on Mem and Anys Gowdie, midwives and herb specialists. The women are brutally murdered by a mob. Anna had always admired these women, and soon she and Elinor begin studying their herbs and medical books to aid the sick and strengthen the healthy. Anna gets closer to Elinor, who she views as a friend, teacher and mother-figure. At times, Anna feels jealousy about the love that exists between Elinor and Michael as she is so lonely with all her loved ones dead. She tries using opium to numb her pain but decides against continuing the drug after Elinor shares her history and addiction to poppies. Elinor shares how she ran off with a young man who abandoned her. Pregnant and afraid, she used a hot poker to destroy the unborn child but also destroyed her womb and so can't have children. Michael worked on her father's estate and becomes her friend, then husband.

Superstitions continue to escalate as many claim they have seen Anys' ghost and pay her to instruct them how to prevent sickness. Anna's stepmother, Aphra, is highly superstitious and, like Anna's father Joss, expresses contempt toward the Mompellions. By summer, half the village is buried. Anna asks her father to help dig the graves as the sexton has died, and Michael Mompellion is exhausted from adding this to all his other duties. Joss finally agrees but begins demanding high payments for his services, making him a despised man in town. He eventually attempts murder to rob a man, but the man survives. Joss' hands are nailed to the man's mine stoves. His wife doesn't come for him in the night as expected as her sons have come down with the plague, so he dies in a storm.

The villagers meet at an outdoor area instead of church so they can stand farther apart and not spread the disease as it thrives on warm weather. One villager turns to flagellation, which greatly upsets Mompellion. The man has rid his house of all goods



except handcrafted crosses. The man finally dies in an accident, and his wife is given furnishings and clothes, but she dies soon after from the plague. Mompellion recognizes that the plague was passed onto the woman through the gifts she received. He instructs the villagers to burn all their goods to prevent more spread.

Meanwhile, Aphra has been discovered to be the phony ghost of Anys Gowdie, who has been taking money from the villagers in exchange of useless cures. Two men take charge of her for the night before her trial the next day. They put her in pig slop up to her neck, which she barely survives. The experience removes any shreds of reason Aphra had left and she goes insane. Anna is concerned for her little daughter, Faith, and tries to visit Aphra. She discovers Faith has also died, and her mother has the corpse hanging on a wall as she rants around a fire. Everyone decides it is best to leave Aphra alone until her fit is over.

It has become apparent that the plague is over as there have not been any new deaths for weeks. Elinor implores her husband to reopen the village. A date is finally set and all the villagers gather to hear the official news. But before it can be shared, Aphra appears with the corpse of her daughter. Elinor and Michael try to comfort her, but she kills Elinor before taking her own life.

Mompellion is inconsolable following Elinor's death, much as Anna tries to pull him from his depression. One day, Anna takes his horse and gallops through a neighboring village. She feels suddenly alive and wants to choose life over death. When she returns, Michael greets her and before long, they embrace and kiss. They go into the rectory and make love in the kitchen. Later, Michael goes to her cottage and they spend a tender evening and night together. In the morning, Anna discovers a shocking truth - Michael had never touched his wife as a punishment for her lustful sin and killing her unborn child. Now that he has lost his faith, he plans to do what he pleases because it was all meaningless. Anna is repulsed by his cruelty to Elinor and runs away. She finds refuge in the church but encounters Elizabeth, the Bradford's haughty daughter. She tells Anna her mother is dying in childbirth. Anna agrees to try to help her.

Anna discovers that Mrs. Bradford's pregnancy is illegitimate. She manages to save the mother and baby girl but soon discovers Elizabeth trying to drown the infant. Anna says she will take the baby away and is given some money in exchange. The next morning Mompellion warns her that Ms. Bradford is on his way and that Anna is in danger. He gives her his horse and a letter of introduction to stay with Elinor's father. Anna decides on a different course and takes a boat bound for Venice. She decides to stop in the Arabic port city of Oran. She marries a doctor in name only to be able to stay in his home as part of his harem. She becomes his assistant and learns many new ways of approaching health and medicine. She also has a baby by Michael Mompellion that she names Elinor. The novel ends with Anna and her two daughters venturing out in to the city. Anna has found independence, work she is passionate about and renewed motherhood.



Apple Picking Season

Apple Picking Season Summary

The novel begins in the Fall of 1666. The main character, Anna Frith, is a servant to the village priest, who she tries to get to eat some apples, but he is despondent and broken. Everyone looks weary and Anna thinks back to happier times when she married Sam Frith at age fifteen and left a drunken father and stepmother who overworked Anna. Sam dies, but she has two sons. She cares for Michael Mompellion, the preacher, because his wife, Elinor, is dead. Anna is lonely at night when her empty house gives her no comfort, her children having died in the plague. The next morning, she milks her cow and carries some milk to Michael. At the rectory, she encounters Elizabeth Bradford, whose family fled the village and the plague. When Anna announces Elizabeth's presence, Mompellion tells Anna to tell her to go to hell. Elizabeth forces her way into the house to plead for Mompellion's attendance on her ill mother. Mompellion says that the Bradford family deserted the village in their time of need so he wants nothing to do with them. Elizabeth tells Anna about her father's abuse of the family. When Anna goes to Mompellion, he sits with an unopened Bible on the desk. Anna reads a comforting passage in the Bible and he recites one back to her about a home and a wife and children and then roughly grabs her arm, bringing tears to her eyes. Shocked, she departs.

Apple Picking Season Analysis

In the first chapter, the main character, Anna Frith, is introduced as well as another central character, village preacher, Michael Mompellion. Beginning at the end of the plague, we sense that they are part of a handful of survivors, and there is a strong sense of gloom and apathy. Much of Anna's past is shared, such as her harsh upbringing at the hands of her father and stepmother, her young marriage to miner Sam Frith, the birth of two sons, and the deaths of her husband in an accident and her boys to the plague. Anna's relationship with Mompellion is tense, since he is so bound by his own despair, but obviously Anna had a good relationship with his wife to want to help him. Mompellion is facing a loss of faith and decries his former beliefs. The test of faith is a major theme woven throughout the novel.

The local and wealthy Bradfords are also introduced through the daughter, Elizabeth. It seems they fled the village rather than help their neighbors. It becomes increasingly apparent throughout the novel that the Bradfords are a pretty heartless bunch and reflect some of the worst of human nature in times of trial.



Ring of Roses

Ring of Roses Summary

There is a flashback to the spring of 1665 when Anna is a widow at only eighteen. She is glad to take in a lodger, George Viccars, a tailor. She feels he is heaven sent, though that would prove to be quite wrong. She is thrilled when George offers sixpence a week. Her sons, Jamie and Tom, are very little with Tom still nursing. Anna's children enjoy George's company and Anna enjoys his stories. That summer, a box of cloth arrives from London. George makes a beautiful dress for Anna. George wishes Anna felt something for him. He is flushed and staggers a bit. When she tries on the dress, George gives her a kiss, and Anna realizes he is flush with fever.

The next morning, she goes to the rectory, leaving George asleep. Anna greets Elinor, who is teaching Anna, a willing pupil, many skills. Anna is afraid to learn about herbs because herblore is often associated with witches. Many villagers are suspicious of Mem Gowdie and her pretty niece, Anys. Anna's stepmother, Aphra, is convinced Anys is a sorceress and often gossips to other villagers about her.

Anna checks on George midday and is shocked to find him extremely ill. He tells Anna to leave so she doesn't catch the illness and asks for the priest. Michael Mompellion spends two days at George's side when he finally dies.

Ring of Roses Analysis

The bulk of the novel begins with the onset of the plague. An outsider, George Viccars has goods delivered from London, which we later learn is infested by the plague. Later, some villagers will blame him for being a devil that spawned evil. Anna's superstitious stepmother, Aphra, will become a major character in the impending conflicts between the supernatural and religion.

Anna's attraction to George is not just physical but intellectual and emotional. She is drawn to his stories about the world outside her village and likes the way he plays so well with her sons. It is obvious she has a strong intellectual curiosity, which Elinor stimulates by teaching her about herbs and how to read.



The Thunder of His Voice

The Thunder of His Voice Summary

Before leaving, Michael tells Anna she should follow George's advice "burn everything." Soon, George's customers begin arriving. The first is Anys Gowdie. Anna describes her as a calming force during birthing when helping her aunt Mem Gowdie, the midwife. She tells Anys about George's advice, but Anys will not have her dress burned. George's other clients feel the same. Anna burns his clothes and, sadly, the dress he made for her.

Anna is consumed by thoughts of George and Anys and decides to stop by the Gowdies. Anna remembers with shame how she and other children used to tease Anys for being a vegetarian, but when she was pregnant, Anna used herbs Anys recommended which had helped greatly. Anys tells her that she "lay" with George, but it was Anna he wanted for a wife, and Anys had advised him to win Anna's heart through her sons. Anna asks why Anys did not want George for a husband. Anys replies that she loves her work and will not be chattel to any man, plus she likes a little variety, not just one plant. Leaving there, Anna stops to chat with her friend Lib Hancock. Later, she helps with a dinner at the Bradford manor; none of the family is particularly endearing to anyone. At the dinner, though, the talk is of the plague in London. They talk of the rich who leave London to escape and Mompellion suggest that the honorable and courageous thing would be to stay so as not to spread the disease. Anna worries about her sons having been around George and runs home to find them sleeping peacefully.

The Thunder of His Voice Analysis

George's warning to burn everything implies he believes his sickness is the plague, and he probably knew the warning signs from his travels. While it's disconcerting to Anna that he slept with Anys Gowdie, she can't help admiring Anys' gutsy, provocative and independent style. These are traits she will develop as the novel progresses. The division of wealth and poverty are clearly seen at Bradford Hall. The wealthy in the novel are generally abhorrent, except for Elinor, who came from such privilege. The first conversation about plagues happens at Bradford Hall when a dinner guest shares news of what he has heard from London. The Bradfords and their guests think it is madness not to run from the plague if you have the means, an idea which Mompellion wholeheartedly refutes. His adamant view on this foreshadows what he will ask of his congregation. Seeds of worry begin to grow in Anna as she fears for her children's lives.



Rat-fall

Rat-fall Summary

The fall following George Viccars' death is one of the loveliest Anna recalls, with warm, sunny dry days. She is so relieved her children aren't ill. Anna and James tend the sheep and then sit on the riverbank. Michael Mompellion stumbles upon them and Tom cries, but Mompellion settles him down. Mompellion is good with the children and Anna is glad to have a kind, open pastor. At home, Jamie surprises Anna by showering her with roses. One day Mary Hadfield finds some of the boys playing with dead rats. Soon after, Edward Hadfield is ill with a high fever. A surgeon uses leeches on him, but when he learns about George's death, he tells Anna for the villagers not to call him. Edward dies before sunset, soon followed by his brother and stepfather. Little Tom is ill and that night, Anna goes to bed with Tom in her arms, knowing it will be the last time. In the morning, he is lifeless.

Rat-fall Analysis

The summer is like the calm before the storm, since the reader knows that the plague is about to strike and Anna's carefree happiness will come to an end. The moment when Anna helps deliver the ewe is important as this foreshadows more important births to follow. Mompellion is seen in a more human light when playing with the children, and there is a sense that Anna feels an intellectual understanding about him. The plague strikes quickly, and Anna is one of the first affected. The pain she feels for her baby's illness and death is horrific, yet only the start of many more painful moments ahead, to which the first chapter alluded.



Sign of a Witch

Sign of a Witch Summary

Jamie is also struck by the plague. Anna spends her time trying new treatments. Elinor is by her side much of the time, and Anys also helps. Jamie suffers for five long days before dying. The days that follow are a blur as more villagers succumb to the plague. Anna goes back to work but spends any spare time at the church cemetery.

One day, Anna hears a drunken group of people and sees Mem Gowdie on the ground, hands bound, being beaten and accused of causing the plague. Anna pleads with them to stop, but the group ignores her. They drag Mem to the mine water to see if she sinks or swims, the test for a witch. Anna is pushed knocked unconscious when she tries to intervene. When Anna comes to, Mary Hadfield is screaming that Mem is drowning and is not a witch. Anna tries to go down to save her but loses her footing. Anys appears and pulls Anna up, then swings down to bring Mem up unconscious, and Anys begins administering CPR. When Mem revives, the villagers accuse Anys of being a witch by raising the dead. Anna begs Lib Hancock to stop the madness, but Lib reminds Anna that Anys had slept with Viccars, the "Devil," who brought the plague. Anna tries to help Anys but is knocked away as they tie a noose around Anys' neck. Anys starts telling stories about the other women there and they hang her. Michael Mompellion appears and yells at the crowd saying the only evil present is theirs. He tells them to pray and hope that somehow they will be forgiven their sins. The villagers pray and lament.

Sign of a Witch Analysis

Fear and anguish turn villagers against each other. As nonconformists dabbling in natural science, Mem and Anys Gowdie are easy targets by those with supernatural fears. The lynch mob mentality shows an ugly side of human nature, when reason is overtaken by the paranoia of the unknown. Though she tried her best to help Anys, Anna suffers guilt over her death for having had loose lips about her affair with George Viccars, which was used as proof she had slept with the devil. Mompellion's arrival helps calm the madness, but the conflict between superstition and religious faith is just beginning.



Venom in the Blood

Venom in the Blood Summary

Mem does not attend Anys' funeral as she is sick with the fever in the rectory, where Elinor insisted she be brought. Five days after Anys' funeral, Mem dies. The village has lost its only healers and midwives. The law will not enter the plague-struck village, so no one is tried for their murder. Some of the mob die from the plague; others do penance in the hope of forgiveness.

In church, Mompellion speaks passionately about the love of God saying the plague is a test. Many may be tempted to flee the village infecting even more people. He says they must stay in the village to isolate the disease. Supplies will be delivered to the edge of the village on a regular basis until the plague has ended. He warns that those who flee will suffer from "loneliness, shunning, and fear." Mompellion implores everyone to stay in the village so if they are sick, they will have neighbors and friends and, as long as he is alive, will not die alone. He asks the villagers to reflect and pray before making their decision. All the villagers agree not to flee except the wealthy Bradfords, who slip quietly out of church.

Venom in the Blood Analysis

In this chapter, Mompellion convinces his congregation to make a choice for the better good and contain the plague by a self-imposed quarantine. Most villagers are swayed by the argument that they would be shunned and alone outside the village, so it is probably fear more than virtue that guides their decisions. It is no surprise that the Bradfords plan to leave, given the earlier dinner party conversation and their selfish style. Anna does not hesitate to make her decision to stay as her will to live is pretty shattered, and she realizes she has no where else to go.



Wide Green Prison

Wide Green Prison Summary

Anna's spirits are higher after Mompellion's sermon and is surprised to find Maggie Cantwell, the Bradford's cook, at her gate. Maggie's been dismissed without a moment's notice and she asks Anna to help gather her belongings. Michael Mompellion enters and appeals to Colonel Bradford to do his duty, but the Colonel is says it's foolish not to flee the plague. Mompellion warns the Colonel that his reputation will be forever ruined in the village and that God's wrath will be greater than any plague. As the Bradfords leave, some servants beg for help and find homes in the village. Maggie and Brand did not swear in church to stay, so they travel to stay with kin. Later, Anna and other villagers watch as goods are delivered at a distance. A list of the dead are given to the delivery person to share with kin and friends in nearby villages.

At the rectory, Elinor rushes Anna out the door to help with a woman in labor. Anna is terrified, but Elinor insists, so Anna help births the child, though inside she is trembling. However, she remembers how Mem and Anys Gowdie helped her and tries to model them. Anna thinks the baby is not positioned correctly, so she encourages Mary to walk. Hours later, the child is still sideways, and Anna can almost hear Anys' voice guiding her to feel inside for the child to understand the best way to help it out. She manages to get hold of a foot and pulls the baby through. Anna and Elinor laugh with relief. Amid all the death, they celebrate over a new life. Anna knows she is returning to an empty house and finds the poppy vial in Elinor's basket and slips it into her sleeve.

Wide Green Prison Analysis

The Bradfords make their decision to leave the village and show their true colors in the cruel dismissal of and insensitivity for their staff. Unlike the others, they have the means with which to run, emphasizing the class distinctions. The rest of the village is officially cut off ,and Anna instantly feels a sense of isolation in the "wide green prison" they have created for themselves. Helping birth a new life gives Anna some momentary satisfaction in the midst of so much grief, but her depression and loneliness are overwhelming. The poppy drug seems like a welcome escape.



So Soon to be Dust

So Soon to be Dust Summary

Maggie, the Bradford Cook, and Brand return covered in rotten fruit. Mompellion carries the almost unconscious Maggie into the cottage of Jakob Merrill, a villager who had found Maggie and Brand on the road. They were recognized as coming from the plague village and were pelted with fruit and then stones. Maggie collapsed and Brand got her into a barrow and hauled her back. Mompellion tells him he did well not to desert Maggie, and that he is the hero of the plague, which will make heroes of them all whether or not they ask for this.

Brand will stay with Jakob's children and Maggie move to Anna's cottage. Anna searches for a horse and cart for Maggie's transport and encounters her drunk father. They get into an altercation, and he asks the men to bring some "branks," an iron head cage he once used on Anna's mother, with a bit to muzzle the tongue. Anna remembers her fear of seeing her mother suffer with that contraption, and her father humiliating her mother by dragging her around the village. Fear makes Anna wet herself and she rushes home and scrubs her soiled clothing and body, shaking and upset. Suddenly a boy arrives saying she must go see Maggie, who dies before midnight. Anna wonders why one with special gifts, like Maggie's for cooking or Viccars' for sewing, were "so soon to be dust," when they had so many productive years left.

So Soon to be Dust Analysis

Maggie and Brand's return highlights the fears and phobias associated with the plague. People in need of care are instead shunned and mistreated. Their story undoubtedly makes other villagers think twice about leaving the quarantined area. Maggie's death is the beginning of many doubts Anna will feel about her faith, since there seems to be no reason for the senselessness of dying young.

This chapter also reflects on some of Anna's cruel childhood at the hands of her father. Her mother was powerless to prevent his cruelty so Anna grew up fearing him, as she still does.



The Poppies of Lethe

The Poppies of Lethe Summary

Anna makes her own "tincture" using honey and the poppy resin for the pleasant dreams. When Anna wakes, she is much calmer than before. She is glad she has more with which to face the despair in her life. Sally Maston, her neighbor's five-year old, appears bloodied from plague sores. At Sally's cottage, her mother lies dead, her father is close to death, while a baby cries. By sunset, four families are affected by death. Mompellion tends the dying, while Elinor and Anna help the orphaned children. Anna learns that Lib Hancock is dying and goes to see her, but Lib is too far gone and dies without an exchange of words.

Anna drinks the last of the poppy mixture and has another magical dream and wakes feeling serene until she realizes she has no more poppies. She ventures out and notices Blacksmith Talbot's house is silent. Anna finds Kate Talbot pregnant and her husband using his hot irons on his plague boils. Anna discovers that Kate is using a charm on her husband and asks where it came from. Kate says the ghost of Anys Gowdie whispered to put a shilling in a log in exchange for the charm. Anna tells her that someone was playing a greedy trick. Anna milks the cow and prepares a meal for Kate, then heads out on her poppy errand.

Anna finds Elinor at the Gowdie cottage searching for herbs that might help fight against the plague. Anna confesses she took the poppy, but Elinor already knows and says she, too, has tried it when wanting to forget. Elinor tells Anna that as a privileged child Elinor was sheltered from real life and at age fourteen believed a young man who convinced her to elope, but he abandoned her. Her father and brother took her home, but she was pregnant. Elinor violated her body with a hot iron. A physician managed to save her life but not her womb. He gave her poppy to ease the pain. Elinor imagines she would still be in a lost, drug-induced state if not for Michael. When Michael found Elinor ill, he offered his friendship and then his love. Elinor asks Anna if she will still work with her, knowing all this and Anna loves Elinor more than ever. They trace the spread of the plague and realize that the oldest in the village seldom got it, so they will concentrate and saving the youngest.

The Poppies of Lethe Analysis

More evidence that superstition is growing in the village comes when Anna sees Kate's charm and talks of the ghost of Anys Gowdie. The poppies provide immediate relief to Anna's state of mind but also a quick addiction. If not for Elinor's tale of her harrowing experiences and dependence on poppy, Anna might have been inclined to keep using the drug. She's not altogether convinced she won't need them in her uncertain future. Elinor's tale explains more about Elinor's background, the consequence of her lust and her relationship with Michael, though the biggest component of their relationship has yet

to be revealed. To Anna, Elinor represents all that is good, whatever her past, while she questions her own actions. Not being able to square matters with her best friend Lib leaves an unpleasant feeling with which Anna knows she will have to live.

Among Those That Go Down to the Pit

Among Those That Go Down to the Pit Summary

Mompellion is digging six graves, including one for the sexton. Anna often visits the sick with Mompellion. One man they visit is Jakob Merrill, who confesses being a poor husband and worries for his young daughter and son. Mompellion assures Jakob that God loves him and Jakob took in Brand when Brand was homeless and, if he makes the young man part of his family, Brand can farm the land and look after the children. Jakob makes a will for such an arrangement. Anna bribes her father with two lambs to dig the graves. Anna hopes his children will get some of the meat. Weeks pass and only on Sundays do they take a break. Mompellion tells the villagers the plague thrives in warm weather and there will be more testing of their wills. He says they will meet at Cucklett Delf instead of church so that the healthy can stand well enough away from the ill to not get sick. The dead must be buried as quickly as possible under any ground. Mompellion collapses. Mr. Stanley, a new minister in town, delivers a sermon and assures the people that their loved ones will be saved even if not buried in the church cemetery.

Merry Wickford, a Quaker, is unable to mine the minimum share of lead required to keep her mine, so a neighbor, David Burton, puts a nick on it. Anna pleads with other miners to help the poor orphan, but their loyalty is with Burton as he is of their own faith. With one day left, it seems Merry faces the poor house. Elinor says they will get the lead for Merry. Elinor and Anna dress in mining clothes and find the necessary tools. Merry is to help with cleaning the lead and letting them know when they have an ample dish to be measured. They set to breaking the rock and soon realize they will never be able to accomplish their task. Anna suggests they do "fire setting" that combines extreme heat and cold water to create an explosion, though it is a dangerous undertaking that cost Sam his life. Anna sets it up and runs as rocks fly everywhere. The task is successful, and Merry has many dishes worth of ore in the mine. The Barmester declares Merry's mine safe and all the miners except David Burton cheer Merry and the women. Anna sleeps well that night, feeling for once she has accomplished something that turned out right.

Among Those That Go Down to the Pit Analysis

Sundays are a harsh reminder that death still holds a strong hold on the village as there are more and more faces missing at church. The warm weather also brings new threats and a sense of despair as no end is in sight. As the dead keep piling up, Mompellion is driven to exhaustion. Anna's efforts to solicit her father's help as a grave digger reinforces his callous personality and will prove to be a fatal decision. Anna has a great fear of being underground, which she imagines like a living death. Her worst fear is to be buried alive, one that almost comes true. In the end, Anna and Elinor prove their strength and wits in their dedication to help little Merry Pickford. It tightens the bond

between the two women and is another event that helps build Anna's growing independent nature.



The Body of the Mine

The Body of the Mine Summary

For nine days, Anna is so sore it is difficult to do the simplest tasks. One morning she sees her father who thanks Anna for helping him get the grave digging job. Anna has heard gossip that he has been demanding an unfair share of household goods from the sick and weak and is careless about contagion. Anna chides her father for thieving, but he makes no reply. On Sundays, the villagers meet at Cucklett Delf, with families standing at least three yards from each other to avoid infection. Anna's father never comes. Anna goes with Mompellion, who tries to reason with her father to change his ways, but he is drunk and the words are wasted.

Anna's father commits an act so vile, the villagers rise to action. A young man, Christopher Unwin, is the last survivor in a family of twelve and has had the plague for so long he might be one of the rare ones to survive it. Christopher believes he is near death, so Anna goes with Mompellion to see him. Anna's father is there digging a grave, probably anticipating plundering the house after Christopher dies. Mompellion fights with Anna's father. Later, Christopher has an appetite. Mompellion jokes they both beat more than the reaper. The next morning, Anna finds Christopher Unwin, muddled and bloody, and who says Anna's father tried to kill him whacking him with the shovel and stealing his clothes and goods. Christopher was buried alive and had to dig his way out. The villagers turn into a mob. Anna thinks of all the beatings and his cruel ways and carries on with her chores.

Anna is summoned to bear witness at her father's trial for attempted murder. He pleads guilty to the thefts he committed at the Unwin home. All eyes turn to Anna, but to her father's dismay, she remains silent. Punishment is to have his hands impaled by knives to the stoves of the Unwin mine. A man so punished is left alone and it is assumed kin will come for him. Anna assumes Aphra will go despite the storm raging through the night. Aphra was not able to go because all her children but one were struck by the plague, and she dared not leave them. Aphra's rage turns to madness as three days pass before Aphra arrives at Anna's cottage, getting into a rage when she discovers no one has brought down her husband's body. Aphra says she has just buried all her sons. Anna agrees to go to the Unwin mine with Aphra, where they find Joss' corpse horribly mangled by animals.

The Body of the Mine Analysis

This chapter focuses on Anna and her parents, people that Anna can't connect with on any level. Anna's father becomes increasingly evil and selfish and Anna finally takes a stand by not speaking up for him in court and not warning him about the mob. Her silence is her defiance. He dies under a stormy, frigid sky that represents his life - a violent, tempestuous childhood at sea and his own angry, cold heart. Aphra is almost as



hard and uncaring as her husband, though is more complex in nature. The seeds of her superstitious beliefs grow during the plague with her sons and Joss' death unearthing all her fears. The thorny brambles she fashions over their graves are symbolic of self-mutilation and soul cleansing, as another villager will later exhibit with flagellation. Superstition, like religion to others, gives pragmatic Aphra a sense of logic to the illogic of death, and that is an evil force that must be outwitted.



The Press of Their Ghosts

The Press of Their Ghosts Summary

Anna starts crying for her father and Anna shares the misery of both her and her father's childhoods. Afterward, Anna feels at last free of her father. Anna believes her father did not flee the village because Aphra convinces him she has lucky talismans to protect them. Mompellion tells them that he has also seen talismans. Anna investigates one family who claim they received a protective talisman for just a tuppence. Anna tells them they have been tricked.

Anna trips on her way home and that act made her think that perhaps the plague is just nature, like her tripping on a rock. Perhaps instead of thinking it is a curse from God, they should be trying to discover how it is spread and they could work on it as a farmer rids his fields of unwanted scrub. The key is having the right tools with which to work. May festivities bring a mixture of hope and fear. More and more villagers succumb to the plague. By June 140 people are dead. Many skilled craftsmen have died so the village is quickly turning to ruin. Each person responds differently—Jane Martin, who used to baby-sit Anna's children hangs out at the tavern, drinking and having sex. John Gordon, the man who beat his wife at Anys' hanging, has a leather strip with nails which he scourges his back with every five steps or so. Mompellion explains that hundreds of years ago, during the Black Death, their flagellations were many. Anna and Mompellion visit the Gordons and on the way, Anna finds a drunk Jane Martin having sex. Mompellion rails against them. Anna cleans up Jane and mount her between them on the horse and take her to her croft. Mompellion asks Anna not to share any news of these events with his wife.

Gordon's wife reluctantly lets them in. She tells them John started this behavior after receiving a tract from London. He has burned all their clothes and beat her with the leather and nails as well as himself. Mompellion goes in search of John. Mompellion does not find John. Brand finds his corpse on the rocks near a sheer ridge. Some of the villagers wonder if John Gordon had been right and begin to fashion their own scourges. Mompellion fluctuates between anger and self-reproach about this. One day, Anna see Michael standing over Elinor tenderly. Anna has a moment of jealousy and smashes their tea cups against the stone.

The Press of Their Ghosts Analysis

At the beginning of this chapter, information about Anna's father, including a loveless, harsh childhood at sea, helps explain his extreme behavior. Anna finally finds peace after sharing his story with Elinor. Elinor and Michael fill a large, parental void in Anna; Elinor with love and understanding and Michael with wisdom and strength of character. Her jealousy is natural and like that of a child wanting more attention.



The increasing signs of superstition and flagellation upset Mompellion, who is grounded enough with his faith that he views the world rationally. Brambles again appear symbolically as parents try to pass the baby through them to protect it from the plague. Despite his best efforts to point out the nonsense of superstitious behavior, villagers are too fearful to completely dismiss it. Anna gains a sense of self-awareness when she starts to view the plague as an act of nature rather than an act of God.

Several seemingly small incidents foreshadow later events, including Mompellion's outburst when he sees Jane Martin fornicating in the grass, and Urith Gordon's odd circumstance with her flagellating husband.



A Great Burning

A Great Burning Summary

Anna and Elinor do not understand why the disease affects some and not others living in the same household. When Elinor coughs, Anna pretends she doesn't hear it. The second time, there is no ignoring the cough as Elinor hacks for several minutes. Elinor tells her it's just a little cold. Anna can't hold back her tears. Elinor takes a handkerchief to wipe Anna's eyes, but does not, stuffing it back in her whisket. Anna knows then that Elinor is afraid of passing on the plague. The next three days, Elinor's fever rises and her cough worsens. Anna stays by her side as much as possible. Anna thinks of all the things that Elinor has become to her - a mother figure, a teacher and a friend. Whenever Mompellion comes to be at Elinor's side, Anna feels the old waves of jealousy. Elinor tells Anna how fortunate she (Elinor) is to have such a good husband in Michael and good friend in Anna. She asks Anna to be a good friend to her husband as he will need one. Elinor is soon delirious and speaks at first as a child, then intimately to her husband. Mompellion rather coldly sends Anna on her way. As Elinor returns to health, she obviously was not struck by the plague but by an ordinary fever.

One Sunday, Mompellion shares what God has shown him; he asks all the villagers to burn all their things that might be contaminated and to then scrub their houses. Everyone is reluctant but he convinces the villagers to partake in a great burning. They sing a psalm but with hardly the same rigor as in the past as their numbers are so small and tired. Brand and another young man drag forward a woman dressed in black and wearing a veil; Michael lifts it to reveal Aphra. It is she who has been cheating the villagers for shillings by pretending to be the ghost of Anys Gowdie. The villagers become angry and Mompellion says she will be dealt with the next day Michael charges Brand and Robert to guard Aphra. The young men throw her in a deep pit of manure for the night. If she slept, she would have drowned in it. Aphra has obviously suffered so much, the villagers consider her punishment done, but Mompellion tells her she must repay the money. Aphra refuses to let Anna in during the next few days until Anna forces her way in and sees Aphra's daughter dead from the plague hanging from the rafters and Aphra naked with a shaved head dancing with a snake. Mompellion says they will have to wait until Aphra collapses from exhaustion in order to bury the daughter.

A Great Burning Analysis

Elinor's near-death experience greatly frighten Anna as she realizes how important this woman is in her life. Even now, she can't stop feelings of jealousy whenever Mompellion is at Elinor's bedside. Although it turns out to be an ordinary fever, her recovery seems like a miracle.

The earlier foreshadowing of Urith Gordon's empty home full of crosses and consequent death after receiving goods from neighbors has lit the bulb over Mompellion's head; the



plague can be prevented from spreading if contaminated goods are destroyed. This is very close to Anna's thinking when she stumbled on the rock and began to view the plague as an act of nature. The great burning is a sacrificial event of sorts; objects representing memories and loved ones are consumed in an inferno, like the hell of the plague.

It is not surprising that Aphra was behind the mysterious greedy ghost of Anys Gowdie, but whether this was done in greed or because of her increasing insanity isn't clear. Although Anna thinks little of Aphra, she is moved by all the suffering she must have endured in the pig filth and tries to help her as best she can. Increasingly paranoid and hostile, Aphra won't let anyone near her last living child. Anna is horrified at how quickly Aphra succumbs to lunacy once that child dies.



Deliverance

Deliverance Summary

Two weeks after the great burning, there seems to be a considerable slow down in new plague cases. Elinor and Mompellion argue about when to allow the living to leave the village as the plague appears over. Mompellion is reluctant, even though the villagers have suffered terribly, he doesn't want to be premature. On the second Sunday in August, with no new cases reported, Mompellion is ready to make the proclamation at the Delf. When Mompellion asks to give thanks, a manic voice screeches, "For what?" It is Aphra, brandishing a miner's knife and carrying the rotting remains of her daughter. Michael catches hold of her, and he and Elinor try to comfort her. When Faith's corpse breaks in her arms, Aphra lashes out in anger, slitting Elinor's throat and taking her own life. Anna notices that she scoops up her daughter's remains and kisses them with tenderness before dying.

Deliverance Analysis

The end of the plague brings a sense of relief, but there is no joy given so much loss. The survivors have been like the walking dead, fulfilling the tasks of many to give purpose to the horrors of each new day. The conversation Anna overhears between the Mompellions has significance later, especially when Elinor tells her husband others do not share "as firm a purpose." At the Delf, Anna describes Elinor as looking like a bride, but flowers are also for funerals and the dead are wrapped in white sheets. This foreshadows Elinor's impending death. Although Elinor survived the plague, she did not survive Aphra's wrath. Anna's two opposing mother figures die simultaneously. For the first time, Anna sees Aphra exhibit tenderness as she reaches for her daughter's remains in her last breath.



Apple Picking Time

Apple Picking Time Summary

In the long, final chapter, the novel returns to the time of the first chapter, fall of 1666. Faith is buried next to her brothers, but no one wants to bury Aphra. Brand finally helps Anna lay her to rest. Elinor is buried at the churchyard. Mr. Stanley leads the prayer at her funeral as Michael Mompellion is too upset. At her death, Michael had clung to her body until men were finally able to pull him away. Anna tended to her body and remembered her words - be a friend to my Michael. All Anna has been able to do is serve him since then, as he is solitary and disconsolate. Soon after Elinor's death, Mompellion sent word to announce the end of the plague and to ask that roads in and out of the village be reopened. He also sent a letter to Elinor's father about her death.

Mompellion has not shaved since Elinor's death, and his face is haggard from exhaustion and grief. Anna finally shaves him but suddenly a strand of her hair falls loose and brushes against his skin. She drops the blade and cannot help but blush. She lets him continue the task alone and finds some excuse to leave. Afterwards, he keeps to his room day and night. After a few weeks, Anna fetches Mr. Stanley, hoping he can help. Mr. Stanley has no luck talking with Mompellion and is refused further visits.

Anna has much to keep her busy outside of the rectory, such as caring for her sheep and providing tonics and remedies for the villagers. She feels that fate has put her next in the Gowdie line for tending to the herbs and plants, but their garden has too many memories for her. The villagers move around as if stunned from their experiences, and outsiders are still too afraid to venture in, despite the open roads. Anna continues to try to brighten Mompellion's spirits but with little success. She also senses that some of the villagers blame him for their losses and grief so she does her best to be tender with him.

Then came apple-picking time: Elizabeth Bradford's appears and Mompellion's offers an angry outburst. Anna goes to find solitude in the stable, where Mompellion's restless horse, Anteros, resides. Anna tells the horse that Mompellion has finally lost his wits and has given himself up to darkness. She pulls a crumpled paper out of her pocket; the draft of the letter written to Elinor's father and sees how much darker his mood has become since then. She tells Anteros that there is no choice but to live and takes the horse out into the courtyard. Anna mounts him and goes galloping bareback over the moors. The sound of the hooves pounding and the exhilaration of the windy ride make Anna feel more alive than she has felt since a child. She ends up at the Boundary Stone, which has become overgrown with grass since the plague ended. She wonders if anyone will remember the sacrifices that were made here. She spies a nearby village that was off limits during the plague and gallops through it.

It is midday by the time she returns to the rectory. Mompellion comes out incredulously, seeing Anna windblown and flushed. He asks her if she has lost all sense of reason, and she answers by asking the same question. Mompellion admits he has lost his



senses and drops to his knees. Thinking of what Elinor would do, Anna takes him into her arms. Holding a man so tightly for the first time in years fills Anna with pangs of desire. Mompellion runs his fingers through the tangles of her hair and draws her mouth to his. At that very moment, the stable boy happens upon them. Anna immediately instructs him to take care of the horse and heads quickly into the kitchen. Mompellion finally appears and apologizes to her. But Anna's desire is so strong that she brings his hand to her lips and sucks on his fingers. Unbridled emotions takes over, and they make hard, passionate love on the flagstone floor. Afterwards, they go upstairs and lie tenderly together, sharing their sorrows for what they have lost the past year.

That afternoon, Anna leaves to feed her sheep. While forking hay, Mompellion appears and takes over the chore. Mompellion says it reminds him of being a boy, and perhaps he will become a farmer. On the way back to her cottage, Mompellion asks if he can spend the night. She nods and they go in. She is about to start the fire, but Mompellion says he intends to serve her that evening. He places her in a chair, tucks a warm blanket around her and gets the fire going. He then washes her feet with warm water. It is not long before they are making love again. Then he fumbles in her kitchen to put together a meal of cheese, apples, oatcake and ale. That night, they gaze at each other a long time before falling asleep and before morning they make love again.

Anna wonders if he thinks of Elinor during their lovemaking, but surprisingly he says he has no such memories as he never lay with Elinor. He explains that she had committed a great sin, her lust resulting in the death of an unborn child, so he had decided that she should atone for this by living virtuously. The more he could make her love him, the greater her penance would be. Anna is appalled by this confession, more so when he says he followed the Papists dogma to view women as dregs of the Devil's dunghill. He says he would not allow himself to look at Elinor as anything but a lowly creature and the vileness inside her body. Anna begs him to stop as she recalls words from Elinor that barely hinted at such a thing. Michael laughs mirthlessly as he proclaims there is no God, and everything he did toward Elinor and the village was shockingly wrong. He says his whole life has been based on a lie so now he shall do as he pleases. He reaches for Anna, but she jumps up, grabs her clothes and runs away.

As she reaches the churchyard, she can only think of Elinor and sobs on her gravestone. Michael appears, but now Anna is repulsed by him. She runs into the church and remembers the two joyful moments of having her children baptized there. She remembers Sam and his simple, sweet ways. She also thinks of all the sermons she and the others heard from Mompellion, many now gone. Anna announces out loud that she believes in God. A voice asks her if that is really true. It is Elizabeth Bradford. She tells Anna that her mother is in labor and will most surely die as she has never seen so much blood. Anna offers to go with her to help her mother. Elizabeth is rude and disrespectful, yet still Anna goes with her.

Anna finds Mrs. Bradford bleeding profusely with a maid ineptly helping. Anna goes into action, barking orders for supplies. She then reaches inside Mrs. Bradford to find the child is in a simple breach position, something her doctor could have dealt with but was probably instructed not to by her husband. Although Mrs. Bradford is weak, she is able



to find the strength to push out her small baby girl. To Anna, this new life is the answer to all her questions - having saved it was reason enough to live and tending to life is what she wants to pursue over death.

However, Mrs. Bradford is weak from losing so much blood. Anna goes to get some nettle tonic from her cottage to help strengthen her. Once outside she is cold, having run away from Mompellion without a shawl, so she returns to the Hall to find a shawl. Instead she finds Elizabeth trying to drown the baby in a bucket and quickly rescues to the child. Anna lunges at Elizabeth in rage. Elizabeth explains it is a bastard child, and her father will have nothing to do with it. Anna says she still has no right to take its life. Elizabeth says she needs to save her mother from her father's wrath, so Anna offers to take the child. Elizabeth doesn't want the shame of the child so close to the hall. Anna says if the Bradfords will pay the means to help raise it, she will take the child away. Elizabeth agrees and they haggle over the details.

Anna then goes up to see Mrs. Bradford, who is doing exceptionally better and tells her of the plan. Mrs. Bradford thanks her but warns her to make haste before her husband or son find out the child is alive. She also gives Anna an emerald ring and necklace to give to the child when she is grown and to tell the child her mother would have loved her if it had been allowed. Anna tells her she will always be cherished, then goes with Elizabeth to her cottage. She gives Elizabeth a flask of nettle tonic in exchange for a purse of money to raise the child.

In the morning, Anna collects her cow's fresh milk for the baby, then packs her scant belongings, including the winter jerkin she had made for Jamie, a medical book she and Elinor had studied and a few herbs and tonics. She decides to give her cottage to young Merry Wickford and her flock to Mary Hadfield in exchange for her mule to use for transport. She is writing these instructions on a slate when Mompellion suddenly enters. He apologizes again and says he is only there to assist. He has realized his duty is to keep living and serving, thanks to her example but warns her that her life is in danger as Mr. Bradford is returning. He offers his horse Anteros and has arranged for her to stay with Elinor's father. Anna takes off with the child but not before stopping and giving Mompellion a final wave farewell.

Apple Picking Time Analysis

Mompellion appears to be suffering from grief. His surprising admission about forcing his wife to atone by having no physical contact with her sheds a new light on his personality and sense of conviction. It puts into question his motivation for convincing the villagers to isolate themselves - was it really to protect others or to force them to atone for their sins? Anna is repulsed by this knowledge, especially after having sex with him. Until then, it was as if she was filling Elinor's shoes and living Elinor's life.

In this chapter Anna also finds the will to live. Her experience galloping on horse back makes her feel alive after so much death and gloom. Saving the Bradford baby also gives her a sense of purpose and a renewed chance at motherhood.



Epilogue - The Waves, Like Ridges of Plow'd Land

Epilogue - The Waves, Like Ridges of Plow'd Land Summary

Years have passed, and Anna has a room with a view of the ocean in a land far away from England. She describes the perilous journey by sea and only her desire to save the child fueling her will to live through it. She says the voyage was hardly comparable to the gentle "ridges of a plow'd land" as described in a poem by Margaret Cavendish. Anna explains how Anteros took her to Bakewell, where she hired a wet nurse but then decided not to make her way to Elinor's childhood home, instead tearing up Michael's letter of introduction. Determined to sever all her old ties, she headed to the port, as she didn't want to walk in Elinor's footsteps. Anna rented a room at a port side inn but had no idea what to do from there. One day, the innkeeper told her an unpleasant young man had been inquiring about her all over town and suggested she get on a ship soon. Evidently, it was the Bradford son. Anna, the wet nurse and baby got on a ship to Venice. They finally docked at the port of Oran, "home of the Andalus Arabs." Anna decided to get off there and send the wet nurse back. The captain tried to dissuade her, warning her of dangers in the area, but Anna was determined to settle there. The captain introduced her to a doctor, Ahmed Bey, who took her in. Anna became one of his wives, in name, though not in flesh, as it was the only way to be accepted into his household. She and Bey often talk about faith, hers feeling tattered, but whether or not she has any left, she still has hope.

Anna describes Bey as one of the kindest and gentlest men she has ever met and of how much she has learned new ways of medicine as his assistant, through strengthening and nourishing the body rather than tearing it apart. Anna has also brought much to the community with her midwife skills and continues to study and learn. She describes the brightness of her new home compared to the mistiness of England and all the vivid colors that exist except green, as there is no grass, and the palm tree leaves are often coated with sand. The color green is what she misses the most. She once took a green-bound book to her room that reminded her of English pastures. Since it was a sacred text, Bey reacted harshly until she explained her reason. He apologized and gave her an embroidered carpet with the Tree of Life, with greener branches and leaves than anything in Elinor's old garden.

Anna's favorite time to wander the streets is after the sunset prayer, when it is quieter from the hustle and bustle of market activity. The women refer to her by her first born - mother of Jamie in Arabic - and Anna takes pleasure in having her son remembered this way. It took a long time for Anna to decide on a name for the Bradford child. At Bey's suggestion, she finally settled on Aisha, meaning "life" and "bread." Having finished her story, Anna takes her veil and goes to the courtyard, where Aisha is playing. Anna looks



for her second child, who was born in that harem. Ahmed Bey helped with the delivery, but Anna did not need help with a name for this child. She has her father's eyes, but her name is Elinor. Hand in hand, Anna and her daughters venture into the bustling city.

Epilogue - The Waves, Like Ridges of Plow'd Land Analysis

Anna made a conscious choice not to stay with Elinor's father as she didn't want to live in Elinor's shadow or have connections to any old ties, which might have been dangerous or tumultuous. Rather, she chose to carve her own road. It is surprising that a poor village girl would end up as a medical assistant and student in an Arabic land, which shows how much Anna has grown and learned from her experiences. Although she is a harem wife, she has a different kind of independence that reflects her passions for medicine and mothering. The plague experience still haunts her, and she questions her own faith as a result. But whether or not she has faith, she has hope, and that is evidenced in her love for her daughters.



Characters

Anna Frith

Anna Frith is the central character in the novel, and the story is told from her first person perspective. Anna was raised harshly by a loveless father and stepmother after her natural mother died in childbirth. She married miner, Sam Frith, when only fifteen, ready to escape her father's home and brutality. She had two sons with Sam - Jamie and Tom - though Sam died in a mining accident when Tom was only a baby. To make ends meet, Anna goes works as a maid at the rectory and occasionally at the local estate, Bradford Hall. She dotes on her children and is devastated when the plague takes them. Anna is empathetic, compassionate and loving but with vulnerabilities and weaknesses with which it is easy to identify. In her depression, she takes poppy to escape the pain, and she also longs for the touch of a man and an end to her loneliness.

Anna develops an especially close relationship with Elinor, who she sees as a kind, mother figure. She is almost desperate for her love to fill the void and becomes jealous of Michael as a result. She also is jealous of Elinor having a man's tender love until she learns the truth about that marriage. Anna was not educated as there isn't a school in her village but obviously has a sharp mind, which Elinor recognizes and nurtures. Anna is deeply fascinated by medicinal herbs and the work the Gowdie women do in that respect. She also admires Anys for her sense of independence, something Anna claims by the end of the novel.

Anna is deeply religious and impressed by Michael Mompellion's conviction to God's purpose. She faithfully follows all his guidance and supports his work after the plague strikes. But as misery upon misery pile up, she begins to question her faith. She also wonders if the plague is not an act of nature rather than God, which makes her even more interested in medicinal ways to find a cure or prevention. By the end of the novel, Anna's faith is in tatters, and she is not sure what she believes. However, she has found her calling in medicine with the brilliant and kind doctor, Ahmed Bey of Oran.

The story is a coming of age for Anna, a poor village girl, who strikes out on her own in foreign lands to pursue her dreams to be a loving mother once more. While the tragedies of the plague took their toll on her, she would not be the person she became without them.

Michael Mompellion

Michael Mompellion is one of the main characters in the novel and is loosely based on the actual rector who convinced the villagers of Eyam to isolate themselves during the plague. A charismatic, handsome young man with more contemporary views than his puritan predecessors, Michael uses the power of speech to persuade the villagers to do the right thing by isolating themselves and the disease. Michael is intelligent, well-read



and compassionate; he rides an impressive steed named Anteros. He met Elinor when working on her father's estate. He is righteous and adamant to the point, we later learn, of tormenting his wife by his refusal to show her intimacy so she can atone for her sins of lust. Anna admires him greatly and cares for him after Elinor's death while he is despondent and has lost his faith. He and Anna become passionately involved for several days, until she learns the truth about how he treated Elinor, at which point she is repulsed and sickened by him. Michael realizes how wrong he was to punish his wife this way, as well as make the villagers stay when some might have been saved by leaving. He recognizes Anna's will to live and wants to do so as well but not as a preacher. When Anna is ready to leave with Mrs. Bradford's baby, he lends her his horse and arranges a getaway as she is in danger. Despite her feelings, because of all they have been through together, Anna gives him a farewell wave.

Elinor Mompellion

Elinor is also a main character in the novel. Anna loves and admires her beauty, intelligence and kindness. Sensing Anna's quick learning abilities, Elinor teaches her how to read. They also work together with the Gowdie's herbs and medical books to find ways to prevent the plague from spreading and to keep the living healthy. Elinor is quite frail and pale and spends lots of time in her garden. She is generous to all who need help and spends all her time after the plague comes tending to the sick. Elinor seems to have an intimate relationship with her husband, though Anna later discovers this was not the case. Elinor grew up a woman of privilege but ran away with a man in a lustful, romantic passion. The man abandoned her, and she discovered she was pregnant. Elinor used a hot poker to destroy her womb and thus is unable to have children. Michael was working on her father's property and became her friend and confidante and then her husband. Only toward the end of the novel does Anna find out that Michael tortured Elinor by refusing any intimacy as a way for her to atone for her sins. Dressed in white and carrying a large bouquet of flowers, Elinor is murdered by Aphra at the Delf on the day the village acknowledges the end of the plague. Anna names her child by Michael Mompellion after Elinor.

George Viccars

George Viccars is a tailor, who moves to the village to help fill orders for the local tailor. He is considered responsible for the plague coming to the village as the fabrics he ordered from London arrived in an open cart, probably exposed to the virus. He is amiable, intelligent and well traveled. Anna is attracted to him, especially as he is so good with her sons and loves to hear his stories of far away places. He finally shows his romantic inclinations toward her the day he gets sick with the plague. He seems to recognize it for what it is as he begs Anna and her sons to flee and burn everything. He spends many miserable days suffering before he dies. Anna also discovers that he had an affair with Anyas Gowdie but had hoped to marry Anna.



Sam Frith

Anna's husband, Sam, was a miner but was killed in a mining accident after their second child was born. She was more than willing to marry him at only fifteen to escape her father's abusive home. She remembers Sam as a big, warm and rather simple person, who always seemed happy. He loved the smell of his children and would relish in them when he returned from his arduous work in the mines. He was not a romantic or intelligent person but reliable and trustworthy. He died when fire-setting his mine. Anna gave up any claim to his mine, knowing she could not manage it.

Jamie and Tom Frith

Jamie and Tom Frith are Anna's sons by her husband, Sam Frith. Tom is a baby and Jamie about five years old. Anna loves her sons more than anything in the world, so when the plague takes them, she is truly depressed. Jamie became particularly close to George Viccars and saw him as a father figure. At the end of the novel, Anna is proud her son is remembered as she is referred to as Jamie's mother in Arabic.

Josiah

Anna's father is a bullying, callous, angry man. Raised at sea and suffering a lot of abuse and punishment, he grew up hard and takes out his wrath on his wife and children. He went as far as humiliating his first wife, Anna's mother, by putting her in a painful iron mask when she rebuked him for drinking. Drinking is what he does best, and he spends most of his time at the Miner's Tavern. When Anna asks him to help dig graves to alleviate Michael Mompellion of the task, he only sees the profit in it. Soon, the villagers are angry as his greed turns to robbery. The final straw is when he tries to kill a young man for his goods by hitting on the head and burying him alive. The man survives and Joss is given a trial. His punishment is to have his hands knived to mining stoves. Anna assumes Aphra would get him in the stormy night, but, since Aphra was with her dying children, Joss died in the frigid cold and rain. Anna and Aphra collect his body days later, and Brand helps them bury him. Anna has some guilt over his death but also anger. She comes to terms with both by sharing her story with Elinor.

Aphra Bont (Anna's stepmother)

Anna's stepmother Aphra is a hard, superstitious woman. She leads a hard life married to Anna's drunken father but is hardly a role model mother. Her kids always look hungry and are physically abused by their father. Aphra is shrewd and distrustful and becomes very paranoid as she starts to lose her sense of reason. She shows no emotions or love at the beginning of the novel, and Anna remembers being raised by her as being viewed as helping hands for the younger children. After the plague, Aphra becomes fearful of spirits and demons while impersonating Anys Gowdie's ghost to make a profit. After her sons and husband die and she is forced to spend the night in pig slop for her crimes,



she goes completely insane. Anna finds her dancing and ranting in her cabin after her young daughter Faith dies. Aphra clings to this last memory of her family life when she drags the corpse to the Delf. She seems to be comforted by Elinor and Michael until the corpse of her child is crushed, at which point she lashes out and kills Elinor, then plunges the knife into herself. In her last moments, she tenderly grasps and kisses the remains of her daughter.

Faith Bont

Faith is Anna's half-sister, daughter of Aphra and Joss Bont. At three years old, she is the youngest child and only girl. She is the last surviving child when Aphra loses her sanity. Anna does her best to help Faith, but she, too, dies of the plague. In her madness, Aphra hangs Faith up and tries to hide her plague sores. Aphra carries her rotten corpse to the Delf when the plague is over. When Faith's body crumbles as Michael and Elinor try to comfort her, Aphra goes over the edge and murders Elinor before killing herself. Her last moment is grasping Faith's corpse with tenderness.

Colonel Henry Bradford

Colonel Henry Bradford was once a distinguished soldier, but he is feared by all who know him. Cold hearted and mean, he cares nothing for his family or the villagers; all that matters is his wealth and survival. When the plague strikes, he immediately decides to leave, thinking Michael Mompellion's idea to stay is ridiculous. Mompellion tries to reason with him and comes close to physical blows, but the Colonel will not be swayed. The servants beg the Colonel for help after he dismisses them all, but he will not even let the maids sleep in the barn. The Bradfords survive the plague but would not be remembered well by the villagers.

Mrs. Helen Bradford

Described as once beautiful, Mrs. Bradford is in a terrible marriage as her husband is cold and abusive. She is closest to her daughter, Elizabeth. Her son is a drunken cad, who spends most of the time in London. By the end of the novel, Mrs. Bradford has become pregnant by another man and her husband's doctor was instructed to let both mother and child die rather than have an illegitimate child in the family. Mrs. Bradford survives the childbirth thanks to Anna's help but undoubtedly continued in an unhappy and abusive situation.

Elizabeth Bradford

Elizabeth is the spoiled daughter of Henry and Helen Bradford. She is haughty and petty but at the same time has a sincere compassion for her mother and fears her father. Elizabeth tries to convince Michael Mompellion to see her mother when they return after the plague, but he refuses to do so. It turns out that her mother is pregnant



with an illegitimate child and will probably die at childbirth. Despite the hostility between them, Anna goes with her and saves Helen and her child. When Anna sees Elizabeth trying to drown the child, Anna saves it and negotiates a deal with her to take the child far away.

Lib Hancock

Lib Hancock is Anna's best childhood friend and was married to a farmer before he died from the plague. Early on, Anna shared a secret with Lib - that Anys Gowdie had slept with George Viccars. Lib uses this information against Anys when the angry mob accuses her of being a witch. Anna tries to reason with Lib, but she is too upset by the death of her loved ones and participates in the brutal attack. When Lib contracts the plague, Anna tries to make peace with her, but it is too late.

Mary Hadfield

Anna's neighbor, Mary, is the first to lose family members to the plague, including all her sons and husband, and eventually her mother. Mary is a neighbor that Anna counts on in many occasions, such as watching after children or attempting to reason with Aphra in her madness.

Jane Martin

At the beginning of the novel, Jane Martin is a very puritan girl, who babysits Anna's children when she works. After the plague strikes, she begins hanging out at the Miner's Tavern and becomes promiscuous. Once, Anna and Michael Mompellion find her having sex in a field while completely inebriated. By the end, she changes her ways and survives the plague.

Brand

Brand was a servant boy at Bradford Hall and, like the other servants, was sent packing by the Bradfords when the plague struck. He saves the cook from an attack by villagers in another town, returning with her to the Plague village. Brand is taken in by a man who wills him his farm when he is dying in exchange for taking care of his surviving children. Brand helps Anna on numerous occasions, such as helping her bury Aphra.

Aisha and Elinor

The novel ends with Anna as mother to two young girls, Aisha and Elinor. Aisha is Mrs. Bradford's illegitimate child, who Anna saved at childbirth, and Elinor was fathered by Michael Mompellion.

Earl of Chatsworth

The Earl arranges to deliver vital goods such as food, fuel and medicines, at his own expense when the village declares it will remain isolated.



Objects/Places

Plague Village

The novel is based on actual events that happened in Eyam, England in 1665-66, though the village name is never mentioned. A map at the front of the book indicates the village is in central England. Most of the villagers are shepherds, lead miners and cobblers.

Rectory

Anna works as a maid at the rectory and especially likes Elinor's splendid garden.

Anna's Cottage

Anna's cottage is humble like most in the village. She has a pallet of straw for a bed, a kitchen and a fireplace. She also has sheep and a cow on her land.

Gowdies' Cottage

Mem and Anys Gowdie are the village midwives and health care specialists. They study and grow herbs and understand all their medicinal uses. After the Gowdies are murdered, Anna and Elinor spend much time in their home and garden looking for ways to stop the plague.

Bradford Hall

The only estate in the village, Bradford Hall is the epitome of the country elite, full of grand furnishings, stables and servants.

Boundary Stone

This marker on the edge of the village is where supplies are brought in and news of those who have died is given out.

Cucklett Delf

An outdoor area where villagers meet in warmer weather instead of church to avoid spreading the plague to one another.



The Miner's Tavern

As well as a tap room, which Anna's father greatly frequents, the inn also has a court room. Merry Wickford's weight of lead is determined there, as well as punishment against Anna's father for his crimes of theft and attempted murder.

The Wickford Mine

Anna and Elinor help save orphan Merry Pickford's mine by helping her gather enough lead to keep it. As the women are not strong enough to pull the lead themselves, they use the dangerous method of fire-setting to create an explosion.

Bakewell

The nearest large town from which goods are sent into the village from the Earl.

Oran

After she departs England, Anna settles down in Oran (northwestern Algeria), where she raises her daughter fathered by Mompellion as well as Aisha, the Bradford's illegitimate child. She lives as a harem wife to a doctor, Ahmed Bey, for whom she works as an assistant.



Themes

Life and Death

Issues of life and death are predominant in the novel as two thirds of the small village die from the plague. Anna is one of the first to experience death, when her lodger, George Viccars, dies followed quickly by neighbors and her own sons. A loving mother, Anna can hardly cope with death and even uses poppy to numb her pain. Like others in the village, part of Anna has died inside and her actions become robotic as she plods through each day. Her memories involve her sons, nature and beauty. Her life during the plague is dark, cold and lonely, especially her cottage, which she dreads facing in the evenings. It is a grim reminder of the emptiness in her life.

However, after the plague is over, Anna has an epiphany of sorts while riding Mompellion's horse. She feels physically alive as she gallops over the fields, the hooves echoing the beating of her heart. At this moment, she chooses to live and find purpose in life. She finds this purpose when she saves Mrs. Bradford's baby girl, even more so when she has to task of protecting and raising the child. In the end, Anna embraces life and her new roles of motherhood, learning and healing.

Mompellion reacts to the death of his wife by loathing and rejecting his faith. He looks at his past actions made in the name of God, such as punishing his Elinor or pressuring the villagers to remain isolated, as having no purpose or consequence in the end. But when he sees Anna's passion for life return, it moves him, and he decides he will dedicate himself to serving others.

The novel ends in a bright, sunny environment full of colors and textures. As Anna ventures off into the city with her daughters, there is a sense of peace and tranquility that reflects her state of mind.

Religion and Superstition

During the plague, villagers are torn between their faith in God and superstitious beliefs. It is easier to blame evil spirits than God for all the misery and death. George Viccars comes to represent Satan and the Gowdie women his evil doers through witchcraft. The fact that the Gowdie women are not conventional and study herbs makes them easy targets, though it is Anys' beauty and provocative behavior that is especially attacked.

Even after the Gowdies are murdered and the plague continues anyway, many villagers resort to charms and superstitious cures, fear-fueled actions fed by Aphra, who pretends to be the ghost of Anys Gowdie. Despite her greedy disguise, Aphra truly believes in the superstitious, which takes over her sanity after her sons and husband die. She puts thorns over their graves to ward off evil spirits and does other rather odd, paranoid behaviors. After her daughter dies, she loses her mind completely and performs odd dances and rituals to fight evil. Death seems to come as a relief to Aphra.



Anna begins with a strong faith in God and has no superstitious beliefs. She sees superstition as evil and chides others for practicing it. Rather than seeing the plague as an act of God, she comes to view it as an act of nature; while this seems rational, it also erodes her faith. Over time, her faith becomes tattered, and she is not sure that she believes in religion, though she believes in hope.

Penance and Atonement

Many villagers view the plague as the wrath of God, while Michael Mompellion sees it as a test given in love. Mompellion is charismatic enough to get his congregation to agree with him on many levels, but some who see the plague as God's wrath resort to extreme behavior, such as flagellation, in order to atone for their sins.

The Mompellions have a secret about penance and atonement that is not revealed until late in the novel. Michael has forced his wife to chastity as an atonement to fit her crime resulting from lust. He makes her fall more and more in love with him and tortures her by not allowing any touching between them. He believes this is due penance to atone for the unborn child she killed. However, after she dies and he loses his faith, he sees it was wrong to judge his wife this way, as without God it was without purpose.

Anna's father was always cruel to her and she despises his hard, drunken, mean ways. In a way she forces her father's penance when she does not stop an angry mob from going after him and is silent on his behalf in court. She also does not get her father after he is pinned to the mining stoves with daggers on a cold, stormy night. After her father dies, Anna thinks of all the wrong he has done but also about the way he was raised and became the man he was. It is only with his death that she feels some sense of atonement for his cruelty.

Style

Point of View

The entire novel is written in a first person point of view, that of Anna Frith, the central character. Accounts of past events Anna has not witnessed are shared by other characters, such as Elinor and Michael Mompellion. The book is told as a recounting of surviving the Plague. In the epilogue, the novel switches from past to present tense to give the sense that this is the moment from which she is sharing the story.

Setting

Except for the epilogue, the novel takes place entirely in the Plague village, which is based on the town of Eyam in central England. Set in 1665-66, the village has about 380 residents. Most are miners, shepherds and servants to the Bradfords, the wealthy family in the area. The village is positioned on a hillside so that you are always walking uphill, downhill or on a slant. Anna describes the colors as predominantly green and gray; the hillsides and foliage are green; the flint and sky gray. Another small village is within sight, and the nearest major town is Bakewell, from which goods are delivered during the plague.

Taking place during the Reformation, European changes are even seen in this small village, especially in the church. Old puritan dogmas are on the way out, while new, more compassionate and open-minded modes of religion are reflected in the new preacher, Michael Mompellion.

In the Epilogue, Anna describes her escape from the village and stay at a London Port, while she decides what her next step will be with the young baby in her care. When she gets word that the Bradford son is looking for her, she takes a boat to Venice. However, once in Oran, she has an immediate affinity for the place and decides to make it her home. She describes it as starkly different to her village as there is no green, which she misses the most. It has also taken her time to get used to the bright sunshine and the hustle and bustle of the port city compared to her tranquil village.

Language and Meaning

The language reflects the time period of 17th century England with many words not common in today's vocabulary. As she is surrounded by nature, many of Anna's descriptions depict this, such as describing George Vickers' plague sore as the size of a small piglet or a fleeting feeling like the brush of a moth's wings. The language is highly descriptive and gives a very vivid sense of the people and surroundings.

The dialogue appropriately shifts between characters and their level of education, intellect and background, so that each character is unique and identifiable. For example,



Joss Bont's rough, sea-faring childhood show up in his brutish and coarse expressions, while Elinor's privileged and caring upbringing is reflected in her refined, gracious discourse.

The language also shifts to reflect the emotions of the central character and the village as a whole. In happier times, there is a lightness to Anna's recollections, with memories of sunshine and rose petals and laughter. When the plague is in full force, there is a sense of heaviness to Anna's words, as well as much introspection on issues of faith and purpose. Nature itself is described as an overpowering force, quickly taking over the village and reflecting its decline.

Structure

The book is structured in four parts: the first part takes place at the end of the plague, set in the "Leaf-Fall, 1666" with a chapter titled "Apple-picking Time;" the second part takes place with the onset of the plague and makes up the bulk of the novel, beginning in "Spring, 1665;" the third part returns to "Leaf-Fall, 1666," with a continuation of "Apple-picking Time;" The fourth part, the Epilogue, is titled "The Waves, Like Ridges of Plow'd Land" and takes place approximately five years later in Oran. The "bookends," "Apple-picking Time," contain the longest chapters (16 and 32 pages each), while the second section chapters are all about equal length, approximately 10-15 pages. The epilogue is a short 7 pages.



Quotes

"For hundreds of years, the people of this village pushed nature back from its precincts. It has taken less than a year to begin to reclaim its place." P. 11

"George Vickers lay with his head pushed to the side by a lump the size of a newborn piglet, a great, shiny, yellow-purple knob of pulsing flesh." P. 42

"She was a rare creature, Anys Gowdie, and I had to own that I admired her for listening to her own heart rather than having her life ruled by others' conventions." P. 55

"If God saw fit to send this scourge, I believe it would be His will that one face it where one is, with courage, and thus contain this evil." P. 62

"My Tom died as babies do, gently and without complaint. Because they have been such a little time with us, they seem to hold to life but weakly." P. 76

"My neighbors were all standing there, their faces turned to me, full of grief and fear. Some had tears in their eyes. But the howling voice was mine." P. 79

"Cries of 'whore' and 'jade' and 'fornicator' were coming now from every twisted mouth, as the mob surged at Anys where she knelt beside her aunt, leaping upon her and clawing at her flesh." P. 91

"All at once, the voices began: some in slurred murmurs, some crying out loudly upon the Lord, others weeping and beating their breasts. At that time, you see, we all of us believed that God listened to such prayers." P. 94

"All of us in the church that day gave their oath to God that we would stay, and not flee, whatever might befall us. All of us, that is, except the Bradfords." P. 106

"But even in the midst of that joy, I knew that I would have to leave the babe nursing at his mother's breast and return to my own cottage, silent and empty, where the only sound that would greet me would be the phantom echoes of my own boys' infant cries." P. 123



"Why did He raise us up out of the clay, to acquire good and expedient skills, and then send us back so soon to be dust when we yet had useful years before us?" P. 133

"Once again, I awoke in the morning blissfully rested. And once again, the poppy-induced serenity did not last long. This time, it was no outward horror that plunged me back into our hard reality, but my own realization, lying warm in my bed, that I had no further means to secure such oblivion." P. 139-140

"Elinor embraced me, and I felt certain at that moment I would do anything for this woman, anything she asked of me." P. 153

"We saw our work as having two natures: the one, to ease the suffering of the afflicted, and the other, more important but far less certain in its outcome, to bolster the defenses of the well." P. 165

"All that week I began to notice that neighbors would break off their conversations when I drew near them, and gradually I became aware that they were speaking of my father, and sourly." P. 89

"By gathering and sorting my own feelings so, I was finally able to fashion a scale on which I could weigh my father's nature and find a balance between my disgust for him and my understanding of him; my guilt in the matter of his death against the debt he owed me for the manner of my life." P. 210

"If we balanced the time we spent contemplating God, and why He afflicted us, with more thought as to how the Plague spread and poisoned our blood, then we might come nearer to saving our lives." P. 215

"By the second Sunday of June we had reached a sorry marker: as many of us were now in the ground as walked above it." P. 217

"I was jealous of both of them at once. Of him, because Elinor loved him, and I hungered for a greater share of her love than I could ever hope for. And yet I was jealous of her, too; jealous that she was loved by a man as a woman is meant to be loved." P. 229

"All of these humble things, waiting mute for the torch, spoke to me of the other losses that could not be piled up and regarded: the daily gestures of tenderness between man



and wife; the peace in a mother's heart at the sight of her sleeping babe; the unique and private memories of all the many dead." P. 240

"When I drew closer, I could see darting, leaping shadows through the window, and as I came closer still I realized that Aphra was dancing, leaping before her fire and throwing her arms upward as lunatics do when seized by a fit." P. 249

"Shall I say we rejoiced as the conviction grew in man and beast that the Plague was truly gone from us? No, we did not rejoice. For the losses were too many and the damage to our spirits too profound." P. 253-254

"She looks like a bride,' I thought. But funerals, too, have flowers, and winding sheets are white."

I was alive, and I was young, and I would go on until I found some reason for it." P. 272

"We had each other, wild and hard, right there upon the gritstone floor, and the pain as the rough flags grazed my flesh seemed to match the pain that was in my heart." P. 275

"The more I could make her love me, the more her penance might weigh in the balance to equal her sin" P. 279

"To have saved this small, singular one - this alone seemed reason enough that I lived." P. 286

"I birthed her here in the harem. Ahmed Bey helped in her delivery, but I did not need his assistance in her naming." P. 304

Topics for Discussion

In what ways did Elinor and Michael Mompellion become parental figures to Anna?

How and why did the people become divided as the plague devastated the village?

What supernatural beliefs surfaced as a result of the plague, and how did those beliefs conflict with religion?

What about Anys Gowdie appealed to Anna?

How did women in the novel show greater strength than the men possessed?

Lust is one of the sins explored in this novel through Elinor, Jane Martin, Anys Gowdie and Anna. What was the motivation and result of lust for these women?

Anna and Michael Mompellion experienced a loss of faith by the end of the novel. How did they each cope with this loss?

After the plague, Michael Mompellion says he regrets his decision to isolate the village as more might have been saved. Was the sacrifice worth the price? What is the mood in the village once the plague has ended?

After Michael reveals the truth about his relationship with Anna, how did her feelings change? How did you react to this surprising discovery, and how did it influence your opinion of the character?

After Anna's depression and breakdown, what events led her to want to live again?

What were some specific ways that Anna grew, emotionally and intellectually, as a result of her plague experiences?