

Discussion Questions

Year of Wonders

by Geraldine Brooks

Book Club Meeting

Tuesday, January 10, 2012

6:30 p.m.

1. All of the characters in this novel have their failings and as a result they are all fully human. Are you surprised by the secrets Elinor and Michael Mompellion each reveal to Anna about their marriage? How do they change your feelings about each character? Do they make either seem weaker in a way?
2. The Bradford family bears the brunt of Mompellion's rage when they leave town to save themselves. However, weren't they only doing what every other noble family did in those days: run because they had the means to run? Setting aside the events near the end of the novel (which make it clear that one would be hard-pressed to find a redeeming quality in any of them), can you really blame the Bradfords for running?
3. How much of Mompellion's push for the quarantine had to do with the secrets he shared with Elinor? Was he really acting out of everyone's best interests?
4. Keeping in mind that this story takes place more than twenty-five years before the Salem witch trials, what is the role of the Gowdie women in the novel? What is it about these women that drives their neighbors to murderous rage? How does their nonconformity lead to their becoming scapegoats?
5. How would you explain Anna's mental and spiritual unravelling? What are the pivotal experiences leading up to her breakdown and her eventual rebirth?
6. Discuss the feminist undertones of the story. How does each female character—Anna, Elinor, the Gowdies, and even Anna's stepmother—exhibit strengths that the male characters do not?

7. In a story where the outcome is already known from the very beginning—most of the villagers will die—discuss the ways in which the author manages to create suspense.

8. The author creates an incredible sense of time and place with richly textured language and thoughtful details—of both the ordinary (everyday life in Eyam) and the extraordinary (the gruesome deaths of the villagers). Discuss some of the most vivid images and their importance to the story and to your own experience reading it.

9. Can we relate the story of this town's extraordinary sacrifice to our own time? Is it unrealistic to expect a village facing a similar threat to make the same decision nowadays? What lessons might we learn from the villagers of Eyam?