

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“Year of Wonders”

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AUTHOR NOTES

Geraldine Brooks is an Australian writer and former war correspondent. Since starting out with the *Sydney Morning Herald* she has written for esteemed publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*. She has published books of both fiction and non-fiction. Her acclaimed 1994 non-fiction work, *Nine Parts of Desire* explored the role of women within Islam and she also wrote a memoir called *Foreign Correspondence* in 1995. *Year of Wonders* (2001) was her first novel, an historical fiction exploring the infamous year 1666 when plague struck a small mountain village as the result of an infected piece of cloth from London. Her 2006 book *March*, an extrapolation out from Louisa May Alcott's famous book *Little Women*, won the Pulitzer Prize. Her latest work, *People of the Book* is a sprawling narrative set across several centuries and continents tracing the history of the mysterious codex known as the Sarajevo Haggadah. Catherine Zeta Jones has acquired film rights for the *People of the Book*.

Geraldine married author Tony Horwitz in 1984. They have two sons and three dogs. She divides her time between Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, US and Sydney, Australia.

She attributes her decision to become an historical fiction writer to two events: the first was the publication of a notable article on the methane emissions of sheep in New Zealand, which shot her to journalistic acclaim when she became the Middle East Bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal*. The second was after she was arrested for being a spy in Nigeria; this prompted her to consider a midlife career change.

For a full account of Geraldine Brooks' life and works look at her website: <http://www.geraldinebrooks.com/index.html> or check out *The Washington Post*: "Plucky Charms" by Bob Thompson and "The Writing Life," an essay by Brooks.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Eyam is a small village in Derbyshire, England. The village is best known for being the "*plague village*" that chose to isolate itself when the plague was discovered there in August 1665, rather than let the infection spread. The village was founded and named by Anglo-Saxons, although lead had been mined in the area by the Romans.

The plague had been brought to the village in a flea-infested bundle of cloth that was delivered to tailor George Viccars from London.

Within a week he was dead and was buried on 7 September 1665. After the initial deaths, the townspeople turned to their rector, the Reverend William Mompesson and the Puritan Minister Thomas Stanley. They introduced a number of precautions to slow the spread of the illness from May 1665. These included the arrangement that families were to bury their own dead and the relocation of church services from the parish church of St. Lawrence to Cucklett Delph to allow villagers to separate themselves, reducing the risk of infection. Perhaps, the best known decision was to quarantine the entire village to prevent further spread of the disease. The plague raged in the village for 16 months and it is stated that it killed at least 260 villagers with only 83 villagers surviving out of a population of 350. This figure has been challenged on a number of occasions with alternative figures of 430 survivors from a population of around 800 being given.

When the first outsiders visited Eyam a year later, they found that fewer than a quarter of the village had survived the plague. Survival appeared random, as many plague survivors had close contact with the bacterium, but never caught the disease. For example, Elizabeth Hancock never became ill, despite burying six children and her husband in eight days (the graves are known as the Riley graves). The unofficial village gravedigger, Marshall Howe, also survived, despite handling many infected bodies, as he had earlier survived catching the disease.