Year of Wonders

What do you know about the background of this novel?

*Year of Wonders* is a twenty-first-century novel written by an Australian, but if you look at the first page, after the quotation from the poet Dryden, you will find the date 1666. How much do you know about seventeenth-century England?

Working in small groups, pool what knowledge you have. It may not be extensive as you have probably not studied this period in history, but you may be surprised at how much you jointly know, if you brainstorm answers to these questions:

1. When was Shakespeare writing? When did he die?
2. When Shakespeare was first writing, Elizabeth I was on the throne of England. She didn’t have any children. Do you know who succeeded her?
3. Since the Norman Conquest in 1066, there has always been a king or queen reigning over England, apart from an 11-year period from 1649 to 1660. (You will notice that that is not long before our date, 1666.) What happened in that period?
4. What did many people in the seventeenth century think about witches?
5. What is a ‘Puritan’? What do you know about their beliefs and values?
6. What is the subtitle of *Year of Wonders*? What do you know about the bubonic plague?

Jot down your answers, and then do some initial research to check what you didn’t know. Your research will tell you that England had been through a period of great political and religious upheaval.

**Your Year of Wonders wiki**

One proven way of enriching your learning is to set up a class wiki where you collaboratively share your discoveries about the text you are studying and your responses to it. You could begin by having each group post the research they have just undertaken, with pages headed ‘Some important events in seventeenth-century England’, ‘Puritans in seventeenth-century England’, ‘Witches in seventeenth-century England’ and ‘The bubonic plague’. Look for images as well as information, such as examples of the way in which the Puritans chose to dress, in contrast to the elaborate and expensive dress that you will see in portraits of King Charles II, images of witches and witch trials, and illustrations of the gruesome and useless treatments for the bubonic plague. In the course of your work on this unit, you may come across more information on any of these topics and you can contribute new material to the wiki pages.
**Historical fiction**

The purpose of your research is not to become expert in the history of seventeenth-century England, but to have enough background to appreciate the novel *Year of Wonders*. It belongs to the genre of historical fiction and is based on very detailed research into the period. You will learn a great deal more about the times as you read the novel.

The author, Geraldine Brooks, took as her starting point for the novel the English village of Eyam, known as the plague village. Many of the events of the novel are based on real historical events and many of the characters are based on real people, although Brooks has made substantial changes, especially to the representation of the Mompellions. Anna, the narrator, has no historical basis.

The Virtual Resource Centre at [www.nelsonenglishmanual.com.au](http://www.nelsonenglishmanual.com.au) has links to the website of the village of Eyam. Visit the site and read about the history of the plague. You will find it interesting as you read the novel to see the extent to which Brooks has kept to the historical record.

Working with a partner, consider the following questions about the genre of historical fiction:

1. Is there an expectation that an historical novel is based on thorough research and gives a realistic picture of the time and place?
2. What is more important – historical accuracy or the author’s ability to shape the material into an effective and engaging narrative?
3. The term ‘anachronism’ is used to describe something that is inappropriate to the historical setting; for example, if an actor in a film set in Ancient Rome is seen to be wearing a watch. Some readers argue that the attitudes of the main characters, Anna, Elinor and Michael, are anachronistic: that they have modern attitudes to many subjects – attitudes that they simply could not have held in the seventeenth century. As you read the novel, think about whether you agree that this is so. If it is so, does it matter? Does it or would it make the book a less successful novel?

Make notes on your discussion. You may want to revisit these notes after you have studied the novel.

**Your resource kit and reading journal**

As you work through this unit and read this novel, you will be building up your own resource kit: a collection of resources, including notes, pictures, diagrams, essays, drafts of your own personal writing, information about seventeenth-century England, information about Geraldine Brooks, and so on. The list is yours. You can store your resources in a box, a folder, a plastic pocket or a file on your computer; most probably, your resource kit will consist of a combination of paper files, electronic files and a place to store real objects.

Your resource kit must contain a notebook to use as a reading journal and log, where – both at school and at home – you can jot down points to follow up, comments to expand on, things to do and spontaneous responses, including questions. If you carry a laptop with you at all times and are very disciplined about using it, your reading journal or log can be electronic, but there are advantages in being able to quickly scribble ideas down on paper whenever you think of them, so a small notebook is often the best format for a reading journal.

File your notes from your pair work session in your resource kit.

**A class blog**

A useful extension of your personal reading journal or log is a class blog where you can post your thoughts and questions and have others respond to them. Establish a
Reading the novel

You will need to read the novel several times during the year. The first time you read it, try to read with as few interruptions as possible, so that you can immerse yourself in the story. However, keep your reading journal handy in case there are questions that come to mind, things that you will want to check later. It’s helpful to record page numbers so that you can find a section quickly.

On a second and subsequent reading, take notes as you go, particularly of quotations that you think you may be able to use later. Again, remember to include page numbers. As you read, it is important to record your feelings about the way the story unfolds. Use the following questions as a guide to help construct your reading journal:

- Given the grim outcome of the spread of this dreadful disease, it is interesting to ponder why Geraldine Brooks called her novel *Year of Wonders*. It is an oddly upbeat title, given the subject matter. In your reading journal, record your views as to why she chose this title. Keep track of examples of the ‘wonders’ you believe are evident in the experiences of the characters.
- How does Brooks shape your attitude to each of the characters? Look carefully at the way each is introduced, even the most minor character, and record your initial impressions.
- How does Brooks use descriptions of the village and the surrounding countryside to create atmosphere and suspense?
- Brooks introduces some serious commentary about class, religion and gender throughout the story. What views does she develop and how do they reflect contemporary attitudes? For example, several of the women are non-conformist in their behaviours. How is this evident and how does this affect the development of the narrative?
- Pay careful attention to the contrasts between individuals such as Elinor and Elizabeth and Anna and Anya.

Brooks’ language

You will come across quite a few unfamiliar words as you read. Begin compiling a glossary of these words. There will be some that are simply unusual words whose exact meaning you may not know, but there will also be many archaisms, some dialect words from the Peak District around Eyam village and some technical language, especially to do with tin mining and farming. Some examples have been provided to get you started. You may not find some of the definitions in the dictionary you normally use. You may need to see if your library has some large dictionaries that include words that are no longer used. Some online dictionaries are also helpful.

Post this glossary on your class wiki and make sure that everyone helps compile it.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Page number</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>beastings pie</td>
<td>page 10</td>
<td>a type of custard pie</td>
<td>dialect word</td>
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<tr>
<td>boose</td>
<td>page 10</td>
<td>a shelter for cattle</td>
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continued...
The novel has 15 chapters. It is helpful to have a brief summary of each chapter so that you can turn quickly to important incidents that you may want to reread. You can work in small groups and share the task of summarising the novel. If you have five groups, each group will be responsible for only three chapters. Post your summaries on the class wiki.

How authors construct meaning

The structure of the novel

When you made your summary of the novel, you would have noticed that it is structured in four sections:
- Leaf-fall, 1666
- Spring, 1665
- Leaf-fall, 1666
- Epilogue.

Work with a partner to consider these questions:

1. The novel opens almost at the chronological end of the story and then, in section two, goes back to a time 18 months earlier. The use of **flashback** is quite common in narrative. Why do you think Brooks used it here, rather than beginning the story from the day George Viccars knocked on Anna’s door?

2. Sections 1 and 3 have the same title – and each has only one chapter, with the same chapter heading. Why do you think Brooks has structured her narrative like this?

3. The majority of the chapters – 13 of the 15 – occur in the second section, ‘Spring, 1665’. Are these narrated in chronological order?
4 Brooks uses titles for each of her chapters. Many authors just use chapter numbers. What do you think of Brooks’ titles? Can you find some adjectives to describe them?

Make notes on your discussion and post them on the class blog, inviting other students to comment on them. Read and comment on the work of other students.

Leaf-fall, 1666: Apple-picking time

A careful reading of the opening chapter of any novel is essential to establish an understanding and awareness of authorial voice and point of view. In this story, Geraldine Brooks uses several narrative techniques to evoke time, place and atmosphere.

Work in small groups to discuss what is happening in this opening chapter. The time is autumn and the mood is sombre. Even the use of the word ‘leaf-fall’ has been chosen for its connotations of loss. The word sounds as if it should be archaic, but it may well be Brooks’ own invention. The heroine, Anna, is telling the story, and her observations of the season are critical to establishing the many shifts and changes in attitude that have taken place. ‘I used to love this season’, with all the implications that it no longer holds the same feeling for her, sets up an expectation that what has caused her to feel differently will be the stuff of the story.

1 Brooks introduces many other characters in this opening chapter. Begin making notes on the characters – their attitudes, behaviour and relationships with others. As you read further in the novel, look especially for any change or development in the characters. It is important to record key quotations which reveal essential qualities: for example, Anna’s father ‘loved the pot more than his children’ (page 7); Elizabeth Bradford was ‘sour-faced and spoiled’ (page 12).

2 Why do you think Brooks chose to use first-person narrative?

3 How does the use of archaic and dialect words contribute to the meaning of the story?

4 Notice how the author’s use of precise images – such as ‘brown spots’, ‘so few people to do the picking’, ‘his hand on the Bible, but he never reads it’ – contributes to the mood of decay, loss and disillusionment. What other images are used in this first chapter to establish this impression?

5 Note how Brooks uses parallels between the physical desolation of the garden and the spiritual desolation of Mompellion. Can you find some examples?

6 Unlike Mompellion, who seems to have given in to an existential despair, Anna is bravely and stoically going about caring for his needs and those of others. Is Brooks using the contrast between the emotional stability of these two characters to suggest that women such as Anna are essentially more resilient than men?

7 Observe carefully how even such actions as her care for the welfare of the horse Anteros contribute to establishing the complexity of Anna’s character. You should by now have a number of words to describe her character which should be supported by key quotations and page references.

8 Brooks’ narrative challenges and subverts traditional assumptions about the wisdom and moral superiority of the upper classes. For example, the Bradfords’ cowardice and betrayal of the village people during their time of travail draws
contempt and disgust from Mompellion, which Anna records with some astonishment and concern: ‘His mind had become even darker than I had thought.’ Collect other examples where the ‘gentry’ are presented in a negative way.

9 Reread the section beginning ‘Elizabeth Bradford threw out a hand to steady herself’ (page 17) to ‘by the slam of the great oaken door’ (page 18). Examine how Brooks reveals the significant contrast in values held by Anna and Elizabeth Bradford.

10 The chapter ends with Mompellion and Anna reading from the Bible. What is suggested at this point about Mompellion’s state of mind? Document the evidence to show how this is revealed.

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

Spring, 1665: Ring of roses

In small groups, explore the first chapter of the ‘Spring, 1665’ section of the novel.

1 The chapter title alludes to the long-held belief that the children’s nursery rhyme ‘Ring a Ring a Rosie’ originated during the time of the plague. Folklore scholars now dispute this theory. Even if Brooks knew that the connection was dubious, why might she still have chosen to allude to the nursery rhyme in the chapter heading?

2 Anna describes the winter prior to this as ‘the hardest season I had ever known’. There is a terrible irony in this claim, for spring with its attendant promise of new life, prosperity and optimism in fact becomes the time of disease, death and despair. Similarly, the arrival of journeyman George Viccars, who provides Anna with the prospect of some small income, is presented initially as a saviour: ‘I thought God had sent him.’ George is the villain who is not villainous. The tragedy which unfolds through his arrival is quite unwittingly caused by his presence in the village. Explain why this is irony.

3 Draw a map of the village (read the description on page 33) and the surrounding countryside. Include places and names and then draw arrows to show the ‘starburst spread of death’ (page 153). You can add to this as you read further. How precise and detailed is Brooks’ description of her setting?

4 Discuss how Brooks uses this chapter to establish the range of attitudes and values which are expressed by the female characters.

5 When Anna reflects on the difference between Sam and George, her deepest needs are further revealed. The jobs of these men are very different. Sam, the miner, is kind and hardworking and he loved his wife and children, but ‘His whole life was confined by these things’ (page 26). George, who is worldly and sophisticated, is nevertheless unimpressed by the city: ‘The city is like a corpulent man trying to fit himself into the jerkin he wore as a boy’ (page 27). Discuss the effect of this last simile, especially given George’s profession. Find other images which support this impression of city life.

6 The comparisons we make reflect our experiences. George the tailor naturally thinks about clothes that are too tight when he wants to explain how crowded London is. Can you find other examples in the novel where characters’ use of similes reflects their knowledge and experience, especially in Anna’s narration?

7 One of the ways we learn about characters is to watch them respond to others. How has Brooks used George to deepen our understanding of the character of Anna?
8 Many characters appear to be ‘starved’ of love. Discuss how these feelings are expressed. Is this something that will become increasingly significant in the novel?

9 Brooks takes care in the **juxtaposition** of descriptions of characters like Elinor and Aphra to show the prevalence of superstitious prejudices and jealousies. Anna’s reluctance to add to her own education by developing ‘herb knowledge’ is because she knew ‘how easy it is for a widow to be turned into a witch in the common mind’ (page 38). Draw a concept map to show how different values and attitudes towards education and superstition are evident in each of the women mentioned in this chapter.

10 Discuss how the structure of this chapter assists in preparing the readers for the shocking revelation of George’s sickness.

11 In what ways do the three men – Sam, George and Michael – highlight the complexity of Anna’s character? Create a mind-map to show how each man contributes to her development.

12 ‘Burn it all! Burn it all! For the love of God, burn it!’ George’s final words are prophetic and frightening. Read also page 239 where Anna wonders about ‘the cleansing power of fire’. The solution was in the villagers’ hands but they failed to take comprehensive action until it was too late to prevent the deaths of many people. To what extent did superstition, including the belief that all disasters were the work of either God or Satan, prevent them from trying to find a scientific explanation for the spreading of the plague?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

**The thunder of his voice**

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1 Just as Brooks juxtaposes the characters of Aphra and Anna to throw light on the superstitions of the time, in this chapter she juxtaposes the characters of Anys and Anna to explore strong female characters. Anna herself is becoming atypical of women of her time in questioning widely accepted values, such as the insistence that Anys’s sexual behaviour makes her an evil person. Anys is even less typical. Is Brooks stretching credulity in asking the reader to believe that Anys would speak so frankly about her sexuality to Anna? Is she giving her seventeenth-century character the sensibility of a twenty-first-century woman? How convincing do you find the characterisation of Anys?

2 Does it matter if Anys’s attitudes are anachronistic?

3 While no deaths in the village of Eyam are reported in this chapter, the threat of the plague is conveyed at the dinner party held at Bradford Hall. Read pages 58–63. Chart the way each of the dinner guests reacts to the story told about the impact of the plague on the behaviour of the Londoners. How does each respond to the gruesome details?

4 Discuss the metaphorical image ‘the Thunder of His Voice’. In what respect is it portentous, signalling something threatening to come?

5 By the end of the chapter, neither of Anna’s children is ill, despite her fears, and the village is lulled into a reverie by the ‘wondrous day of our reprieve’ (page 71). Is the final sentence of the chapter ironic?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.
Rat-fall

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1. At the beginning of this chapter, the mood of quiet tranquillity and peace of mind is contained in the beautifully descriptive countryside and the September weather. Collect some of the words and phrases that build up a sense of joy and new life.

2. ‘Rat-fall’ is obviously modelled on ‘leaf-fall’. What are the connotations of the word?

3. How does the opening description prepare the reader for the second part of the chapter? What is Brooks’ intention here?

4. Discuss the idea that Mompellion’s interaction with Anna at this point is reminiscent of the biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

5. Why, other than the need for company, is Mompellion drawn to sit and spend time with Anna and her children? What is the effect of the image of the Cooper boys playing with the dead rats?

6. Anna’s little Tom is the fifth to die. Discuss the reactions of the following characters to the deaths: the surgeon, Aphra, Elinor Mompellion and Anna.

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

Sign of a witch

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1. Anna compares the lash of the whip on ‘a man freshly scourged’ to the plague’s cruel blows ‘upon raw sorrow’ (page 80). The frantic attempts to apply the latest preventatives and remedies only heighten the suffering of Jamie. Discuss the section in which all the well-meaning people attempt to help Jamie.

2. Read the account of Anna’s grieving for the loss of her children (pages 85–7). What effect is created by the questions she poses in the graveyard?

3. The increasing paranoia of the people desperate for a scapegoat causes them to turn on Mem and accuse her of being a witch. It is this which shakes Anna from her own preoccupation with grief and loss and forces her to confront the villagers in a frantic attempt to prevent the drowning of the old woman. Discuss how Brooks builds the atmosphere of hysteria in this scene.

4. Why does Anna feel that she contributed to the betrayal of Anyss?

5. Make notes on the reactions of each of the members of the lynching party.

6. Discuss Anyss Gowdie’s rescue of Mem from the well. You should give careful consideration as to why her actions contribute to her fate. As Anyss recognises that she is unable to resist their determination to hang her, she turns on them and accuses several of the women of crimes of adultery, evidently exposing their deep secrets. Thus the heroic but tragic attempt by Anyss to save her aunt results in her own death as ‘the men bellowed like oxen’, desperate to silence her. While Mompellion arrives in time to prevent John Gordon beating his wife, he is too late to save Anyss.
7 Read the section ‘Oh, yes, the Devil has been here this night!’ (page 95). How does this contribute to your knowledge and understanding of Mompellion?

8 ‘… we all of us believed that God listened to such prayers’ (page 95). Brooks uses the final sentences of her chapters to warn of what is to come. Do you think that Anna will continue to think this way?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

**Venom in the blood**

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1 Pay careful attention to the way Brooks uses the descriptions of the wind, snow and silence to reinforce the grim reality that ‘Witch’s blood did nothing …’ to stop the spread of the contagion. Mem’s subsequent death, despite the efforts of Anna and Elinor, quickly follows, but the ‘Law of the Land’ did nothing on the pretext that no gaol ‘would consent to hold them’. Look carefully at how the various members of the lynching party deal with their guilt. Do you think their responses are sincere?

2 Anna’s anticipation that Mompellion would deliver a scorching sermon is unrealised when instead, after conferring with the Puritan Thomas Stanley, he adopts a very different approach. Read the section from ‘Pale and hushed we took our place’ (page 97) to ‘Quietly, the old man was making clear his full support of the younger’ (page 104). How does Mompellion prepare the congregation for his plan? Make notes on the reactions of each of the groups he particularly singles out. Notice the differences in the imagery he chooses to develop his argument. To what extent does this approach fit with the impressions already created of Mompellion?

3 Why did Mompellion confer with Stanley before he delivered his plan for their ‘voluntary besiegement’ (page 102), which they later refer to as ‘The Sunday Oath’ (page 115)?

4 What effect is created in the final sentence of the chapter?

5 Why do you think the chapter is called ‘Venom in the blood’?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

**Wide green prison**

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1 Anna’s calm acceptance of the decision to stay and try to prevent the spread of the contagion is juxtaposed against the Bradfords’ hasty preparations to flee. Discuss the effect of the leaving of the Bradfords on the members of their household.

2 Anna and the other villagers have a renewed connection and awareness of ‘the common grace our decision has brought upon us’ (page 107), whereas the Bradfords’ cowardly decision to leave with the excuse of ‘safeguarding what is mine’ (page 110) draws a passionate plea from Mompellion. Read pages 111–14, from ‘The rector was not to be gainsaid’ to ‘Fear a far worse punishment than the Plague!’ Discuss how the rector and Bradford are shown to be entirely polarised in their respective views of honour, courage and collective responsibility.
3 ‘Since they have no choice’ (page 113): Discuss how Anna’s reflection on the significance of this statement reveals another strand to her already very complex awareness of herself and the situation.

4 Compare the way the rector provides ongoing encouragement and leadership to that of his wife Elinor. How do they complement each other and become the source of inspiration and comfort for everyone left?

5 Why does Brooks include such a lengthy description of the birth of Mary Daniel’s son (pages 120–5)? You should consider the contrasts between the memory Anna has of the death of her mother and what she instinctively understands from her own birthing experience.

6 Discuss the implications of Anna chanting: ‘May the seven directions guide this work … May it be pleasing to my grandmother, the ancient ones. So mote it be.’ (page 120)

7 Discuss the implications of the image ‘wide green prison’. Many connotations for the word ‘green’ are implied in this chapter.

8 Make a list of all the people who have died of the plague at this point in the story.

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

So soon to be dust

The title of this chapter ‘So soon to be dust’ is drawn from the English burial service, adapted from the biblical text Genesis 3:19: ‘In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’ (King James Version)

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1 When Maggie Cantwell is brought back to the village, a new but inevitable dimension is added to the plight of the people of Eyam. The cruel and barbaric treatment she received from those in the market in Bakewell who feared she may be a carrier is only mitigated by the quick thinking of young Brand. Consider Mompellion’s claim ‘The Plague will make heroes of us all, whether we will or no. But you are the first of them.’ Is he right?

2 Why doesn’t the rector rebuke Anna when she says ‘God damn the Bradfords!’? Why is she less tolerant of her father’s blasphemous outburst?

3 Anna’s criticism of her drunken father meets with a violent attack from him and this evokes a terrible memory of her mother being forced to wear the ‘branks’ or ‘scold’s bridle’. Look up the terms ‘branks’ and ‘scold’s bridle’. Discuss how physical punishments such as this were used to keep women in their place.

4 Read from ‘As soon as I saw her …’ (page 132) to the end of the chapter. Anna’s anguish at yet more seeming waste of talent and skill, especially of a good woman in the face of the mindless cruelty of her father, gives rise to questions about God and His creation which continually trouble her. Discuss whether there is any sense that Anna is beginning to lose her faith in God.

5 Make a chart of all the references to hands which are made not only in this chapter but throughout the book. How do they add metaphorical complexity to the story?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.
The poppies of Lethe

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1. The last chapter ended with questions and this chapter begins with a question: ‘How do we tumble down a hill?’ Which questions are unanswerable and which rhetorical? Discuss the differences in effect which are created in the questions.

2. The taking of the tincture of poppy introduces more ideas which, for the modern reader, are potentially quite confronting. The easy availability of the poppy tincture, an opium derivative, leads Anna into the temptation to experience the same sweet repose that Sam enjoyed after he broke his leg. How does the other word in the title – ‘Lethe’ – contribute to the sinister connotations?

3. Read the episode that begins on page 135, with the words ‘Time turned into a rope … The thought that it was there, waiting for me, warmed my mind as the posset and the fire were just now beginning to warm my bones.’ The numbing effects of the tincture of poppies place her in a very dangerous psychological and physical place. As she and the Mompellions ‘reeled from one grievous scene to another’, they divide their toil between the living and the dead. Anna’s resources are constantly challenged. She longs to make restitution for past grievances and hurts with her friend, Lib, but is too late and she later seeks solace at night in more poppy resin. Yet, inevitably, the terrible pain inflicted by the disease continues to greet her waking self. How credible do you find this episode?

4. Discuss how the many attempts to find relief and cures for the plague cause the villagers to resort to charms and other superstitious remedies. Contrast this with Elinor’s recognition that the contagion has spread like a ‘starburst of death’, yet affects mainly the very young or the very old. This leads them to her exploration, with Anna, of the Gowdies’ herbal treasures. The loss of the wisdom and knowledge of Mem and Anys is made more profound as they search through this ‘sorry little cottage’.

5. Discuss the impact of Elinor’s story on Anna and on the development of ideas of judgement, retribution and forgiveness.

6. To what extent does the truth of the backgrounds of Elinor and Michael Mompellion (pages 147–52) affect your understanding of their roles? What do you think Brooks is trying to expose about the social mores of these times through this revelation?

7. Does Anna’s reluctance to surrender total possession of the poppies weaken her character?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

Debate

Hold a class debate on the topic ‘Atonement might be made for even the greatest of sins’. Use evidence from the novel to support your argument.

Among those that go down to the pit

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1. Read Psalm 88:4 in the Old Testament, from which the title of this chapter is drawn. Discuss why Brooks has chosen this line and how it helps to illuminate much of the meaning of the story.
2 Read pages 166–8. Discuss the different methods used by Mompellion and Stanley to achieve the same ends; that is, to support the people but denounce superstition. Whose approach do you find the most persuasive?

3 Read the story of the Wickford family from page 170 onwards. Discuss how intolerance and bigotry of nonconformist religions such as Quakerism contribute to the contagion of the other ‘plague’ – dishonesty, cowardice and social discord.

4 Elinor’s plan to help Merry Wickford keep her father’s mine causes Anna to confront a lapse on her part to ‘gift’ Sam’s tools to the Wickfords. However, contrast her compassion and selflessness with the grasping opportunism of David Burston, ‘sour and silent’ (page 187).

5 Who or what is the Barmester? Discuss the significance of this authority, both at this point in the narrative and then later during the trial of Josiah Bont (page 200).

6 Discuss both the metaphorical and literal meaning of the statement ‘Those that go down to the pits’.

7 How does Brooks intend us to interpret the connections between the scene in the church and the story of extracting lead from the mine?

8 Discuss the contrasting effects of the digging for graves and the digging for lead. How does this contribute to the mood and effect of the beginning and the end of this chapter?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

The body of the mine

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1 Read page 190. Discuss the emotional and spiritual implications of the service being held outside where they were ‘not confronted by the memories of the past and haunted by the missing faces’.

2 Anna’s father proves to be even more amoral and perfidious in his behaviour than his attempts to silence her revealed (the incident beginning on page 189). There is a terrible irony in Aphra’s claim that he is ‘a good provider for the first time in his history’. Initially, not even Mompellion can stop Josiah Bont’s thieving greed (page 190 onwards). Examine the argument that Bont propounds to justify his behaviour (page 192).

3 Why does it take the incident with Christopher Unwin to finally spur the population to action?

4 The shame and horror that Anna feels in the face of her father’s criminality is mixed with a ‘nagging sadness – one more grim thought to ponder’. How Anna manages to rise above the taint of her father’s actions, and indeed to become stronger and more resilient, is in part due to the strengthening of the regard Mompellion shows for her intelligence and moral courage. However, her loyalties are nevertheless sorely tested. When Bont is tried before the Barmote Court, the grim penalty ‘taken to the Unwin mine and impaled by its stowes by a knife through thy hands’ brings on another terrible outcome for Anna: ‘I knew I would pay for my silence.’ Debate whether Anna should have spoken up for her father in the ‘trial’ in the tavern (page 200 onwards).

5 Compare ‘It was some time before … confine them’ (page 206) with ‘Alas I did not comprehend how great a horror … the sign of the cross’ (pages 206–7). Discuss the significance of the two different approaches Aphra makes to burying her dead. Consider how these foreshadow her ultimate breakdown.
As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

The press of their ghosts

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1. Anna's grieving for her father encourages her to tell the story of his own 'neglect and ill use', his 'lonely childhood'. The recounting is a cathartic experience which enables her to be 'free of him' and 'able to think calmly once more'. The resilience and fortitude of both Anna and Elinor in the face of humiliation, horror and loss has become a constant theme in the narrative. Why do these women appear to be able to cope better than most of the men?

2. However, many women also succumb to old superstitions in their ignorance, fear and desperation. 'It seems the madness is spreading as fast as the disease amongst us' (page 212). Make a list of all the rituals and chants that the people resort to in their panic.

3. Read page 215: 'I walked on ... host of sinners.' How does Anna’s attempt to rationalise her preoccupation with God's intention with her awareness of the plague as merely a 'thing in Nature' contrast with the previous description of the Mowbrays' behaviour?

4. How are the connotations of the word 'press' in the title made more evident in the Maying?

5. Anna not only records stories of those who resort to pagan ritual but also observes and recounts other aberrant behaviours which further reinforce the diverse psychology of people under great duress. 'Dangerous ideas may spread on the wind' (page 220). What contemporary parallels can you think of where superstition and rumour have influenced the attitudes and behaviour of people?

6. The ghosts of old ideas, attitudes and behaviours, such as the flagellants, reawaken in many forms, testing the resolve of both Mompellion and Anna. The rape of Jane Martin brings an outburst of vitriol from Mompellion, directed at the girl not the rapist. Is Brooks suggesting here that Mompellion suffers from deeply repressed anger in his attitude towards his wife?

7. Compare the behaviour of the flagellants with those who adopt pagan rituals. Is there any difference?

8. Why does Brooks end this chapter with the description of Anna smashing the plates?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

A great burning

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1. The narrative is building in climactic tension. As the individual fates of the people are variously met, either through the miracle of survival or their contribution to the mounting death toll, there is an ominous inevitability that Elinor will fall ill too. Yet the random and seemingly unpredictable nature of the disease – which is a constant source of puzzlement – miraculously is not the cause. Read pages 233–8. How does Elinor’s illness cause Anna to again examine her feelings for both the Mompellions?
2. What is the miracle of this triangular relationship?

3. ‘I hope you will find it in your heart to be a friend to Mr Mompellion’ (page 235). Is Elinor being guileless here, or is she instinctively aware of Anna’s hidden love for Mompellion?

4. The word ‘burning’ implies more than the physical destruction of the worldly goods of the villagers. Discuss the other metaphorical implications of the word. Mompellion claims that his conviction that they should burn all their worldly goods is a message from God. That he gains the villagers’ ‘reluctant agreement’ (page 239) is testimony to the powers of his oratory. Anna’s remembrance that she should have heeded George Viccars’ words to ‘Burn it all!’ wracks her with guilt and distraction, and yet she is still unable to surrender every item.

5. Read pages 238–41. Discuss the contrast of the villagers’ loss – ‘we had been stripped bare indeed’ – with that of the Bradfords. Is there any compensating factor to sustain the villagers?

6. The revelation that Aphra has pretended to be the ghost of Anyx and extorted money and goods from the frightened and superstitious unleashes another wave of violent retribution. Anna admits that she, too, in her revulsion at Aphra’s perfidy was tempted to spit on her, but she still responds with compassion and distress when she witnesses the terrible treatment meted out by Brand and Robert. What other evidence is there that the tradition of brutal and inhumane punishments is common in the village? How do Reverend Stanley and Michael Mompellion represent more enlightened attitudes?

7. The death of Faith not only causes Aphra to lose her mind but also to succumb to an ancient instinct that inspires great fear in Anna: ‘there was nothing I could do for Faith, or for Aphra, so I gave way to my craven impulse’ (page 250). How does the descent into madness contribute to the metaphorical implications of the plague?

8. Trace the development of Anna’s spiritual and emotional journey through this chapter. Why does she not give in to madness in the same way Aphra does? What protects her?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

**Deliverance**

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1. Anna believed that she had abandoned her father in his moment of greatest need. Now she feels that her ‘grip upon my own reason’ was not strong enough to ‘withstand the horrors of the house’ – a decision she comes to regret and that adds to the litany of weaknesses with which she blames herself. Even though the spread of the plague appears to have been arrested, they did not rejoice ‘for the losses were too many and the damage to our spirits too profound’ (page 254). Read page 254: ‘At the rectory … hold back tears’. Why does Elinor believe in the need for a service of thanksgiving? Why does Mompellion not? Who is right?
2 The entrance of Aphra adds a note of tragic finality of monumental proportions. The dramatic quality of this scene is contributed to by the contrast between Elinor, clad in white with her arms full of flowers like a bride – ‘But funerals, too have flowers, and winding sheets are white’ (page 256) – and Aphra with the grizzly ‘remnant of her daughter’s corpse’. Is Brooks using the deaths of these two women to bring to a close the contagion of the plague, both symbolically and literally?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

**Leaf-fall, 1666: Apple-picking time**

Mompellion’s collapse into inconsolable grief following the death of Elinor sees Mr Stanley take charge, and Anna is instructed to do what she has always tried to do – ‘to serve her as best I could’. Her endeavour to fulfil the promise ‘to be a friend’ allows Anna to manage her own grief but highlights Mompellion’s self-absorption and descent into despair. He is oblivious to her loss. His rejection of the efforts of Stanley to comfort him reveals a loss of another more profound kind, and that is his love of God. As he asks Anna to deliver the bitter message in the Latin phrase ‘falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus’, his surprise that Anna understands indicates how little he has really known of the depth and complexity of the friendship she shared with his wife.

Mompellion’s recovery is slow. His rage against God and his melancholy all contribute to Anna’s feelings of oppression and personal loss. That the villagers do not care to have him tend to their needs because he was ‘simply the bitter emblem and embodiment of their darkest days’ (page 267) contributed to her fear that she would be the only witness to his wasting away.

Working in small groups, complete these activities about this chapter:

1. ‘Let go and live, since we have no choice in it’ (page 271). What brings Anna to the decision to ride Anteros?

2. How does Anna’s defiant response to his question ‘have you … taken entire leave of your senses’ change the dynamics of her relationship with Mompellion?

3. Read from ‘When you lie with me’ (page 277) to ‘I have learned to do as I please’ (page 281). Why did Mompellion treat Elinor so cruelly? How does this behaviour sit beside the extraordinary compassion and kindness he has extended to others? In retrospect, what earlier evidence is there that he was driven by Puritanical beliefs and attitudes?

4. Why does Anna feel she has betrayed Elinor? Do you agree?

5. What is the effect created by the repetition of the pronoun ‘I’ in the paragraph which begins ‘I was lying there, prone on her gravestone …’?

6. Anna’s meeting with Elizabeth Bradford in the church instigates another tragic revelation. That she offers her help despite the ‘prideful sneer’ is testimony of the consistency of her own instinctual compassion. Once again she assists in the birth of a child, but this time with a practised and skilful hand (pages 284 onwards). ‘I bent my head and breathed the fresh new scent of her … I knew then that this was how I was meant to go on: away from death and towards life, from birth, seed to blossom, living my life amongst wonders’ (page 286). How does this passage prepare the readers for what comes next?

7. What drives Elizabeth Bradford to attempt to drown the baby?

8. Contrast Elizabeth’s ‘cold reckoning’ attitude to the child with that of her mother (pages 288–9).
9 In the final stages of this chapter, Mompellion’s wise counsel and astute understanding of the ruthlessness of Colonel Bradford and his daughter is in evidence. He is contrite and remorseful in his confession to Anna that he ‘looked hard into my heart this day’ (page 291). His humble acknowledgement that she has behaved with greater integrity and humanity than he has done restores some of her regard for him. There is a great poignancy in the moment when, astride Anteros with the babe in her arms, she turns and raises her hand to him in a gesture of farewell. Discuss why Brooks does not finish the narrative at this point.

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

Epilogue: The waves, like ridges of plough’d land

Working in small groups, consider these questions about this chapter:

1 Why does Brooks begin the Epilogue with the reference to Elinor and the poem? ‘I was thrilled because it was written by a woman.’ How does this comment reveal the limitations of Anna’s experience up until now?

2 How does the description of Anna’s room prepare us for the next part of her account?

3 Discuss the effect of the narrative moving backwards and forwards in time on pages 297–9. How does this structure assist in revealing character, time and place?

4 How convincing do you find the meeting and subsequent moving in with Ahmed Bey (pages 330–1)?

5 Compare the description of Bey on page 301 with that of the other men in Anna’s life. In what respects is he different?

6 How is his attitude to his adamantine faith in contrast to ‘that flimsy, tattered thing that is a remnant’ of her own belief?

7 What is Brooks’ intention in the reference to his anger with Anna for touching the sacred book (page 302)?

8 Compare the descriptions of the countryside of Eyam in September (page 65) with Oran (page 302). How does Brooks create a sense of place and a contrasting mood?

9 Discuss the differences in the imagery and detail in the last pages. How does Brooks achieve a sense of serenity and optimism?

As a group, agree on the main points of your discussion and post your notes on the class wiki.

Research

Work with a partner to research the following issues, which will give you a deeper understanding of some aspects of Year of Wonders:

1 In the last book of the New Testament, the end of the world in prophesied. Research the story of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and discuss how this vision of St John may be applied to the events in Year of Wonders.

2 Michael Mompellion’s horse is named after a character in Greek mythology. Anteros was the god of requited love, literally ‘love returned’ or ‘counter-love’,
and also the punisher of those who scorn love and the advances of others, or the avenger of unrequited love. Consider the symbolism of the name Anteros and how it applies to the relationship between Michael Mompellion and Elinor.

3 Explore the metaphorical implications of the word ‘plague’.

4 Make a list of the different types of human goodness and badness which are revealed by the spread of the plague, such as selfish opportunism, dishonesty, perfidy, baseness, caddishness, knavery, egotism, depravity, criminality and carnality, and link these with the characters who display these characteristics.

How texts can be interpreted

As you have been discussing Year of Wonders and writing your notes, you have been bringing your own interpretation to the text. Each of us reads a little differently, depending on our context – our personal experiences and characteristics. Some readers might have found, for example, the detailed descriptions of the plague’s physical symptoms nauseating. However, if you are interested in medicine, you might have found this deeply interesting. Reading about the death of Anna’s children could affect someone who has experienced the loss of someone close more than it might affect someone who has not known such grief.

Work with a partner to consider these interpretations of Year of Wonders:

1 If you are in a co-ed class, have the boys responded quite differently from the girls from time to time? This novel has been described as a strongly feminist work. Do you agree with that? What does it mean?

2 Anna and Elinor are remarkably strong women. Were they always like that, or has life made them like that? Is Brooks implying that all women are strong and resilient?

3 At the beginning of this unit of work, you discussed with a partner what you might expect of an historical novel. Now that you have looked at the novel closely, come back to that question. Find the notes of your discussion and see if you want to make any changes to them. Does Brooks’ research into the time and place of the novel enable her to create for the reader a credible world? What are her strengths as an historical novelist? You might consider her use of language – the archaisms, the regional dialect words, the technical terms from seventeenth-century tin-mining and farming. You might also consider the detail of her accounts of day-to-day life.

4 Are some of the characters’ attitudes anachronistic? Consider this particularly in relation to Anna. Or can you justify Anna’s modern sensibility by the extraordinary circumstances she has suffered? Do the Mompellions also have attitudes that would have been highly unusual in their day? What about Anya?

5 The character of Michael Mompellion is based on the true rector of Eyam, William Mompesson. Is it appropriate to create a fictional character of dark and troubling qualities when the real man was only known for his heroic and saintly qualities?

6 Should writers, when they are writing historical fiction, attempt to present an unbiased view of the times in which the story is set? Or is that only appropriate to a writer of non-fiction or of ‘faction’? In her ‘Afterword’, Geraldine Brooks states that, although she drew the inspiration for the story from the true account of the villagers of Eyam, the book is a work of the imagination and thus must be read as fiction.

7 Brooks states that she has used the story of the plight of the villagers of Eyam to explore her interest in the problem of making a choice where the outcome could not be predicted but would nevertheless result in terrible costs to the people concerned.
She was intrigued by the question of how faith, relationships and social order would withstand the pressures of being cut off from the rest of the world. The characters of Michael Mompellion, Anna Frith and Elinor Mompellion make for an interesting study of not only the way people individually deal with terrible personal suffering but also the way they respond to the suffering of others. They are all driven by very personal values and beliefs which both sustain and compound their spiritual and emotional tests. All three are shown to be very human in the way they confront their struggles. Does Brooks create personal and social dilemmas for her characters which can still be experienced in the twenty-first century?

8 The members of the ruling class are represented by Brooks in a very negative way. The Bradfords are depicted as craven, hypocritical, snobbish, even criminal in their attitudes and behaviour. Even the newly restored king is reported to attend a whorehouse. Is Brooks guilty of stereotyping?

9 Examine the statement ‘my life and the lives of my family are of more consequence to me than some possible risk to strangers’ (page 110). How much is this attitude an expression of the way many people in contemporary society think and behave? Is there something intrinsically faulty in the thinking which prompts such a view?

10 John Vernon, writing in the New York Times, complained that Brooks has joined a modern trend in historical fiction that tends ‘toward the lurid and the gothic’. He particularly objected to the graphic description of the plague symptoms, but there are plenty of other horrifying incidents in the novel. Vernon wrote that the final third of the novel ‘takes on a kitchen-sink effect, with a parade of witches, ghosts, mad mobs, evil fathers, flagellants, devil worshipers, nice but dour Puritan girls turned into whores, stabbings and general mayhem’. Is there any justification for this criticism?

You can find a link to Vernon’s review on the Virtual Resource Centre website at www.nelsonenglishmanual.com.au.

11 Vernon also described the sex scenes between Anna and Michael as appropriate to a ‘bodice-ripper’. What is a ‘bodice-ripper’? Is Vernon correct? Does this section of the novel seem out of place with the rest of it?

12 Some readers find the Epilogue very disappointing. They feel that it stretches credulity too far. Whether you agree or not, it is important to remember the author’s context. This was Brooks' first novel. As a journalist, she had worked in some of the most dangerous parts of the world. Her experience in the Middle East had inspired two non-fiction books, both of which try to explain Muslim culture and beliefs to a Western audience. She longs for multicultural understanding to end the terrible conflicts. That longing is expressed in Anna’s experience.

How do you feel about the Epilogue?

13 Which of the following issues do you believe are important to Brooks? You will need to quote evidence from the novel to support your views.

- Superstition is dangerous.
- Traditional religion can encourage superstition and discourage scientific thought.
- Human beings are wonderfully resourceful and capable of great initiative.
- Human beings can be extraordinarily resilient in the face of great personal and social calamity.
- Human beings are capable of great self-sacrifice for the sake of others.
- Human beings are also capable of extraordinary selfishness and evil.
Constructing a supported analysis of a text

What you are required to do

Work through this section in pairs.

For assessment purposes, you are required to analyse how a selected text constructs meaning, conveys ideas and values, and is open to a range of interpretations. Let’s look at this requirement in detail. The main points are as follows:

1. To ‘analyse’ means that you are required to determine how the text works on any number of levels beyond its obvious aspects. The marker will assume that you understand the basic story and the characters involved. You must avoid summarising the text.

   Read the following sentences. Are they examples of analysis or summary?

   The narrator, Anna, works as a servant in the Mompellion household.

   Although uneducated, Anna is bright and quick to learn.

   The plague was brought to the village by a visiting tailor.

   Mompellion, seen through Anna’s eyes, is a commanding and impressive figure.

   The villagers agree to take the ‘Sunday Oath’.

   Brooks presents the ruling classes in a negative light.

   Mompellion refuses Miss Bradford’s demand for help.

2. You are required to analyse ‘how a text constructs meaning’. Writers make decisions when they are writing about how they are going to get their ideas across. Think of the text as a map. What features are included? How does the writer get from A to B?

   What is the significance of using first-person narration? What is the effect of beginning the story almost at its chronological end?

3. You are required to analyse ‘how a text conveys ideas and values.’ All texts are driven by ideas. What are they? Use your instincts. What does the writer believe? All texts contain values. Take the word literally. What does the writer ‘value’?

   What are the main ideas in Year of Wonders? What values underpin the text?

Key skills you will need to demonstrate

Work through this section in pairs.

In your assessment you are required to demonstrate some key skills. Let’s look at them in detail.

1. The ability to critically analyse texts and the ways in which authors construct meaning.
The word ‘critically’ means that there must be evidence that you have thought about the text rather than simply having understood it. You must show that you are aware that a text is ‘constructed’.

Talk about what it means to say that a text is ‘constructed’.

2 The ability to analyse the social, historical and/or cultural values embodied in texts.

All texts are produced in a particular context and therefore reflect the values of that context. From *Year of Wonders*, it is clear that Brooks values such qualities as resilience, compassion, a thirst for knowledge and tolerance.

What other values reflect the context in which this novel was produced?

3 The ability to discuss and compare possible interpretations of texts, using evidence from the text.

There are any number of ways of interpreting a text. A good response should reflect an understanding that all analysis is one of many possible interpretations of the text.

What are some of the ways in which *Year of Wonders* can be interpreted?

4 The ability to use appropriate metalanguage to construct a supported analysis of a text.

It is important to use the right terms to support your ideas. Terms like ‘flashback’, ‘narrative structure’, ‘setting’, and ‘characterisation’ can be used to describe *Year of Wonders*.

5 The ability to plan and revise written work for fluency and coherence.

You must make a detailed plan on paper before you start writing. Proofreading and editing are also important.

6 The ability to apply oral language conventions in a chosen oral text type.

7 The ability to engage an audience through interesting and varied language use.

8 The ability to respond to audience interest and engagement.

These last three skills apply particularly to oral presentations, although in all work you must use the appropriate conventions, choose language that will engage the audience, and be aware of audience. An essay, like an oral presentation, should catch the attention of the audience and strive to maintain that attention.

9 The ability to use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

Don’t underestimate the importance of spelling and proper punctuation. The subject is English and it is vital that you demonstrate your ability to communicate clearly in the written language. Talk about ways in which you can develop your knowledge of metalanguage and improve your ability to use the conventions of Standard Australian English.

### Planning an analytical essay

An essay must be planned. If you simply start writing, you risk repeating yourself or simply summarising the text. In any case, you will end up rewriting large parts of the essay. A detailed plan will save time and help you to produce a logical and well-supported argument. One of your tasks is to train yourself to approach essay topics in a way that ensures you submit your best work.

Working with a partner, look at the plan for the following question.

> The attitudes and sensibility of the character of Anna Frith are too modern. This diminishes the credibility of the role she plays in the story. Do you agree?
1 Key terms:
- 'attitudes'
- 'sensibility'
- 'modern'
- 'credibility'

2 Definitions:
- 'attitudes' – beliefs and value systems
- 'sensibility' – emotions, way of responding to the world
- 'modern' – in this context, it means ‘inappropriate to the seventeenth-century setting of the novel’
- 'credibility' – believability, authenticity

3 Brainstorming the key terms:
- 'attitudes' and 'sensibility' – Anna’s habit of questioning established beliefs and customs; her desire to retain some independence; her tolerance to behaviour that at the time was regarded as sinful, such as Anys’s promiscuity.
- ‘modern’ – These are feminist, late-twentieth-century attitudes and feelings.
- ‘credibility’ – Is it believable that an uneducated seventeenth-century servant girl could have these attitudes? Are we prepared to suspend our disbelief because Brooks has presented us with an engaging character with whom we empathise and whose story we want to know?

4 What is this question really all about? At one level it simply asks whether Anna’s character is credible, given that her attitudes are so uncharacteristic of the period in which the novel is set. But the question could be extended to take in the idea that readers sometimes willingly suspend their disbelief: we may accept characters and situations that we know to be unlikely if the author is sufficiently skilful and has other ways of involving us.

5 The question in your own words:

While Anna’s character may not be consistent with the setting of the novel, reflecting the attitudes of women in the late twentieth century, her credibility as a character may depend on other things, such as Brooks’ ability to engage us with Anna’s narrative voice.

As a first sentence, this shows that the writer has engaged with the question and is prepared to challenge it.

6 Three subtopics:
- What is anachronistic in the characterisation of Anna?
- How does an author persuade us to believe in the credibility of a character?
- What techniques does Brooks use to persuade us to believe in Anna?

7 Gather quotes and evidence to support each subtopic.

8 Write up a plan.

Write an analytical essay

Use the plan generated from the above steps as the basis for an analytical essay on the question:

'The attitudes and sensibility of the character of Anna Frith are too modern. This diminishes the credibility of the role she plays in the story. Do you agree?'
You need to practise writing the essay within the time limit. Write your essay in a 50-minute period.

Reread your essay and compare its structure against the plan. Check your use of supporting evidence, including the way in which you have embedded quotations. Pay particular attention to your introduction and conclusion: can you make these more effective? Proofread your essay carefully.

Rewrite your essay.

Swap your work with a partner and comment in detail on each other’s work. You can do this by marking a paper copy or you can use the ‘Comments’ feature in Word. When you have read each other’s work closely, talk about what you have discovered.

For advice on conferencing and peer review, visit the Virtual Resource Centre at www.nelsonenglishmanual.com.au.

Post your essays on the class blog. Read and comment on the work of at least three other students.

Constructing a detailed interpretation of a text

What you are required to do

Once you have learned to write an analysis of a text, the next step is to present an interpretation. You are required to develop and justify a detailed written interpretation. The idea is that you will take a particular approach to the text and defend it in an essay.

Key skills you will need to demonstrate

1. The ability to develop sustained interpretive points of view about texts, supported by detailed textual analysis and reference to features, structures and conventions.

   In the first essay, you let the question suggest the direction of the analysis. In this essay, you must use the question to formulate a particular interpretation of the text. This interpretation must be supported with detailed evidence from the text.

2. The ability to analyse the ways in which authors express or imply a point of view or values.

   How, for example, does Brooks use characterisation to express her values? How can we tell that she honours selflessness and resilience and detests the kind of selfish cowardice she portrays in the Bradfords?

3. The ability to use appropriate metalanguage to support a detailed interpretation of a text.

4. The ability to plan and revise written work for fluency and coherence.

5. The ability to use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

Planning an interpretive essay

An interpretive essay must also be planned carefully. The first of the key skills suggests that you must ‘sustain’ an interpretation. The only way that you will be able to do so is if you have plotted your argument in detail. This will prevent you from drifting off on tangents or, worse, summarising large chunks of the text.
The steps are similar to those listed for planning an analytical essay, but there are differences.

Working with a partner, look at the plan for the following sample question.

**To what extent is *Year of Wonders* a love story, rather than a tale about the plague?**

This may be a question you haven’t thought about, but if you move through the planning steps, an interpretation should reveal itself.

1. **Key terms:**
   - ‘a love story’
   - ‘a tale about the plague’
   - ‘to what extent’

2. **Definitions:**
   - ‘a love story’ – This is certainly not a traditional romance, nor what one reviewer called a ‘bodice-ripper’, except perhaps in the sex scenes between Michael and Anna, but there are many kinds of love described in it.
   - ‘a tale about the plague’ – Is a strict historical account Brooks’ main purpose?
   - ‘to what extent’ – The question allows complete agreement, complete disagreement, or a position somewhere in between.

3. **Brainstorming the key terms:**
   - ‘a love story’ – the men in Anna’s life: Sam, George and Michael; her love for her boys; her love for friends like Lib, and to some extent her whole community; above all, her love for the Mompellions – for both of them.
   - ‘a tale about the plague’ – meticulous historical research; use of convincing historical detail evoking the times; use of language to reflect the times; but the historical account is not her primary concern.
   - ‘to what extent’ – It is a convincing tale of the plague, an excellent historical novel, but Brooks’ primary concern is to explore the nature of love, particularly the way in which her relationship with Elinor and Michael transforms Anna’s life. The relationship with Elinor is central. The sexual relationship with Michael at the end of the novel is an aberration.

4. **The question:**

   The question is about Brooks’ central concerns. While she is interested in representing the time and place of the story and has based her account on meticulous research, it is the exploration of love and its ability to transform that is her central concern. Key to this is the relationship between Elinor and Anna.

5. **Your interpretation of the question:**

   A plausible interpretation of this question may be centred on the nature of the relationship between Anna and Elinor.

6. **Your interpretation in your own words:**

   *Is this primarily an historical novel, or is Brooks’ central concern to do with the nature of love?*

7. **Three subtopics:**
   - The undoubted skill and accuracy with which Brooks handles the features of historical fiction
   - The inclusion of characters who are more like women today than women of the seventeenth century, suggesting that the primary concern is something other than historical representation
The centrality of the relationship between Anna and Elinor to the novel, a relationship that transforms Anna's life

8 Gather quotes and evidence to support each of these subtopics.

9 Write up a plan.

Write an interpretive essay

Use the plan generated from the above steps as the basis for an interpretive essay on the question:

To what extent is Year of Wonders a love story, rather than a tale about the plague?

You need to practise writing the essay within the time limit. Write your essay in a 50-minute period.

Reread your essay and compare its structure against the plan. Check your use of supporting evidence, including the way in which you have embedded quotations. Pay particular attention to your introduction and conclusion: can you make these more effective? Proofread your essay carefully.

Rewrite your essay.

Swap your work with a partner and comment in detail on each other's work. You can do this by marking a paper copy or you can use the 'Comments' feature in Word. When you have read each other's work closely, talk about what you have discovered.

Post your essays on the class blog. Read and comment on the work of at least three other students.

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