

Book Review: Year of Wonders
By Geraldine Brooks

Can a book do an about face? It depends on the author. In the case of “Year of Wonders” author Geraldine Brooks has accomplished just that.

And it’s not necessarily a good thing.

The book was originally published 24 years ago. I gave it a shot since it’s my first read for the new book club I recently joined. It didn’t disappoint, at least not for the first 250 pages. But the last 50 left me shaking my head.

“Year of Wonders” is a work of historical fiction, events taking place in England in 1666. A plague begins spreading through a remote village, and the villagers, inspired by their young minister, elect to remain in their homes, isolating themselves within the village boundaries rather than leave and risk further spreading the disease.

Michael Mompellion is the young minister who, together with his wife Elinore, spurs on the villagers despite the many deaths that occur. Anna Frith is a village housemaid who recently lost her husband in a mining accident. She eventually becomes the unlikely heroine in the story, though you would never think it based on the early narrative.

The book’s pace is slow, but that’s fine. Brooks goes to great pains to write descriptively of the events taking place within the village; of the suffering experienced as families are torn apart by the disease. She captures – perhaps sometimes a bit too graphically – the impact the disease has on the body, and the wild herbal remedies used in attempts to comfort and heal. It’s also striking to learn how prominent villagers’ beliefs are in witchcraft and other religious myths.

Fifty pages from the book’s end, however, the narrative shifts into overdrive. The pace quickens, characters’ personalities seem to do a 180, and the entire mood of the story swings

from historical fiction to a brief but steamy romance and action-adventure complete with a Hollywood ride-off-into-the-sunset finish.

It's not that the last 50 pages are poorly written. They're just dramatically different from the mood so carefully crafted throughout the first 250. And I understood, even recognized, the growth and evolution of various characters. But to have them leap off the pages in larger-than-life form was a bit of a shock to the system.

It also brings the book down a notch or two, at least in my opinion. In comparison to Brooks' historical novel "Horse" published in 2022, it just doesn't measure up.

"Year of Wonders" is not a bad read. I give it 3.5 stars. Just be prepared for some dramatic narrative shifts toward the end.