

Caboodles Book Club Kits

People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks



Booklist Review With an ingenuity equal to that standing behind her Pulitzer Prize—winning *March* (2005), which was a fictional imagining of the life of the father character in Louisa May Alcott's classic novel *Little Women*, Brooks now fictionalizes the history of an actual book, the Hebrew codex known as the Sarajevo Haggadah, an extremely precious illuminated manuscript originally from medieval Spain. In 1996, as Brooks has it, as a ceasefire is effected to quell the bloody violence in Bosnia, Australian book conservator Hanna Heath is called to restore the famous Sarajevo Haggadah. The condition of the manuscript, including a stain on a page and certain items clinging to it (among them an insect wing that falls from the binding when Hanna conducts her preliminary review of repair needs), leads her on a search for answers to where the Haggadah has been all its life. This, of course, leads Brooks on a marvelously evocative journey backward in time, to periods of major religious strife and persecution, from the 1940 German occupation of Yugoslavia, to 1894 Vienna, to 1609 Venice, to 1492 Barcelona, and, finally, 1480 Seville. Like a flower growing through a crack in a slab of concrete, the exquisitely beautiful Sarajevo Haggadah remained an artistic treasure throughout the centuries despite always seeming to be caught between opposing sides in skirmishes of greed, intolerance, and bloodlust. -- Hooper, Brad (Reviewed 10-01-2007) (Booklist, vol 104, number 3, p5)

Kirkus Reviews From 1480 Seville to 1996 Sarajevo, a priceless scripture is chased by fanatics political and religious. Its recovery makes for an enthralling historical mystery. In Sydney, ace (and gorgeous) old-book conservator Hannah Heath gets a 2 a.m. phone call. She's summoned to Sarajevo to check out a 15th-century Spanish-made Haggadah, a codex gone missing in Bosnia during a 1992 siege. The document is a curiosity, its lavish illuminations appearing to violate age-old religious injunctions against any kind of illustration. Remarkably, it's Muslim museum librarian Ozren Karaman who rescued the Hebrew artifact from furious shelling. Questioning (and bedding) Ozren, Hannah examines the Haggadah binding and from clues embedded there—an insect's wings, wine stains, white hair—reconstructs the book's biography. And it's an epic. Chapter by chapter, each almost an independent story, the chronicle unwinds—of the book's changing hands from those of anti-Nazi partisans dreaming of departing for Palestine from war-torn Croatia, from schemers in 1894 Vienna, home, despite Freud and Mahler, of virulent anti-Semitism. Perhaps the best chapter takes place in 1609 Venice. There, not-so-grand Inquisitor Domenico Vistorini, a heretic hunter with a drinking problem, contends in theological disputation with brilliant rabbinical star Judah Aryeh. The two strike up an unlikely alliance to save the book, even while Vistorini at first blanches at its art—a beautiful depiction of the glowing sun, prophesying, the hysterical priest assumes, Galileo's heliocentric blasphemy. Tracing those illustrations back to their origin point, Hannah unkinks a series of fascinating conundrums—and learns, even more fiercely, to prize the printed page. Rich suspense based on a true-life literary puzzle, from the Pulitzer Prize-winning Brooks (*March*, 2005, etc.). (Kirkus Reviews, November 1, 2007).

Author Biography

Australian-born Geraldine Brooks is an author and journalist who grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, and attended Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney. She worked as a reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald* for three years as a feature writer with a special interest in environmental issues.

In 1982 she won the Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship to the journalism master's program at Columbia University in New York City. Later she worked for *The Wall Street Journal*, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans.

She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 2006 for her novel *March*. Her first novel, *Year of Wonders*, is an international bestseller, and *People of the Book* is a *New York Times* bestseller translated into 20 languages. She is also the author of the non-fiction works *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*.

Brooks married author Tony Horwitz in Tourette-sur-Loup, France, in 1984. They have two sons-- Nathaniel and Bizuayehu--and three dogs. They divide their time between homes in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and Sydney, Australia.

For more information, see *The Washington Post*: "Plucky Charms" by Bob Thompson and "The Writing Life," an essay by Brooks.

Source: "Reading Guides: *People of the Book*." *Penguin.com* (USA). 2009. Penguin USA, Web. 19 Oct 2009. <http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/people_of_the_book.html>.

Discussion Questions

1. When Hanna implores Ozren to solicit a second opinion on Alia's condition, he becomes angry and tells her, "Not every story has a happy ending." (p. 37) To what extent do you believe that their perspectives on tragedy and death are cultural? To what extent are they personal?
2. Isak tells Mordechai, "At least the pigeon does no harm. The hawk lives at the expense of other creatures that dwell in the desert." (p.50) If you were Lola, would you have left the safety of your known life and gone to Palestine? Is it better to live as a pigeon or a hawk? Or is there an alternative?
3. When Father Vistorni asks Rabbi Judah Ayreh to warn the printer that the Church disapproves of one of their recently published texts, Ayreh tells him, "better you do it than to have us so intellectually enslaved that we do it for you." (p. 156) Do you agree or disagree with his argument? With the way he handled Vistorni's request?
4. What was it, ultimately, that made Father Vistorini approve the haggadah? Since Brooks leaves this part of the story unclear, how do you imagine it made its way from his rooms to Sarajevo?
5. Several of the novel's female characters lived in the pre-feminist era and certainly fared poorly at the hands of men. Does the fact that she was pushing for gender equality—not to mention saving lives—justify Sarah Heath's poor parenting skills?

Would women's rights be where they are today if it weren't for women like her?

6. Have you ever been in a position where your professional judgment has been called into question? How did you react?
7. Was Hanna being fair to suspect only Amitai of the theft? Do you think charges should have been pressed against the culprits?
8. How did Hanna change after discovering the truth about her father? Would the person she was before her mother's accident have realized that she loved Ozren? Or risked the dangers involved in returning the codex?
9. There is an amazing array of "people of the book"—both base and noble—whose lifetimes span some remarkable periods in human history. Who is your favorite and why?

Source: "Reading Guides: People of the Book." Penguin.com (USA). 2009. Penguin USA, Web. 19 Oct 2009. <http://us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/people_of_the_book.html>.