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People of the Book

by Geraldine Brooks

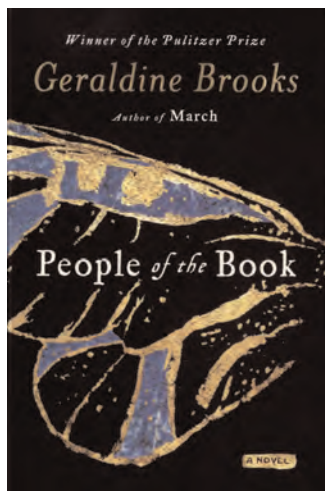
Viking, 372 pp. \$25.95

REVIEW BY JUDY BOLTON-FASMAN

In her newly published novel, *People of the Book*, Geraldine Brooks takes selected historical facts about the Sarajevo Haggadah and transforms them into a story imbued with mystery and atmosphere. It's an approach that Brooks perfected in her previous two novels. Her fictional debut, *The Year of Wonders*, was inspired by a town actually called the "plague village." There Brooks wrote of an itinerant tailor who carried the bubonic plague from London to a small town in Derbyshire in 1665. In 2006 Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for *March*, her second novel, about the absent father in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Set against the backdrop of the Civil War, the novel depicts March's experiences as an army chaplain and committed abolitionist.

Brooks first heard of the famous Sarajevo Haggadah, which arrived in Sarajevo in 1894, while working as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*. Reporting on the siege of Sarajevo she learned that the Haggadah, a treasure of the Bosnian National Museum, had gone missing for the third time. The Haggadah had first disappeared from the National Museum during the Second World War when a Muslim librarian whisked it away to safety. This time another Muslim librarian rescued the Haggadah by locking it in a bank vault during the Bosnian civil war.

Among the rumors that circulated about the Haggadah in the early 1990s was that the Muslim government sold it to buy arms, or that the Mossad took it to Israel. These rumors fueled Brooks's curiosity. Now, over a decade later, Brooks has crafted a complex and intriguing back-story of how the Sarajevo Haggadah became a symbol of the



miraculous survival of European Jewry.

The Haggadah is one of the novel's central protagonists; the other is Hanna Heath, a young manuscript conservator from Australia. Hanna is asked by the United Nations to come to Sarajevo in 1996 to examine the codex and prepare it for an exhibition at the Bosnian National Museum. She is deemed the best person for the job for both her skill and her neutrality. In the course of examining the fragile yet resilient illuminated manuscript, Hanna comes upon tantalizing clues that include a

fragment of an insect wing, wine stains mixed with blood, salt crystals and a strand of white hair. The elaborate silver clasps that once held the codex together have vanished. From each of these clues, Brooks spins an elaborate story that realistically conveys time and place and the condition of the Jewish community.

Each of the novel's discrete sections contributes crucial information about the Haggadah's long, torturous journey. Brooks initially locates the Haggadah in the Spanish Inquisition. Here she intertwines harrowing scenes of torture that take place in a hideously named room called "the place of relaxation" with the life of an impoverished *sofer* – a scribe – who bought the illuminated pictures of the Haggadah at a flea market and wrote down the corresponding text.

In the real Sarajevo Haggadah an inscription reads "Revisto per mi. Gio. Domenico Vistorini, 1609." Brooks imagines Vistorini as a suffering papal censor, an accomplished scholar versed in Hebrew and Greek who has "an innate reverence for books." A converso priest, Vistorini numbs his guilt over sending Jewish books to the flames with communion wine. He also soothes what is left of his Jewish soul through his collegial friendship with Rabbi Judah Aryeh, a character based on *The Autobiography of a 17th-Century Rabbi*.

The Haggadah eventually wends its way through the centuries until it ends up in fin-de-siecle Vienna where a book-binder with an advanced case of syphilis not only forgets how to bind a book, but also steals the Haggadah's exquisite silver clasps to pay for a miracle cure.

Brooks has done an extraordinary job of researching the novel, and her diligence turns out to be both a strength and a weakness of the book. At times, the stories that correlate with the clues under Hanna's microscope overwhelm the story. And tale upon tale is heaped on the Haggadah, occasionally straining the plot.

Hanna's personal story parallels the rich and convoluted history of the Haggadah. Her mother Sarah is a dour woman, a neurosurgeon determined to outshine her male colleagues. A single mother who was largely absent from Hanna's life, she refuses to reveal the identity of Hanna's father. She is emotionally cruel to her daughter, dismissing Hanna's profession as "kindergarten work" and taunting her by asking, "How is your latest tatty little book anyway? Fixed all the dog-eared pages?"

Brooks gradually reveals the mystery of Hanna's paternity, though it is too late to repair the earlier conflicts between Sarah and Hanna. Having led the reader through the overly familiar psychological terrain that underscores difficult mother-daughter relationships, Brooks does provide a satisfying resolution to their story.

The real relationship that shines through in these pages is the one that Hanna forges with the Sarajevo Haggadah. The book haunts Hanna's dreams and inspires her to feel at one with "the gold beaters, the stone grinders, the scribes, and the binders who sometimes in the quiet speak to me." That spirit infuses the vibrant, complicated and painful history of the Haggadah's survival.

"The People of the Book" – those people who over the centuries inadvertently or knowingly aided in rescuing the Sarajevo Haggadah – are worthy and poignant representatives of the original People of the Book – Jews who, like the intrepid Sarajevo Haggadah, survived through luck, perseverance and their belief in God's blessing.

EXCERPT

Aryeh released the catches, admiring the talent of the silver-smith. Each clasp, closed, was in the form of a pair of wings. As the delicate catch released – still smoothly, after more than a century – the wings opened to reveal a rosette

enfolded within. Aryeh saw at once the book was a Haggadah, but unlike any he had ever seen before. The gold leaf, the rich pigments ... he stared at the illuminations, turning each page eagerly. He was delighted, yet a little disturbed, to see Jewish stories told in an art so like that of the Christians' prayer books. (PAGE 163)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does historical fiction enhance actual history? How?
2. What makes the Sarajevo Haggadah unusual for a Hebrew codex?
3. Did you find Brooks's use of historical detail enlightening?
4. Is Brooks successful in revealing Hanna's convoluted past?
5. Do you agree that Hanna's past has something in common with the history of the Sarajevo Haggadah?
6. What strikes you about the last two times that the Haggadah was saved?
7. Does the Passover story come in to play at all in the novel? How?
8. Devise your own four rhetorical questions about the Sarajevo Haggadah's survival.
9. Do Brooks's conjectures about the Haggadah's survival ring true?
10. Which mystery about the Haggadah did you find most intriguing?

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