

People of the Book

By Geraldine Brooks

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People of the Book By Geraldine Brooks

View our feature on Geraldine Books's *People of the Book*.

From the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *March*, the journey of a rare illuminated manuscript through centuries of exile and war

In 1996, Hanna Heath, an Australian rare-book expert, is offered the job of a lifetime: analysis and conservation of the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, which has been rescued from Serb shelling during the Bosnian war. Priceless and beautiful, the book is one of the earliest Jewish volumes ever to be illuminated with images. When Hanna, a caustic loner with a passion for her work, discovers a series of tiny artifacts in its ancient binding—an insect wing fragment, wine stains, salt crystals, a white hair—she begins to unlock the book's mysteries. The reader is ushered into an exquisitely detailed and atmospheric past, tracing the book's journey from its salvation back to its creation.

In Bosnia during World War II, a Muslim risks his life to protect it from the Nazis. In the hedonistic salons of fin-de-siècle Vienna, the book becomes a pawn in the struggle against the city's rising anti-Semitism. In inquisition-era Venice, a Catholic priest saves it from burning. In Barcelona in 1492, the scribe who wrote the text sees his family destroyed by the agonies of enforced exile. And in Seville in 1480, the reason for the Haggadah's extraordinary illuminations is finally disclosed. Hanna's investigation unexpectedly plunges her into the intrigues of fine art forgers and ultra-nationalist fanatics. Her experiences will test her belief in herself and the man she has come to love.

Inspired by a true story, *People of the Book* is at once a novel of sweeping historical grandeur and intimate emotional intensity, an ambitious, electrifying work by an acclaimed and beloved author.

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People of the Book By Geraldine Brooks Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #829833 in Books
- Brand: The Viking Press
- Published on: 2008-01-01
- Released on: 2008-01-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.23" h x 6.38" w x 9.54" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 372 pages

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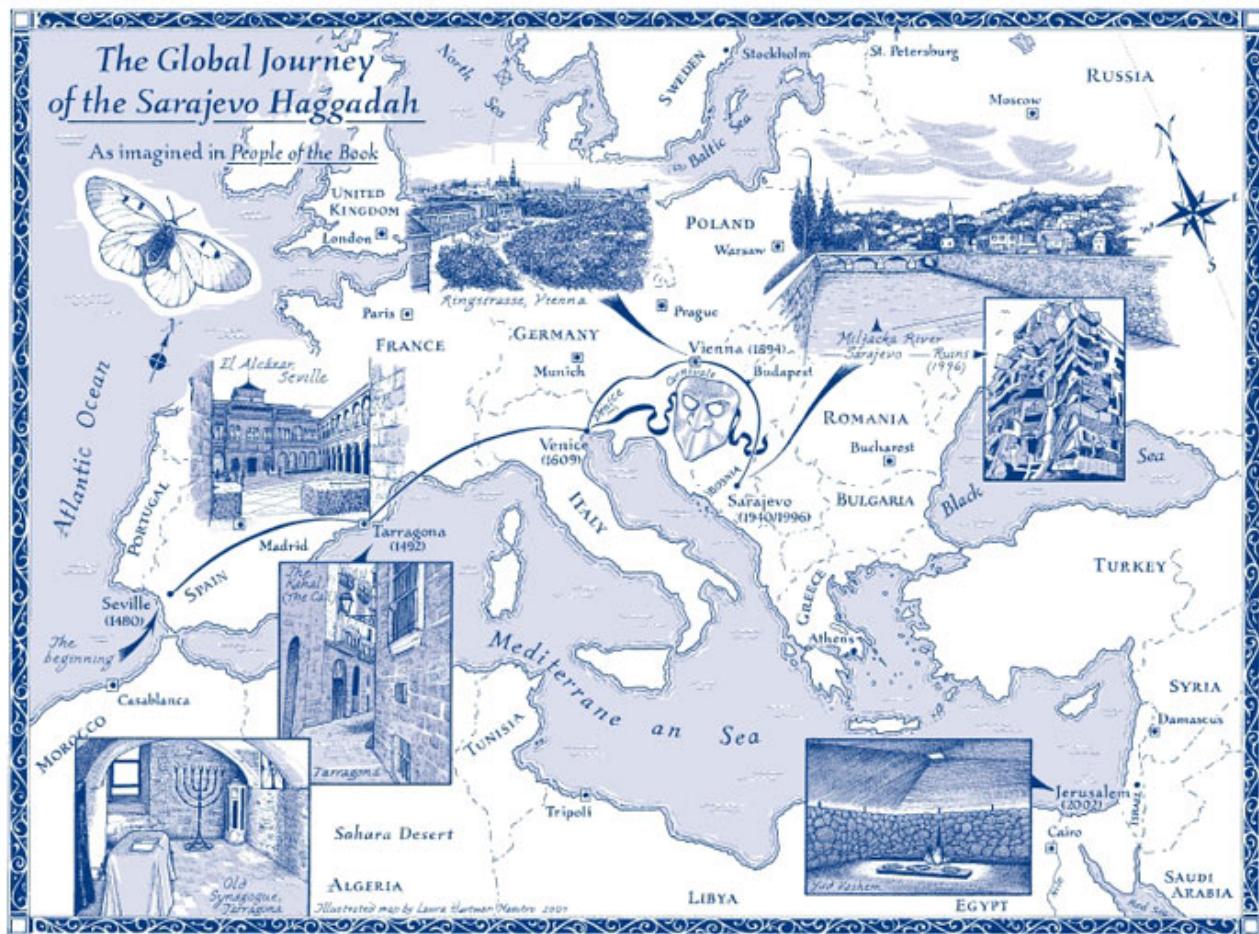
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best of the Month, January 2008: One of the earliest Jewish religious volumes to be illuminated with images, the Sarajevo Haggadah survived centuries of purges and wars thanks to people of all faiths who risked their lives to safeguard it. Geraldine Brooks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *March*, has turned the intriguing but sparely detailed history of this precious volume into an emotionally rich, thrilling fictionalization that retraces its turbulent journey. In the hands of Hanna Heath, an impassioned rare-book expert restoring the manuscript in 1996 Sarajevo, it yields clues to its guardians and whereabouts: an insect wing, a wine stain, salt crystals, and a white hair. While readers experience crucial moments in the book's history through a series of fascinating, fleshed-out short stories, Hanna pursues its secrets scientifically, and finds that some interests will still risk everything in the name of protecting this treasure. A complex love story, thrilling mystery, vivid history lesson, and celebration of the enduring power of ideas, *People of the Book* will surely be hailed as one of the best of 2008. --Mari Malcolm



From Publishers Weekly

Reading Geraldine Brooks's remarkable debut novel, *Year of Wonders*, or more recently *March*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, it would be easy to forget that she grew up in Australia and worked as a journalist. Now in her dazzling new novel, *People of the Book*, Brooks allows both her native land and current events to play a

larger role while still continuing to mine the historical material that speaks so ardently to her imagination. Late one night in the city of Sydney, Hanna Heath, a rare book conservator, gets a phone call. The Sarajevo Haggadah, which disappeared during the siege in 1992, has been found, and Hanna has been invited by the U.N. to report on its condition. Missing documents and art works (as Dan Brown and Lev Grossman, among others, have demonstrated) are endlessly appealing, and from this inviting premise Brooks spins her story in two directions. In the present, we follow the resolutely independent Hanna through her thrilling first encounter with the beautifully illustrated codex and her discovery of the tiny signs—a white hair, an insect wing, missing clasps, a drop of salt, a wine stain—that will help her to discover its provenance. Along with the book she also meets its savior, a Muslim librarian named Karaman. Their romance offers both predictable pleasures and genuine surprises, as does the other main relationship in Hanna's life: her fraught connection with her mother. In the other strand of the narrative we learn, moving backward through time, how the codex came to be lost and found, and made. From the opening section, set in Sarajevo in 1940, to the final section, set in Seville in 1480, these narratives show Brooks writing at her very best. With equal authority she depicts the struggles of a young girl to escape the Nazis, a duel of wits between an inquisitor and a rabbi living in the Venice ghetto, and a girl's passionate relationship with her mistress in a harem. Like the illustrations in the Haggadah, each of these sections transports the reader to a fully realized, vividly peopled world. And each gives a glimpse of both the long history of anti-Semitism and of the struggle of women toward the independence that Hanna, despite her mother's lectures, tends to take for granted. Brooks is too good a novelist to belabor her political messages, but her depiction of the Haggadah bringing together Jews, Christians and Muslims could not be more timely. Her gift for storytelling, happily, is timeless. Copyright 2007 Publishers Weekly.

[From *The New Yorker*](#)

When an Australian rare-book conservator named Hanna Heath finds a butterfly wing, a salt crystal, a white hair, and bloodstains in the recently rediscovered Sarajevo Haggadah, a late-medieval illuminated codex of uncertain provenance, she sets out to solve the mystery of the book's origins. To her disappointment, analysis of the specimens reveals little. "It's too bad," an organic chemist tells her. "Blood is potentially so dramatic." Brooks, beginning where science leaves off, uses Hanna's finds as entry points to richly imagined historical landscapes peopled by the Haggadah's creators, protectors, and would-be destroyers—a female Muslim slave in Convivencia Spain, a Jewish doctor in fin-de-siècle Vienna, an alcoholic priest in seventeenth-century Venice. Their narratives alternate with Hanna's own, and the final, multilayered effect is complex and moving.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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