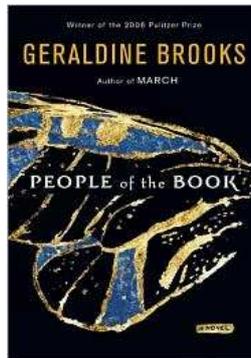




Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

People of the Book
by Geraldine Brooks (2008, Penguin Group)



Target audience: People who enjoy reading about different religions and cultures.

Synopsis: Inspired by a true story, *People of the Book* is a novel of sweeping historical grandeur and intimate emotional intensity by an acclaimed and beloved author. Called “a tour de force” by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, this ambitious, electrifying work traces the harrowing journey of the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, a beautifully illuminated Hebrew manuscript created in fifteenth-century Spain. When it falls to Hanna Heath, an Australian rare-book expert, to conserve this priceless work, the series of tiny artifacts she discovers in its ancient binding – an insect wing fragment, wine stains, salt crystals, a white hair – only begin to unlock its deep mysteries and unexpectedly plunges Hanna into the intrigues of fine art forgers and ultra-nationalist fanatics.

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.

Her first novel, *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* was an international bestseller. In 2006, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 2006 for *March*, a story that imagines the Civil War experiences of the absent father in Louisa May Alcott's beloved classic *Little Women*. She has also written nonfiction, including *Foreign Correspondence*, an award-winning memoir about her search for the international pen pals who enriched her childhood.

Reviews:

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.

Library Journal

Rare because haggadahs are seldom illuminated and precious for the quality of those illustrations, the Sarajevo Haggadah has survived the siege of that city, saved by a Muslim who headed the library at the National Museum. Rare books conservator Hanna Heath, summoned from Sydney to Sarajevo to evaluate it, finds tiny clues—an insect's wing, a wine stain, a hair—that establish its provenance and lead into flashbacks about the book's history, showing how it survived the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and the Nazis and how it came to be created in the first place. Not the least of these stories is Hanna's own. Brooks, whose *March* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2006, convincingly re-creates several unfamiliar settings—Seville in 1480, Barcelona in 1492, Venice in 1609, Vienna in 1894, Yugoslavian resistance to German occupation, and Sarajevo in 1996. Reader Edwina Wren, faced with re-creating all these accents, sometimes defaults to one that's generically foreign. Some of the many characters could also have been a little more developed, but this is both a literary novel and a popular hit, one of those big, ambitious, impossibly erudite books that pursue hidden knowledge through the ages.

School Library Journal

Hanna Heath, an Australian book conservationist, is thrilled to be chosen to work on the rare illuminated Haggadah created in Spain in the Middle Ages. The book had been protected in a museum in Sarajevo until 1994, when it was rescued from certain plunder during the Bosnian conflict and hidden in a bank vault by a Muslim librarian. Hanna is as eager to learn and preserve the mysterious history of the codex as she is to restore the manuscript. How did it come to be illustrated, a practice believed to have been forbidden by Jewish law? What is the meaning of the wine stain, the hair, the insect wing, and the salt crystals? The author uses these artifacts to weave a thrilling tale of the unusual creation of the Haggadah in Seville in 1480 and its dangerous journey to Tarragona, Venice, Vienna, and finally Sarajevo. It is a story of the Inquisition and wars, and the enlightenment or ignorance of the men and women who would save or destroy this brilliant treasure. Integrated into these compelling vignettes is Hanna's own story: her passion for her work, her unhappy relationship with her mother, and her bittersweet love affair. Sophisticated teens will appreciate Hanna's sarcastic, witty observations, which mask a vulnerable lack of confidence. The mystery of the codex and the forensic examinations are intriguing and will keep readers eagerly awaiting the next revelation. Inspired by the true story of the Sarajevo Haggadah, Brooks has imagined a thrilling mystery and a history that has deep ramifications in our own time.

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.

Discussion questions:

1. In what ways is the Sarajevo Haggadah symbolic of the plight of the Jewish people over the years?
2. Which of the stories in *People of the Book* did you find most compelling? Was it a believable history of the Sarajevo Haggadah?
3. Do you think the different chapters, which told different stories, hung together well? Did you like how Brooks revisited Lola's story in the end?
4. Did you connect with Hanna? Did you find her relationships with her mother and Orzen believable? What did they add to the overall story?
5. Why do you think Lola ultimately decided to move to Palestine?
6. Why do you think Father Vistorini saved the Haggadah in the end?
7. Were you surprised by Ruth's boldness? Why don't you think her mother and father realized the depth of her spirituality and courage?
8. Hanna's mother justifies her poor parenting through her feminist ideals. How did you see women's situation change over the years? Do you think Hanna's mother's attitude was necessary to bring about permanent change for women?
9. Was Nura's decision to give Al-Mora to the doctor selfish or a way of looking out for her friend?
10. Do you think the suspenseful ending fit with the rest of the book? Were you surprised by what happened? If you were Hanna, would you have forgiven Orzen?

Prepared by Lisa Hewel, Moffat Library of Washingtonville. June 2010
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council