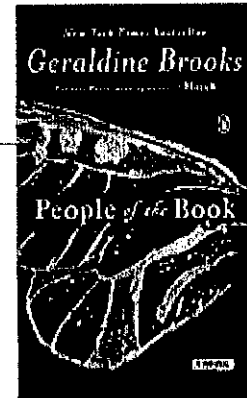


**People of the Book**  
by Geraldine Brooks

About This Book



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-siecle 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.

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Discussion Questions

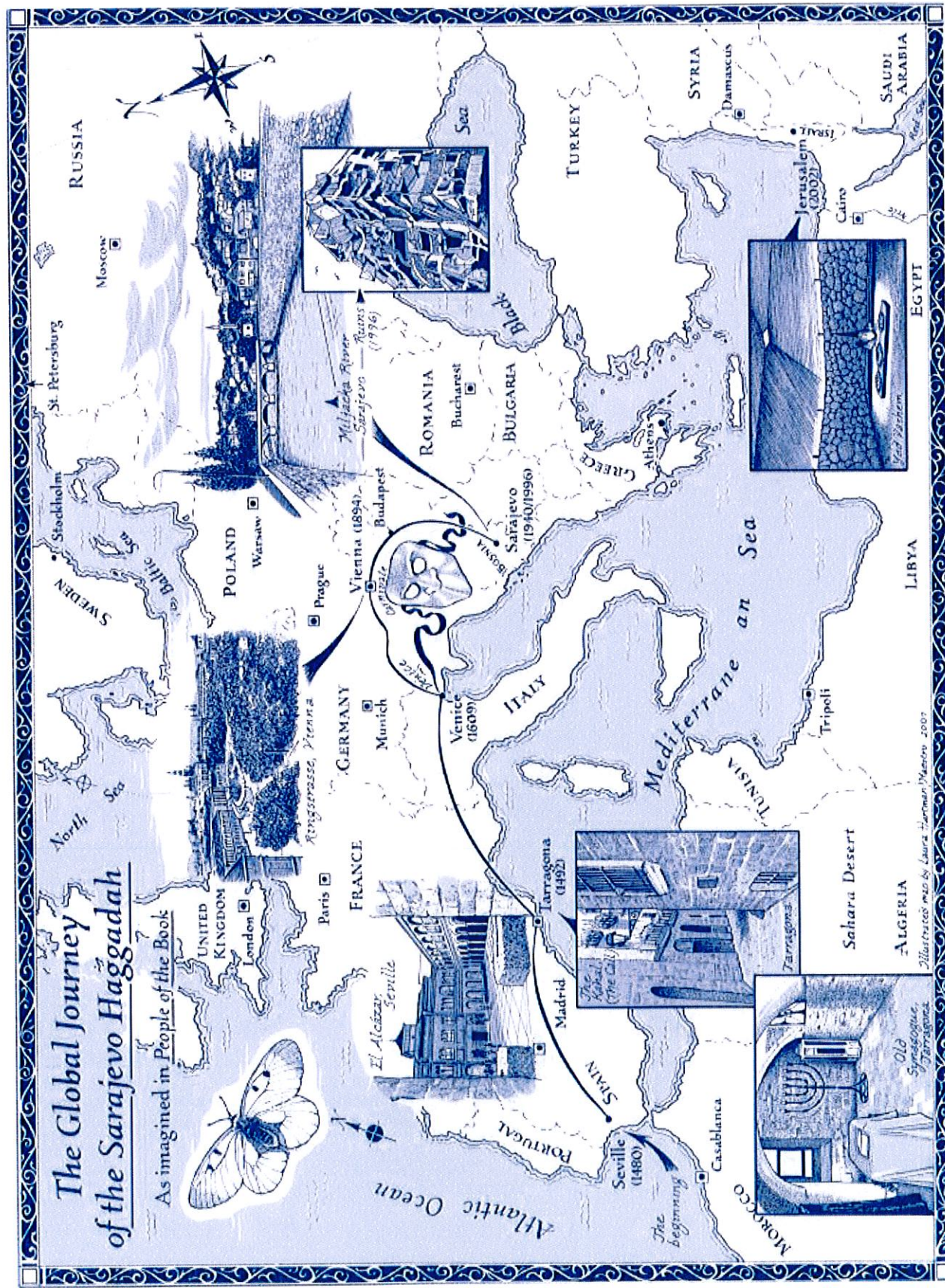
1. When Hanna implores Ozren to solicit a second opinion on Alia's condition, he becomes angry and tells her, "Not every story has a happy ending." (p. 37). To what extent do you believe that their perspectives on tragedy and death are cultural? To what extent are they personal?
2. Isak tells Mordechai, "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?

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# PEOPLE of the BOOK

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**Geraldine Brooks**

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**About Geraldine Brooks**[About Geraldine](#)[Essay: The Writing Life](#)[Read Bob Thompson's profile in The Washington Post](#)[Events](#)

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 nonfiction 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 two 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.



Photo by Randi Baird

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This page updated: February 18, 2010 [Design by Adrian Kinloch](#)

# The Washington Post

## Plucky Charms

Geraldine Brooks Mines Journalistic Exploits for Fictional Gold

By Bob Thompson  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, February 18, 2008

Not too far into writing "People of the Book," Geraldine Brooks knew she was in trouble.

Brooks, a former Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent, had just made the transition from fact to fiction. Her historical novel, "Year of Wonders," had been well-received when it was published in 2001, and she had plunged straight into another. Spanning five centuries, it was to center on the Sarajevo Haggadah, an extraordinary, centuries-old Hebrew manuscript she'd heard about years earlier on a reporting trip to Bosnia.

She planned a number of chapters featuring people connected to the Haggadah in different European cities and historical situations. Helping link them would be the story of a contemporary Bosnian conservator of rare manuscripts.

But she couldn't hear the conservator's voice.

"Sarajevans have a very distinct voice," Brooks says. "It's kind of a soulful Slavic thing with a very witty, edgy European overlay to it, with that cynicism that comes from having lived in a Communist regime. Full of grief, and yet with bags of courage."

She wasn't hearing it and she wasn't transmitting it: "I had 50 pages of this woman that just weren't alive to me."

About that time, another book idea "came flying through the window."

Brooks makes small fluttering motions with her hands as she says this, and then she laughs.

It's a melodic laugh that rises briefly, then descends, like a scale played on a piano, to a few notes below where it started. It will peal forth dozens of times over the course of a two-hour conversation. In this particular context, it seems to suggest that Brooks has led a charmed life -- and knows it.

Because the book idea that fluttered through the window was for a Civil War novel called "March."

She put the Haggadah project aside to write it.

"March" won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize.

And when she finally went back to "People of the Book" -- which, incidentally, now sits on the national bestseller lists -- she quickly solved the problem of the contemporary curator's voice.

A charmed life? Case closed!

Or maybe not.

It all comes down to your definition of "charmed."

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## Blank Spaces to Fill In

The idea for "People of the Book" didn't fly through any windows, unless you count mortar holes in the Sarajevo Holiday Inn.

Freezing and lacking electricity as the Bosnian war wound down in the mid-1990s, the hotel was filled nonetheless -- it was the only one still open -- with journalists gossiping in its candle-lit bar. Brooks was there covering U.N. operations. The bar talk turned to the Sarajevo Haggadah, of which she had never heard.

The priceless manuscript, it seemed, was missing. Had the Bosnian government sold it to raise money for arms? Had the Israelis smuggled it out of the country for safekeeping? Brooks made a mental note to check out the rumors, but never did.

After the war, she learned that in 1992, a Muslim librarian had dodged Serbian shells to retrieve the manuscript and had stashed it in a bank vault. When Brooks switched to fiction writing, she brought her fascination with this story along.

Historical fiction works best, she says, if you have some blank spaces to fill in. This was not a problem with the Sarajevo Haggadah, about which the known facts were few and mostly recent.

The most dramatic involved another Muslim librarian, Dervis Korkut, who risked his life to keep the Haggadah out of the hands of Nazi occupiers during World War II. Hearing that a Nazi general was coming to claim the manuscript, Korkut hid it in the waistband of his trousers. He and the director of the Bosnian National Museum then managed to persuade the general that they'd already handed it over to another Nazi. Where the Haggadah really spent the war remained a mystery until Brooks tracked down Korkut's 81-year-old widow and learned that he'd taken it to a remote mountain village and hidden it in a mosque.

Before that are only faint traces and speculation.

The Haggadah was created, scholars believe, in 14th-century Spain, toward the end of the so-called Convivencia -- a period, as Brooks writes in an afterword to "People of the Book," when "Jews, Christians and Muslims coexisted in relative peace." Among the most notable things about the manuscript are its brightly colored illuminations, which caused art historians to reevaluate their belief that medieval Hebrew books deliberately excluded figurative art.

One of the figures, pictured with Jews at a Passover Seder, was a black-skinned woman with African features. Who was she? No one knows.

Brooks got to imagine her.

After the Convivencia came the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsions of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Somehow the Haggadah survived. Nothing is known of how this happened, though Brooks says her chapter about it is "true to the details of the Inquisition" because, "sadly and troublingly," the inquisitors kept meticulous records of water torture sessions. (She never expected to open a newspaper and learn "that we were doing essentially the same thing.")

One more small fact: An inscription on the Haggadah by a Catholic priest places the manuscript in Venice in 1609. Brooks imagined the priest's life and -- with the help of a revealing memoir by a Venetian rabbi -- evoked the relations between the Christian city and its Jewish ghetto.

Trying to keep her fictional details as close to reality as possible, Brooks used part of a fellowship year at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute to borrow scholarly expertise.

She took Harvard librarians to tea and was regaled with tales of conservators tracking down clues hidden in manuscripts. She pestered biologist Naomi Pierce to help her invent one particular clue, involving the wing of a butterfly that lives only in Alpine habitats.

Another clue involved a wine stain that would turn out to have blood mixed in it. Brooks spent a happy day spilling liquids on bits of parchment in the conservation lab at Harvard's art museum. "I didn't know where we were going to get blood," conservation specialist Narayan Khandekar recalls, "and she just asked, 'Do you have a scalpel?'" He handed her a No. 11 and she jabbed a finger.

Blood, she learned, leaves a sharper-edged stain than wine.

Meanwhile, she solved the problem of her fictional conservator's voice in the most obvious possible way: She switched her nationality from Bosnian to Australian.

So simple!

Born and raised in Australia herself, Brooks found that Hanna Heath "just jumped onto the page." But conclusions about autobiography would be ill-advised. For one thing, Hanna has the mother from hell -- a high-powered surgeon who mocks her daughter's wimpy career choice -- and her creator wants no confusion on this point.

"She's absolutely not my mother," Brooks says. "My mum and I were always best friends."

### **Bold Geraldine, Shy Geraldine**

They got to be such friends, in part, because Brooks's charmed life began with her being sick a lot.

Her American-born father, Lawrie Brooks, was an itinerant big-band singer who'd settled down in Australia as a newspaper proofreader. Her mother, Gloria, had been a radio announcer in Canberra. Brooks grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Sydney where, not long after she started school -- as she reports in her 1998 memoir, "Foreign Correspondence" -- medical tests showed she had "serious blood anomalies."

Her doctors thought this meant rheumatic fever and, fearing strain on her heart, forbade her to walk for more than a month. The bad news, over the next few years, was recurring illness and social isolation. The good news was, in effect, home schooling: "magical times when I basked in my mother's undivided attention."

Eventually she became healthy and went back to school. But when she got to the University of Sydney, a couple of very different sides to her personality -- call them Bold Geraldine and Shy Geraldine -- were still at war inside her.

Bold Geraldine was the 12-year-old who'd risen to her feet in religion class to denounce the pope's views on birth control. A few years later, she could be found leading a posse of Led Zeppelin fans over a wall topped with barbed wire to get into a sold-out concert.

Shy Geraldine, by contrast, found being on her own at a big university daunting. She was terrified to open her mouth in class, unless the class adjourned to a pub and she could have a drink first.

"'Painfully shy' is a very accurate term," she says. Needing to resolve the tension between "wanting risk and adventure and just not being able to talk to strangers," she turned to her mother -- "a great wise person" -- for help. "Her advice was, 'Look, figure out what it is that you're afraid of and just keep doing it and doing it until you stop being afraid.'"

This explains why Brooks signed up for the drama society. And it helps explain why, more than a decade later, she said yes when the Wall Street Journal asked her to cover the Middle East.

When she'd first launched herself on a newspaper career, she says, she'd *overcome* her shyness in part "because it wasn't me making the call, it was the Sydney Morning Herald." She'd won a scholarship to the graduate school of journalism at Columbia, where she'd met her future husband, Tony Horwitz. She'd been hired by the Journal's Cleveland bureau, quit to return to Australia when her father became ill, and been hired back when the paper decided it needed someone to cover Australasia.



But the Middle East was terrifying on a whole new scale.

"I was completely unqualified," she says. She'd never been a real foreign correspondent, certainly not one whose to-pack checklist would include both a chador and a bulletproof vest -- not to mention the "big pile of State Department briefing books on my lap, you know: crash course in Yemen."

Here comes that peeling laugh again. She says it was a year before she had a clue how to do the job.

Horwitz -- who would go on to become a Journal reporter and writer of books himself -- went with her. His take is a bit different. He mentions an early reporting moment he calls "emblematic of her style."

She'd been sent to cover the Palestinian intifada, he says, which erupted in late 1987, not long after they first arrived in the Middle East. As she drove alone through the West Bank, Palestinian boys started heaving rocks at her car.

Time for a U-turn, you might think. Instead, Horwitz says, Brooks "leaped out of the car and chased after her assailants so she could interview them."

Six intense years later, Brooks took a leave to write "Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women." Returning to the Journal, she jetted into war zones such as Bosnia and Somalia. In 1994, she flew to Nigeria to report on escalating conflict between the Ogoni people of the oil-rich Niger Delta and the not-so-savory Nigerian government, which had close ties to Royal Dutch Shell.

Then she disappeared.

Horwitz got a fax in the middle of the night informing him that his wife had last been seen going into a police station in Port Harcourt.

Brooks spent only a few days in jail. But it was long enough for her to think: "I'm 38 years old, I do really want to have a child. And if they keep me for two years" -- well, she might have blown her chance.

So she quit the paper, had the child -- and noticed that a strange thing had happened.

"I'd loved every step I took as a journalist," she says, but "I had *no* idea I'd been carrying around this incredible ball of stress. I used to get these piercing migraine headaches and I had this twitch in one eye that would come and go. I thought it was just who I was.

"The minute I quit journalism, that went away."

### **'A Very Happy Place'**

Brooks got the idea for her first novel when she and Horwitz, based in London at the time, went for a hike in Derbyshire and "saw this little sign that said, 'Eyam -- Plague Village.'" They learned that when the Black Death struck this community of 350 in 1665, the villagers voluntarily quarantined themselves to prevent its further spread. Fewer than a hundred survived.

"Year of Wonders" was her answer to the question: What must that have been like?

The idea for "March" came from Louisa May Alcott's children's classic, "Little Women," in which the father is largely absent because he's serving as a chaplain in the Civil War. What would happen, Brooks wondered, if she imagined the war from *his* point of view? Horwitz's obsession with that conflict, as he researched and wrote his 1998 bestseller "Confederates in the Attic," played its part as well: When "March" was published, in 2005, Brooks took the opportunity to "retract unreservedly my former characterization of my husband . . . as a Civil War bore."

Publication of "March" had to be delayed while Brooks dealt with breast cancer. There were two rounds of surgery, chemotherapy, radiation -- not fun, even for someone who characterizes herself as "on the sunny side of the spectrum." Still, within a year, "it was like it had never happened."

Then along came the Pulitzer, which gave her fiction-writing career a major boost.

Reviews of "People of the Book" have not been uniformly enthusiastic. The Washington Post's Jonathan Yardley praised it as "intelligent, thoughtful, gracefully written and original" and noted that it "resides comfortably . . . between popular fiction and literature." ("A very happy place, I think," Brooks says. "That's exactly where I'd like to be.") But the New York Times's Janet Maslin called it "schematic" and overburdened by research.

Writers are rarely impervious to criticism, but Brooks has a helpful way to keep it in perspective.

Ever since she took her fictional leap, she says, "everything that's happened has just so wildly exceeded my expectation." All she'd hoped was "to sell enough books to be able to continue to write."

That writing happens on Martha's Vineyard these days. She and Horwitz lived for many years in the village of Waterford, but they moved north a couple of years ago when Loudoun County started to feel too overdeveloped. Besides their 11-year-old son, Nathaniel, their household now includes three dogs, Brooks's mother, who has Alzheimer's, and her 20-something nephew.

"Did you see that movie 'Little Miss Sunshine'? It's just like that," Geraldine Brooks says -- and laughs and laughs and laughs.

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Brooks, Geraldine (1955-).  
*Student Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale, 2008. From *Discovering Collection*.

## Geraldine Brooks

1955-

Born: 1955 in Sydney, Australia  
 Nationality: Australian, American etc.

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### Biographical Essay:

Geraldine Brooks is an award-winning Australian-American novelist and journalist best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *March*.

#### Biographical Information

Geraldine Brooks was born in 1955 and spent most of her childhood in western Sydney. She attended Bethlehem College, a Catholic school for girls in New South Wales, and the University of Sydney. While in Sydney, Brooks landed a job at the features division of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for which she wrote articles that centered on environmental issues. In 1982 she earned a Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship that brought her to Columbia University in New York, where she obtained a master's degree in journalism in 1983. After graduation, she worked for the *Wall Street Journal* until the late 1990s, writing stories about Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East. It was also during the 1990s that she covered the Persian Gulf War, which allowed her to take a closer look at the lives of Muslim women. The experience would later be the inspiration for her first non-fiction work, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, which was published in 1994. It would also win her the Overseas Press Club's Hal Boyle Award for best newspaper reporting from abroad, an award she shared with author and husband Tony Horwitz, whom she married in 1984. Brooks' literary career would reach new heights in 2006, when she won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for her novel *March*, published 2005. She was also a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. Geraldine Brooks divides her time between Sydney, Australia, and the United States.

#### Major Works

In 1994 Brooks released her first book, the non-fiction *Nine Parts of Desire*, which tells of her experiences with Islamic women while covering the Persian Gulf War. The book instantly became an international hit, as it was translated into 17 languages and sold thousands of copies worldwide. She followed with another non-fiction book, *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under*, which was published in 1998. It is a memoir of a young girl whose pen friendships with people in the Middle East, France, New Jersey, and Sydney eventually helped her find her true calling as a foreign correspondent. *Foreign Correspondence* won the Nita B. Kibble Award for women's writing.

In 2001 Brooks ventured into the realm of fiction, publishing her first novel, *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, in 2001. Set in 1666, the novel is a fictionalized account of the bubonic plague of London, narrated by 18-year-old Anna Firth. The book follows Firth as she and her fellow villagers try to contain the disease in the small town of Eyam, in Derbyshire, where the plague has caused villagers to panic and resort to witch-hunting.

Another novel, *March*, was released in 2005. It is set during the American Civil War and tells of the experiences of March, the absent father in Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*. A chaplain for the Union Army, he reveals to the readers the cruel racist tendencies of soldiers from both the Union and Confederate sides of the war, as well as the violence and human degradation that come with it. The novel was selected as one of the *Washington Post's* five best fiction works of 2005 and, in 2006, became the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

In 2008 Brooks published her third novel, *People of the Book*, which is a fictionalized history of the Sarajevo Haggadah.

#### Critical Reception

In general, Brooks' work has been well received by critics, largely because of her excellent fictional adaptations of historical events and her involvement with different marginalized social groups. *Nine Parts of Desire* was regarded by *Publishers Weekly* as a "powerful and enlightening" book that presented "stunning vignettes of Muslim women." *Publishers Weekly* was also impressed with the way Brooks "carefully distinguishes misogyny and oppressive cultural traditions from what she considers the true teaching of the Koran." A review in *Newsday* noted that Brooks was an outstanding Western observer who looked at Muslim women from the heart, "mixing historical perspective with piercingly observed journalism." The *New York Times* also praised Brooks for avoiding stereotypes about Muslim women and Islam in general, and for incorporating a valid and believable account of the nature of Islam. *Foreign Correspondence* also gained praises for being "charming and sharply intelligent, with much to say about growing up female and geographically unconnected," in the words of Valerie Sayers of *The New York Times*. Fellow author Naomi Wolf, who wrote the novel *Promiscuities*, said that through *Foreign Correspondence*, Brooks "trains her lucid gaze on the turmoil of female adolescence and by doing so brings us a dazzling range of insights that extend beyond introspection to raise questions about national identity in an increasingly global culture." *The Wall Street Journal* agreed by saying that the book was "one of the better memoirs to come along, in an overcrowded field, in some time."

Brooks' fiction has also earned positive reviews. *Year of Wonders* was praised by *The New Yorker*, which said that the novel was "a deep imaginative engagement with how people are changed by catastrophe." *Publishers Weekly* also noted that the novel "carries the pulsing beat of a sensitive imagination and the challenge of moral complexity." The Pulitzer-winning *March* was regarded by critics as "one of the most superbly rendered works of historical fiction," in the words of Catherine Parnell of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Reviewers were also particular about the novel's parallelism with Alcott's *Little Women*, with *The Atlantic Monthly's* Christina Schwarz saying, "[Brooks'] references to *Little Women* will evoke for quantities of her readers a beloved companion of girlhood." Maya Muir of the *Portland Oregonian* said that all in all, "Brooks has written a gripping story of an impossible time, and simultaneously a neat deconstruction and reconstruction of one of American literature's best-known families."

### WORKS:

- *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* [non-fiction], Doubleday, 1994
- *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under* [non-fiction], Doubleday, 1998
- *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* [novel], Thorndike Press, 2001

- *March* [novel], Viking Adult, 2005
- *People of the Book* [novel], Viking Adult, 2008

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## AUTHOR TALK

January 11, 2008

International bestselling author Geraldine Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for her novel *MARCH*, which retells Louisa May Alcott's *LITTLE WOMEN* from the perspective of the family patriarch, who is off fighting in the American Civil War. Her latest work of fiction, *PEOPLE OF THE BOOK*, spans 500 years and revolves around a different sort of text --- an extremely rare illuminated Jewish manuscript that has managed to survive near-destruction time and time again during some of the most tumultuous periods in world history. In this interview, Brooks describes what fascinated and inspired her about the real-life tome --- the Sarajevo Haggadah --- and discusses the amount of research she performed to accurately portray both the historical periods and the scientific process of book restoration. She also explains how she shaped the voice of the book's narrator, speculates on its reception in Bosnia and reveals how her "Pulitzer Surprise" has affected her work ethic.



**Question: Your previous two novels are set during Europe's plague years and the American Civil War. Now, you've created an epic story about art and religious persecution. What is it that draws you to a particular subject, or a particular historical era?**

**Geraldine Brooks:** I love to find stories from the past where we can know something, but not everything; where there is enough of a historical record to have left us with an intriguing factual scaffolding, but where there are also enough unknowable voids in that record to allow room for imagination to work.

**Q: What do you think it is about the real Sarajevo Haggadah that has allowed it to survive the centuries?**

**GB:** It's a fascinating question: Why did this little book always find its protectors when so many others did not? It is interesting to me that the book was created in a period --- convivencia Spain --- when diversity was tolerated, even somewhat celebrated, and that it found its way centuries later to a similar place, Sarajevo. So even when hateful forces arose in those societies and crushed the spirit of multiethnic, interfaith acceptance, there were those individuals who saw what was happening and acted to stop it in any way they could.

**Q: Were you already working on *PEOPLE OF THE BOOK* when *MARCH* won the Pulitzer Prize? How does winning such a prestigious award affect your writing?**

**GB:** I was working on *PEOPLE OF THE BOOK* even before I started to write *MARCH*. I'd been struggling quite a bit with the World War II story: It's such a picked-over period and I was looking for a backwater of the war that wouldn't perhaps feel so familiar to readers. That search was leading to a lot of dead ends when I suddenly got the idea for *MARCH* and it was so clear to me how to write that book that I just did it.

The "Pulitzer Surprise," as my then-nine-year-old son so accurately dubbed it, affected my writing only in that it interrupted it for a while by drawing renewed attention to *MARCH*. But after a few weeks of pleasant distraction I was back at my desk, alone in a room, simply doing what I've always done, which is trying to write as best I can, day after day.

**Q: Book conservation is hardly a glamorous job, but Hanna's framing narrative is every bit as action-packed and compelling as the stories in the hagaddah's history. What inspired her creation?**

**GB:** Because I like to write with a first-person narrator, getting the voice of the book is everything to me. I'd struggled a lot with my first idea, which was to have the conservator be Bosnian. I love the way Sarajevans express themselves; it's a kind of world-weary, mordant wit overlying an amazing ability to absorb and survive great suffering. But I wasn't getting the voice and the book was stalled as a result. Then I suddenly thought, Well, why shouldn't she be Australian? That's a voice I can hear clearly. Hanna came alive in my head and as a result the contemporary story, which I'd originally thought of as merely a framing device for the stories from the past, became much more important.

**Q: The scientific resources that Hanna employs to find out more about the book's artifacts are really fascinating. How much of that is drawn from actual research and how much springs from your imagination?**

**GB:** I went to labs. I interviewed scientists and conservators and observed their work. But the book is fiction, not a technical treatise, so experts will be able to spot a place or two where I took some small liberties.

**Q: The Jewish people have endured extraordinary trials. How much about this history did you know before writing the book?**

**GB:** Most of it. The whipsaw of Jewish history has fascinated me since I was in junior high.

**Q: Who is your favorite character and why?**

**GB:** That's like asking a parent to name a favorite child. Hanna became like a good mate, and I actually miss hanging out with her. But I feel a certain tenderness towards all of the characters, perhaps especially the most flawed ones.

**Q: PEOPLE OF THE BOOK is set in so many different eras. Was it a more difficult book to research and write than your previous novels?**

**GB:** There was definitely more to research, but it wasn't difficult. I loved the various journeys --- actual and intellectual --- that it took me on. Seeing the domes and spires of Venice shimmering in the watery morning light; having the great privilege of meeting Servet Korkut, who supported her husband in resisting fascism; watching Andrea Pataki painstakingly take apart the real Sarajevo Haggadah --- these are experiences of a lifetime.

**Q: Will the book be published in Bosnia, and if so, what kind of reception do you anticipate?**

**GB:** I hope it will. I have no idea about the reception. It's very presumptuous, what I do --- meddling around in other people's history. When I went back to Eyam, the plague village, I fully expected a faction of the townsfolk to want to have me clapped in the stocks. (They still have them there.) To my intense relief, the people I met had really embraced the book. I had the same feelings of trepidation when I went to read MARCH in Concord, Massachusetts. I was delighted to be met at the reading by Louisa May Alcott (Jan Turnquist, director of the remarkable Orchard House Museum, in costume), who thanked me for being one of the very few who had tried to understand and appreciate her father. So I hope the people of Bosnia will forgive me for taking liberties with their history and see the book as a tribute from someone who was inspired by the remarkable spirit of Sarajevo.

**Q: What are you working on now?**

**GB:** I'm just at the earliest stages of exploring an intriguing story set very close to home, on Martha's Vineyard. It concerns people who lived on this island in 1666, one of my favorite years, and seems to have just the right mix of knowns and unknowables --- a lovely incomplete scaffold to build on.

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## 'People of the Book' by Geraldine Brooks - Book Club Discussion Questions

'People of the Book' - Book Club Questions

By Erin Collazo Miller, About.com Guide

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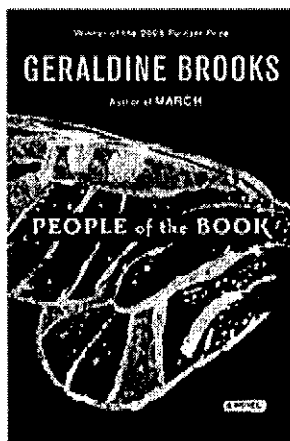
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In *People of the Book*, Pulitzer Prize-winning Author Geraldine Brooks presents a fictional history of the Sarajevo Haggadah. *People of the Book* is a set of stories about the book's survival, woven together through the story of a conservationist who is trying to unlock the mysteries of the book in the mid-1990s. Use these book club discussion questions to delve into *People of the Book* with your reading group.



'People of the Book' - Courtesy Viking

**Spoiler Warning: These book club discussion questions reveal important details about *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks. Finish the book before reading on.**

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 mothers 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?
11. Rate *People of the Book* on a scale of 1 to 5.

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## Jonathan Yardley

A rare manuscript illuminates lives from medieval Spain to modern-day Sarajevo.

By Jonathan Yardley  
Sunday, January 6, 2008

### PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

By Geraldine Brooks

#### THIS STORY

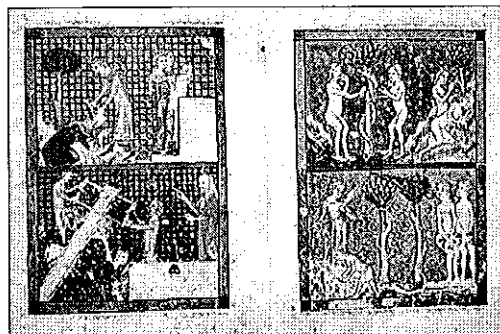
Plucky Charms  
Jonathan Yardley

Viking, 372 pp. \$25.95

Why is it, in this day of rampant technological change, that readers continue to be fascinated by stories of dusty manuscripts moldering on rickety shelves? Think of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, in which a monk investigates charges of heresy by prowling through documents in a medieval library. Or *The Rule of Four*, by Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason, in which four Princeton students find puzzles aplenty in a 15th-century manuscript. Or even those big blockbuster bestsellers -- Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (ancient arcana of numerous varieties) and James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (ancient Peruvian manuscript).

Now, in a similar vein, we have Geraldine Brooks's *People of the Book*. The good news is that this new novel by the author of *March*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2006, is intelligent, thoughtful, gracefully written and original. Brooks has built upon her experience as a correspondent in Bosnia for the *Wall Street Journal* to construct a story around a book -- small, rare and very old -- and the people into whose hands it had fallen over five centuries, people who "had known unbearable stress: pogrom, Inquisition, exile, genocide, war."

The people are inventions, but the book itself is very real: "The Sarajevo Haggadah, created in medieval Spain, was a famous rarity, a lavishly illuminated Hebrew manuscript made at a time when Jewish belief was firmly against illustrations of any kind. It was thought that the commandment in Exodus 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or likeness of any thing' had suppressed figurative art by medieval Jews. When the book came to light in Sarajevo in 1894, its pages of painted miniatures had turned this idea on its head and caused art history texts to be rewritten." Now it is 1996. The book has survived the wartime violence in Bosnia because the head of the library at the National Museum in Sarajevo, a Muslim, saved it from almost certain destruction by hiding it "in a safe-deposit box in the vault of the central bank." Hanna Heath, a 30-year-old Australian book conservator, has been called in by the United Nations to inspect its conditions and repair it as necessary.



(Copy Of A Replica Of The 600-year-old Sarajevo Haggadah. Sava Radovanovic/Associated Press)

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The novel alternates between chapters narrated by Hanna and flashbacks to various points in the book's history -- Sarajevo 1940, Vienna 1894, Venice 1609, Tarragona 1492, Seville 1480 -- at which crucial details about its making and subsequent long passage are revealed. Hanna, in whom it's not difficult to detect a hint of the author's own past as a determined, hard-digging reporter, is a quirky, no-nonsense woman whom I find exceptionally easy to like. Mostly she's totally honest with herself. She's "a complete pessimist. If there's a sniper somewhere in the country I'm visiting, I fully expect to be the one in his crosshairs," and a "world-class coward." She's "not ambitious in the traditional sense," but "I just love to move the ball

forward, even if it's only a millimeter, in the great human quest to figure it all out." Her work is an obscure specialty practiced by only a few people around the world, but she loves it:

"My work has to do with objects, not people. I like matter, fiber, the nature of the varied stuffs that go to make a book. I know the flesh and fabrics of pages, the bright earths and lethal toxins of ancient pigments. Wheat paste -- I can bore the pants off anyone about wheat paste. . . . Of course, a book is more than the sum of its materials. It is an artifact of the human mind and hand. The gold beaters, the stone grinders, the scribes, the binders, those are the people I feel most comfortable with. Sometimes, in the quiet, these people speak to me. They let me see what their intentions were, and it helps me do my work."

The book on the table before her at the museum in Sarajevo may be small, but it contains many large mysteries, or "a series of miracles." It is small, "convenient for use at the Passover dinner table" in a Jewish family's residence, yet it is "gorgeously illustrated" in bright, vivid, startling colors. Such contents ordinarily would call for "an elaborate binding," but "this book had probably been rebound many times in its long life" and a century before, in Vienna, had been rebound "in simple cardboard covers with an inappropriate Turkish printed floral decoration, now faded and discolored."

Hanna works on the book for a week, at the end of which "there probably weren't ten people in the world who could have told for sure that I'd taken this book apart and put it back together." Her work does not involve "chemical cleanups or heavy restorations," as she tells Ozren Karaman, the librarian who had rescued the book: "I've written too many papers knocking that approach. To restore a book to the way it was when it was made is to lack respect for its history. I think you have to accept a book as you receive it from past generations, and to a certain extent damage and wear reflect that history. The way I see it, my job is to make it stable enough to allow safe handling and study, repairing only where absolutely necessary."

So she does her job and leaves, but she isn't finished. For one thing, this resolutely independent woman has taken something of a tumble for Karaman, who is "clearly a spectacular human being, brave and intelligent and all the rest of it," and handsome into the bargain. But of more immediate concern, the U.N. plans to put the restored book on public display in the library and wants her to write an essay for the accompanying catalogue. She has extracted a few minuscule samples from the book -- the wing of an insect, feathers and a rose, a wine-stained fragment, a grain of salt, a white hair -- and considers them sufficiently mysterious to warrant investigation.

Hanna herself doesn't travel backward in time to discover where these bits and pieces came from. She consults with other experts -- in her own field and others -- and travels to Vienna, Boston and London in hopes of tracking down the meaning of her tiny clues. But Brooks seizes on these fragments to create five brief narratives in which they are meticulously explained, allowing the people of the book to emerge from the past to tell their stories. In Boston, Hanna talks about all this with an old friend and former lover, an organic chemist, who listens and then says:

"Well, from what you've told me, the book has survived the same human disaster over and over again. Think about it. You've got a society where people tolerate difference, like Spain in the *Convivencia*, and everything's humming along: creative, prosperous. Then somehow this fear, this hate, this need to demonize 'the other' -- it just sort of rears up and smashes the whole society. Inquisition, Nazis, extremist Serb nationalists . . . same old, same old. It seems to me the book, at this point, bears witness to all that."

Exactly. *People of the Book* is about the appalling capacity we humans share for turning against people who aren't the same as we are -- or at least don't seem to be -- and doing them inexcusable, incomprehensible violence. The survival of the Haggadah, Karaman says in a speech to the Jewish community in Sarajevo, is "a symbol of the survival of Sarajevo's multiethnic ideal," but it goes without saying that the extreme violence in Bosnia and much of the rest of the Balkans in the 1990s was a mockery of that ideal and was far closer to the reality of human history than the hopes and dreams of those who had handled the book along the way to the library.

The stories of all those people as invented by Brooks are interesting and revealing, but the core of the book is Hanna's story. There's a lot more to it than fixing the book and getting involved with Karaman. She is the only child of a brilliant, driven and egotistical neurosurgeon who never married -- in the 1960s in Australia, to have a child out of wedlock simply was not done, but she did it -- and who was an inattentive mother who left the rearing to the housekeeper. She was infuriated that Hanna chose to become a book conservator rather than a high-powered medico like herself, and her scorn for Hanna's work is palpable: "How is your latest tatty little book, anyway? Fixed all the dog-eared pages?" Though a crisis temporarily brings the two women together, the era of good feelings doesn't last, and Brooks is too honest a student of human nature to portray it otherwise. After all, as Hanna remembers Karaman saying, "some stories just don't have happy endings."

As to the ending of *People of the Book*, well, that's for you to find out. Suffice it to say that it's a book that resides comfortably in a place we too often imagine to be a no-man's land between popular fiction and literature. Brooks tells a believable and engaging story about sympathetic but imperfect characters -- "popular" fiction demands all of that -- but she also does the business of literature, exploring serious themes and writing about them in handsome prose. She appears to be finding readers and admirers in growing numbers, and *People of the Book* no doubt will increase those numbers. \*

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