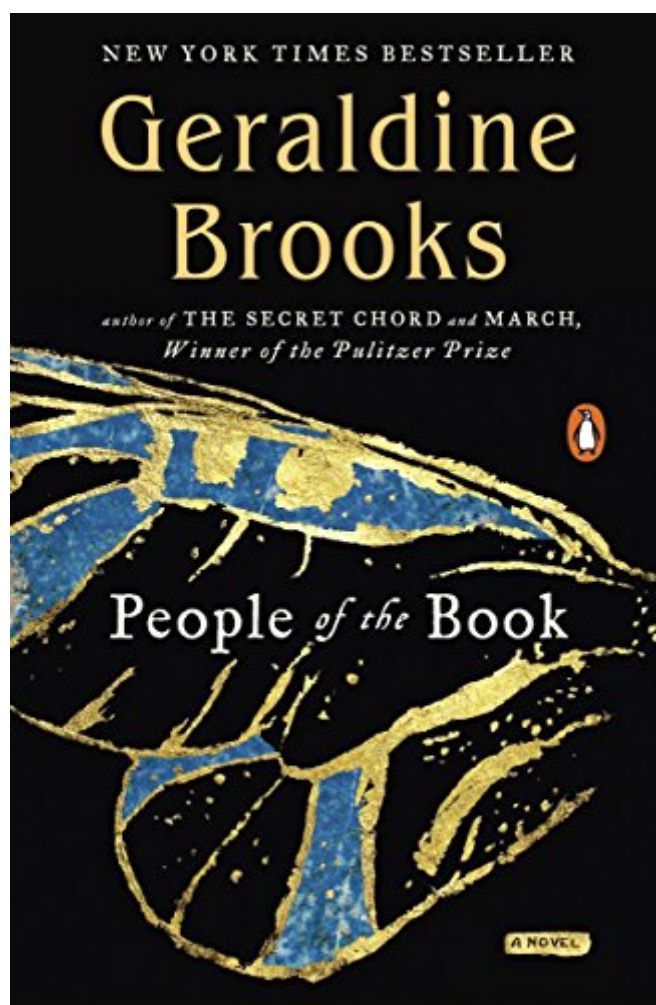


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# People Of The Book: A Novel



## Synopsis

View our feature on Geraldine Brooks'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. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

In 1996, as rare book expert Dr. Hanna Heath examines the Sarajevo Haggadah, an illuminated Hebrew manuscript from 15th century Spain, she carefully removes a series of artifacts that, under laboratory examination, will offer insight into the remarkable journey of this unusual text. Having survived the Serb-Bosnian war, the haggadah yields precious clues that allow Hanna to reconstruct the attrition of time: the fragment of an insect wing, an apparent wine stain, a white hair, salt crystals. It requires all of Heath's considerable skills to trace the evidence through the centuries to the book's origin. One of the earliest illuminated Hebrew books to feature figurative art, this haggadah has been repressed by medieval Jews for religious concerns. Perhaps made in mid-4th century Spain, when Jews, Christian and Muslims peacefully coexisted, the manuscript begins its troubled journey in the Spanish Inquisition and expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. An Australian, Dr. Heath embraces the acerbic wit of her culture, clumsy at the communication skills so easily wielded by others; of a more contemplative nature, she is devoted to the historic value of the volumes she restores. Troubled by a chronic antagonism with her neurosurgeon mother, the young woman has built a life around her work in compensation. Meanwhile, Hannah's romantic curiosity is piqued by the enigmatic man assisting her at the museum in Sarajevo, widower Dr. Ozrem Karaman, his infant son profoundly brain-injured and wife killed in the war's crossfire. Her emotions in turmoil, Hanna's natural impulse is to soothe Ozrem's pain; unfortunately, she cannot forestall the inevitable or alter fate. Hannah turns to her work- for Hanna, books speak to objectifiable history, while feelings are impossible to confine.

"The People of the Book," by Geraldine Brooks, opens in Sarajevo in 1996. Under the watchful eyes of bank security guards, Bosnian police officers, two United Nations peacekeepers, and an official UN observer, a thirty-year-old Aussie named Hanna Heath has been hired to perform an exacting task. She is about to examine a precious fifteenth century codex, the Sarajevo Haggadah, "one of the rarest and most mysterious volumes in the world." Hanna's impressive qualifications include honors degrees in chemistry and Near Eastern languages as well as a PhD in fine art conservation,

which as she patiently explains, is very different from book restoration. She knows her materials intimately: calf's intestine, pigments, gold leaf, and parchment are some of the tools of her trade. The Haggadah, which was created in medieval Spain, is "a lavishly illuminated Hebrew manuscript made at a time when Jewish belief was firmly against illustrations of any kind." The book first came to light in 1894. After passing through many hands, it disappeared in 1992, when the Sarajevo siege began. After four years, it suddenly reappears and an Israeli expert, Amitai Yomtov, awakens Hannah at two o'clock in the morning to tell her the exciting news. Most scholars believed that the book had been stolen or destroyed during the fighting. It turns out that the head of the museum library in Sarajevo, Ozren Karaman, placed the Haggadah in a safe-deposit box for safekeeping. "Can you imagine, Channah?" Amitai exclaims. "A Muslim, risking his neck to save a Jewish book." Now, UN officials want an expert to inspect the Haggadah for signs of damage. Although she is technically proficient and has written many highly-regarded papers in her field, Hanna brings something extra to the table.

Every year at Passover, Jews around the world gather for a festive meal at which they are commanded to retell the epochal story of the Exodus from Egypt. The text for that retelling is known as the "haggadah," the root of which is the Hebrew verb "to tell." Today, it is estimated that there are more than 3,000 versions of this book, a compendium of biblical excerpts, rabbinic commentary, stories and poems. In her emotionally resonant new novel, Geraldine Brooks spins an intricate and moving tale of one of them, the Sarajevo Haggadah, and its stirring, almost miraculous, story of survival. The true story of the haggadah's narrow escapes from destruction, chronicled in a December 3, 2007 New Yorker article by Brooks (featuring a color reproduction of one of the haggadah's striking illustrations), is so fantastic it seems almost impossible to fictionalize it. But what Brooks does so convincingly is what empathetic historical novelists do best --- offer us rich insights into the interior lives of both real and fictional characters that reveal the human drama behind a fact-based story. As one of the book's characters reminds us, "a book is more than the sum of its materials. It is an artifact of the human mind and hand." The novel opens in the spring of 1996, after the Bosnia hostilities have ceased, leaving the city of Sarajevo a shattered remnant of its former self. Hanna Heath, a brash young conservator of medieval manuscripts from Australia, is summoned to the National Museum of Bosnia to restore the 15th century codex, featuring 34 pages of striking illuminations.

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