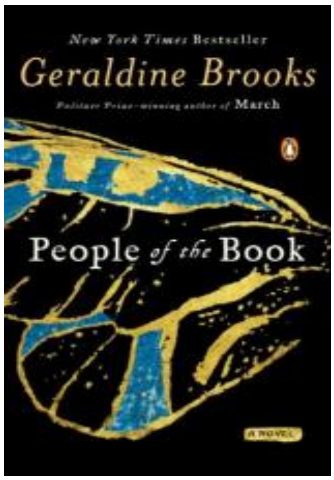
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People of the Book

by Geraldine Brooks



About the 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-siele 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.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Geraldine Brooks is the author of six novels, including HORSE, PEOPLE OF THE BOOK, YEAR OF WONDERS and the Pulitzer Prize?winning MARCH. She has also written acclaimed works of nonfiction, including NINE PARTS OF DESIRE and FOREIGN CORRESPONDENCE. Her books have been translated into more than thirty languages and have sold millions of copies around the world. Born and raised in Australia, Brooks now divides her time between Sydney and Martha?s Vineyard.

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