

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.

Praise for the Book

"...a tour de force that delivers a reverberating lesson gleaned from history."

—*SF Chronicle*

"*People of the Book* shows the author's gift for entering difficult, pivotal times in history with a story so psychologically intimate and sensual that we feel we're there."

—*More*

"...dazzling new novel... Brooks writing at her very best... Her gift for storytelling, happily, is timeless."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"With an ingenuity equal to that standing behind her Pulitzer Prize-winning *March*...a marvelously evocative journey backward in time."

—*Booklist (Starred)*

"Each story is engrossing and deftly woven into the narrative..."

—*Library Journal*

"...enthraling historical mystery...Rich suspense based on a true-life literary puzzle..."

—*Kirkus*

Courtesy <http://www.geraldinebrooks.com/people.html>

About the Author

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Personal Information

Born October, 1955, in Sydney, Australia; married Tony Horwitz (an author), 1984; children: Nathaniel. Education: Attended Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney; received M.A. from Columbia University. Addresses: Homeoffice: Sydney, Australia and Martha's Vineyard, MA.

Career

Journalist. *Wall Street Journal*, Middle Eastern correspondent, 1988-1994. Freelance writer, 1994--.

Awards

Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship, 1982; Hal Boyle Award, Overseas Press Club of America, 1990, for the best daily newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad; Pulitzer Prize in fiction, 2006, for *March*.

Works

Writings

- *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, Anchor Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over*, Anchor Books/Doubleday (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, Viking (New York, NY), 2001.
- *March*, Viking (New York, NY), 2005.
- *People of the Book*, Viking (New York, NY), 2008.

Contributor of essays to *Imazighen: The Vanishing Traditions of Berber Women*, by Margaret Courtney-Clarke, Clarkson Potter (New York, NY), 1996.

Media Adaptations

March was recorded as an audio book by Penguin Audio, 2005. *Year of Wonders* has been optioned for film.

Sidelights

Author Geraldine Brooks has won awards for her Mid-East correspondence for the *Wall Street Journal*, which included covering the Persian Gulf War. She channeled a unique part of that experience into her first non-fiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. When Brooks first arrived in the Middle East she felt cut off, as a female correspondent, from much of Muslim society. But she turned that liability into an advantage when she donned the *hijab* (the black veil worn by most Muslim women in the Middle East) and thereby enabled herself to penetrate the cloistered world of Muslim women.

The title of *Nine Parts of Desire* comes from an interpretation of the Koran offered by the Shiite branch: "Almighty God created sexual desires in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." As Laura Shapiro, writing for *Newsweek* commented, "Good enough reason to keep women under wraps." But Brooks uncovered a complex picture in her investigation of Muslim women's lives that goes beyond the Western assumption of women's oppression and isolation from public life.

Brooks interviews a wide range of Muslim women, from belly dancers to housewives, and from activists to female army recruits; her list of interviewees includes Queen Noor of Jordan and Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter. Her discoveries are fascinating and wide-ranging, if sometimes contradictory. According to Brooks, wrote *Booklist* contributor Mary Ellen Sullivan, sexual gratification is considered "an inherent right" for Muslim women, but genital mutilation is still a common practice. It may surprise some Americans to read that women fare better in Iran than the rest of the Middle East. Brooks explains, "To Muslim women elsewhere ... the Iranian woman riding to work on her motorbike, even with her billowing *chador* gripped firmly in her teeth, looks like a figure of envy." By wearing the *chador* herself, Brooks discovers a camaraderie among the women that she has experienced elsewhere, as when she bakes bread with Kurdish women. But when she notices a young boy sampling bits of bread that his sister sweats to make, she sees the negative side of strict sexual divisions as well: "His sister, not much older, was already part of our bread-making assembly line. Why should he learn so young that her role was to toil for his pleasure?"

In her *Booklist* review, Sullivan called Brooks "a wonderful writer and thinker," noting that her study gives readers new insight into the lives of Muslim women. A critic for *Publishers Weekly* called the book a "powerful and enlightening report" that brings Westerners much closer to the reality of Muslim life for women. And Laura Shapiro of *Newsweek* admired the first-hand

reporting that led Brooks to an "intimacy with these women [that] made it impossible either to romanticize or to demonize the tradition that ruled them."

A few years later Brooks followed up her first book with *Foreign Correspondence*, a memoir of her childhood that focuses on the importance of foreign pen pals to her sense of an independent identity and freedom from what she then considered the boring backwater of her hometown, Sydney, Australia. The frame of the narrative is the approaching death of **Brooks's** father, which brings her back to Sydney from her life as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*. While going through family papers she finds letters from pen pals--from as far as the United States, France, and Israel--she had long ago forgotten. Rereading these letters brings her back to her youthful sense of restlessness and early belief that "real life happened in far-off lands." During her childhood and adolescence, the pen pals fulfilled her yearning for the exotic, and gave a sense of breaking away, as *Booklist* critic Donna Seaman described, from "Australia's mid-century, Anglo-focused insularity." The experience was formative in bringing Brooks to her current position as a traveling journalist and "fireman" for the *Wall Street Journal* (the term identifies journalists who can report on controversial subjects and issues). Brooks's rereading inspired her to look up her old pen pals, and among other things to tell them the story of Joannie, her pen pal from the United States who spent the summer in Switzerland and Martha's Vineyard, but whose glamorous-sounding life ended early from the ravages of anorexia.

In her *Booklist* review, Seaman called the book a "magnetic memoir," while *Publishers Weekly* deemed it "competent but unexciting." A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* offered unadulterated praise, calling it an "evocative, superbly written tale of a woman's journey to self-understanding."

After the birth of her son, Brooks decided to try her hand at fiction, fully intending to write a novel set in Australia. But instead, she found herself being drawn into English history. "There was a story that had intrigued me for years, of a village that voluntarily quarantined itself to stop the spread of bubonic plague," she wrote on her Home Page. "It was this tale, rather than the Australian one, that most wanted to be told." The resulting novel was *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, told from the perspective of Anna Frith, a widow who sees all of the horrors of both the plague and of the tensions during their year of seclusion.

"The author has captured the various human responses to grief, fear, hopelessness, and exhaustion," Joanna M. Burkhardt wrote in her *Library Journal* review of the novel. A *Publishers Weekly* critic offered unabashed praise of the novel, writing that *Year of Wonders* "is to conventional work in the genre as a diamond is to a rhinestone." The critic concluded, "This poignant and powerful account carries the pulsing beat of a sensitive imagination and the challenge of moral complexity."

Brooks followed her novel of England with a novel of the United States Civil War. Spun off from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Brooks told the story of the absent father from that novel, away fighting in the Civil War, in *March*. Basing her character loosely on Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's idealistic father, Brooks describes the life of Captain John March, a Union chaplain, and scenes from his life before and during the Civil War. "The morally gray complications of this endeavor are the novel's greatest strength," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews*

contributor, noting the discussion of "contraband": freed slaves still working in slave-like conditions on a cotton plantation. Christina Schwartz wrote in *Atlantic Monthly*, "Brooks's narrative is remarkably tight. Whereas much literary fiction wallows in digression, here every scrap of information propels the story forward." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor complimented the narrative style, writing, Brooks's "characters speak with a convincing 19th-century formality, yet the narrative is always accessible." And for readers who loved *Little Women*, critic for *Economist* assured, "Alcott fans will find "March" both respectful and sufficiently full in its own right that it might have thrived without piggy-backing" on the original.

March won over critics and received the 2006 Pulitzer Prize. The win surprised Brooks; in a statement published in the *Grand Rapids Press*, she described herself as "in a state of disbelief, really. I just can't believe it. It's like being struck by lightning." In the London *Times* announcement of the prize, Zoe Paxton wrote of the novel, "Grounded in historical truth and serious research, it is nevertheless an intensely emotional work of fiction, as eloquent about the marriage of March and Marmee as it is on the history." Brooks also told Paxton, "I just feel immensely privileged. I love what I do. I look forward to sitting down at my desk and beginning another day's writing."

After writing *March*, Brooks returned to the project she had intended to be her next nonfiction work, a book about censorship of Hebrew books in Venice during the seventeenth century. When she returned to the idea, she decided it would make better fiction, and so she wrote *People of the Book*, which focuses on a single Hebrew text created in Spain during the fourteenth century, and managed to survive through the expulsion of Jews from Spain, the Inquisition and Italy, and World War II. "There are so many mysteries about this book," Brooks told Weich on *Powells Online*. "We can never know who created it or why it got out of Spain or why it was in Venice. We know certain facts: it was in Venice in 1609, but we don't know why or how. There are lots of voids. I'm having a lot of fun there." Margot Livesey of *Publishers Weekly* called *People of the Book* a "dazzling new novel" and concluded that Brooks's "gift for storytelling, happily, is timeless." Brad Hooper considered the story "a marvelously evocative journey backward in time" in his *Booklist* review.

Despite her successes with fiction set in England and the United States, Brooks hopes to write fiction set in her home nation. On her home page, Brooks wrote, "One day, I hope to write an Australian novel. But I now know I will have to work for it." Brooks also spoke with Dave Weich of *Powells Online* about the difference between writing fiction and being a journalist. "As a reporter, if you don't know the truth, you can't write it, but in fiction you can make it up. It's wonderful when you hit that void, and you've got all the facts--that's your scaffolding, and now you can make your edifice."

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

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- *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 2005, Christina Schwartz, "New Fiction: Finds and Flops," p. 115.
- *Booklist*, September 15, 1994, p. 88; November 1, 1997, p. 436; April 1, 2002, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 1316; November 15, 2002, review of *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, p. 616; February 1, 2005, Marta Segal Block, review of *March*, p. 938; October 1, 2007, Brad Hooper, review of *People of the Book*, p. 5.
- *Cincinnati Post* (Cincinnati, OH), April 18, 2006, "New Take on Classic Leads Arts Pulitzers," p. C3.
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- *Economist UK*, September 8, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 112.
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- *Grand Rapids Press* (Grand Rapids, MI), April 18, 2006, "Imagined Adventures of Father of *Little Women* Takes Prize," p. A6.
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- *New England Quarterly*, March, 2006, Daniel Shealy, review of *March*, p. 163-166.
- *Newsweek*, February 13, 1995, p. 81.
- *New York*, August 6, 2001, Daniel Mendelsohn, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 55.
- *New Yorker*, September 17, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 169.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 8, 1995, p. 14.
- *O: The Oprah Magazine*, May, 2007, Geraldine Brooks, "C Is for Courage," p. 249.
- *Publishers Weekly*, November 21, 1994, p. 64; October 27, 1997, p. 57; January 17, 2000, John F. Baker, "Foreign Correspondent to Novelist," p. 12; June 25, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 43; October 1, 2007, Margot Livesey, review of *People of the Book*, p. 34.

- *School Library Journal*, November, 2001, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 191; July, 2005, Jackie Gropman, review of *March*, p. 131.
- *State* (Columbia, SC), September, 28, "USC Class Gives Spotlight to Pulitzer Prize Author."
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- *Times* (London, England), March 25, 2006, Christina Hardyment, "Christina Hardyment Is Enslaved by an Abolition Story," p. 17; April 29, 2006, Zoe Paxton, "March of History," p. 11.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), April 8, 2007, Sheila Wolfe, review of *Year of Wonders*, p. 2.
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Online

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A Conversation with Geraldine Brooks

Q. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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?

A. 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.

Courtesy of Penguin

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?

Courtesy of Penguin