

# THE BODECIA BOOK CLUB REVIEW

## People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks

When Hanna Heath, a manuscript conservator, first touches the centuries-old Hebrew codex known as the Sarajevo Haggadah, she feels a “strange and powerful” sensation, something “between brushing a live wire and stroking the back of a newborn baby’s head.” The manuscript is small, the binding soiled and scuffed, but its lavish illuminations — miniature scenes “as interpreted in the Midrash,” created “at a time when most Jews considered figurative art a violation of the commandments” — are stunning. It’s the spring of 1996 in Sarajevo, and Hanna has been called in to examine the book before it’s put on display.

Brooks, has drawn her inspiration from the real Sarajevo Haggadah. As she explains in an afterword, little is known about this book, except that it has been saved from destruction on at least three occasions: twice by Muslims and once by a Roman Catholic priest. Building on these fragments of information, Brooks has created a fictional history that moves to Sarajevo in 1940, then back to late-19th-century Vienna, 15th-century Venice, Catalonia during the Spanish Inquisition and finally Seville in 1480, the new home of the artist responsible for the Haggadah’s illuminations.

The history of this holy book is a bloody one, bound with brutality and humiliation. Families who protect it are torn apart; the book itself is plundered to pay for a questionable medical cure, then lost in a game of chance. Brooks’s extensive research is evident throughout, but she occasionally chokes her storytelling with historical detail; her dialogue can also be heavy with description. The narrative works best when the burden of the past is borne more lightly, when Brooks burrows into her characters’ inner lives. In fin-de-siècle Vienna, for example, a syphilitic bookbinder, overcome by symptoms of dementia, forgets how to make tea or even pursue his craft. Terrified, he experiences his thoughts as “an army in retreat, ceding ever more territory to his enemy, the illness.”

An inscription in the real Sarajevo Haggadah reads *Revisto per mi. Gio. Domenico Vistorini, 1609*. Taken with the notion that a Catholic priest surveying the codex during the Inquisition might choose to save it, Brooks creates another memorable character, an erudite scholar with “an innate reverence for books.” Sometimes, he finds, “the beauty of the Saracens’ fluid calligraphy moved him. Other times, it was the elegant argument of a learned Jew that gave him pause.” This priest haunts the sacristy for draughts of unconsecrated communion wine, intent on obliterating painful memories from his childhood — “the blowing sand of that desolate town,” the secret niche within a carved Madonna — not to mention thoughts of all the texts he has sent to the fires in his 17 years as a censor.

These self-contained historical interludes shelter within the overarching and at times problematic story of Hanna Heath. An irreverent Aussie, she's an appealing character, but as she travels to Vienna, Boston and London, meeting with experts who might help answer her questions about the Haggadah, the structure of the narrative works against her. A chapter that ends with Hanna wondering about the insect wing or the stain will be followed by a historical interlude solving that piece of the puzzle. Not only predictable, this back-and-forth scheme also creates a discrepancy: the reader learns far more than Hanna ever will.

We are left wishing Brooks had found a less obtrusive way to gather up the many strands of her narrative. While peering through a microscope at a rime of salt crystals on the manuscript of the Haggadah, Hanna reflects that "the gold beaters, the stone grinders, the scribes, the binders" are "the people I feel most comfortable with. Sometimes in the quiet these people speak to me." Though the reader's sense of Hanna's relationship with the Haggadah rarely deepens to such a level, Geraldine Brooks's certainly has.

We gave People of the Book **7 ½ / 10**

### **Do You Want to Read the Next Book With Us?**

The next book we are reading is *Case Histories* by Kate Atkinson. We have read a Jackson Brody novel before (see *When Will There be Good News?* September 2010). We are reading this book as part of World Book Night. Copies of the book were given to a member of the group by organisers of the World Book Night. World Book Night was inspired by the success of World Book Day, which last year saw schoolchildren cash in tokens for more than 600,000 specially-published titles, this new initiative aims to put "an accessible work of enduring quality" in the hands of adult readers. 40,000 were distributed by WBN, and we have ten books to give away to readers. These books are currently at Wellingborough Library, first readers to go into the Library and ask about World Book Night and the Bodecia Book Club will get a free copy of the book. So why not read the book with us, you can comment on the book through our website [www.bodeciabookclub.co.uk](http://www.bodeciabookclub.co.uk) and we will put your comments into next month's review. Once you have finished with the book – pass it on!

The book we are now reading is **Case Histories by Kate Atkinson**

[www.bodeciabookclub.co.uk](http://www.bodeciabookclub.co.uk)

**Don't forget the first rule of Book Club!**