People of the Book
by Geraldine Brooks

Rare manuscripts and incunabula (books printed during the earliest period of typography) are fascinating windows to the past. They reveal cultural, religious, and political history, allowing us to glimpse how those have lived and learned before our time. Many hands contribute to the production of a book, especially one with a fine binding and decorative illustrations. Raw materials like minerals and vegetation must be ground for pigments, inks acquired for calligraphers, gold and silver beaten for gilding, and animal skins treated, scraped, and stretched to form parchment. These books survive several centuries, if they’re lucky enough to escape biblioclasm, war, and the ravages of time. With this in mind, Brooks posits the question of ‘who are the people of this book?’: the Sarajevo haggadah. Her fictional account of a very real 14th century manuscript is compelling.

Though you are more likely to find dust, mold, or silverfish in a rare manuscript than anything else, Brooks has her main character Hanna, a manuscript conservator, discover an insect wing, a white hair, wine and blood stains, and saltwater crystals. These clues left behind make it possible for Brooks to weave the complicated process of a book in the making. Her narrative twists and turns through the centuries since the haggadah was first commissioned, introducing each of the lives that touched the book in some way. Its travels are harrowing and dangerous. In the end, Hanna ensures that the haggadah is in its proper place, safe for now. And Brooks makes her fictional narrative ring true: every book has it’s story.

Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. From the Sarajevo haggadah, a medieval manuscript from Spain. Depicts Miriam taking a timbrel. (Exodus 15:20).
Discussion questions

1. There is an amazing array of “people of the book”, whose lifetimes span some remarkable periods in human history. Who is your favorite and why?

2. How did you like the writing style? Prosaic or poetic?

3. 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?

4. Did you have questions about conservation, librarianship, or bookmaking after you finished the book?

5. A book review written by author Ursula K. LeGuin in The Guardian states that this fictional account is “full of action but with no leavening of humour, no psychological revelations, no vivid language to focus description”. In what way would you agree or disagree with this statement?

6. Brooks writes a fairly intense story. We see religious persecution, rape, violence, war, and addiction. As a play within a play, we see Hanna attempting to write a narrative about the haggadah that isn’t boring or technical. On page 265, she says “I wanted to build up a certain tension... I wanted to convey fire and shipwreck and fear”. Do you think the book captures the technicalities of history, embellishes just a little, or conveys a lot of fire, shipwreck and fear?

Further Reading

