

❖ **Geraldine Brooks — *People of the Book***
Fourth Estate, Sydney, 2008, (pp 348) ISBN 067001821X

Reviewed by Christopher Kremmer

In a world of warring faiths, Geraldine Brooks has brought to life an inspiring story about people who rise above sectarianism in order to save a jewel of the world's cultural heritage.

In *People of the Book*, the U.S.-based Australian who won the Pulitzer Prize with her previous work *March*, straddles numerous chasms, among them the divide between fiction and non-fiction. Her story of a medieval Hebrew prayer book is a fictional history of a real book. Nobody knows exactly how the Sarajevo Haggadah has managed to survive events as tumultuous and threatening as the Spanish Inquisition and the most recent Balkan Wars, but survive it has. Fragmentary evidence suggests that the bound and illuminated manuscript has several times been rescued by people who happened not to be Jewish.

During the Serbian bombardment of the besieged Bosnian city of Sarajevo in the 1990s, a Muslim man risked his own life to protect it. Brooks was working as a correspondent in Sarajevo during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia when she heard about the book, and the novel bears the hallmarks of an author deeply enamoured of her subject.

The narrator of the contemporary sections is Hanna, a straight-talking Aussie book conservator called overseas from Sydney to restore the codex. Brooks imbues Hanna with the requisite knowledge about and passion for the artefact, and her descriptions of the intricacies of the conservator's trade are thoroughly researched and a pleasure to read. But Hanna is also a modern Australian woman, beset by unsatisfactory relationships, career pressures and the troubled state of the world.

Hanna draws the reader into a world in which a dead insect found in the spine of an old book can, through scientific analysis, give important clues to the volume's provenance. It is also an inherently political world full of frustrations, and Hanna's moods swing from excitement at bagging the job of a lifetime, to chafing against the bureaucratic tendencies and Byzantine intrigues of the United Nations which has employed her.

Brooks' writing style is straightforward and accessible. One senses a missionary zeal: the world needs to hear this story, so the simpler the style and more plot-rich the narrative, the greater the likelihood of attracting a wide audience. At times it verges on the consciously commercial, a page-turner with echoes of *The Da Vinci Code*. She is not above shocking the reader back to attention, as on page 32, when Hanna begins licking the fingers of the director of the museum

where the Haggadah is held, and a tempestuous affair begins.

Overall, however, the tone is stylish and sophisticated, and the sections dealing with the imagined history of the codex demonstrate the author's gift for seeing the human in the historical, as in her earlier work *Year of Wonders*, a novel set during the Plague of the 17th Century. The degree of authorial difficulty in this new novel is even higher, partly due to the paucity of known history, and also because the story itself sprawls across centuries. To manage these challenges, Brooks has opted to deploy several different narrators and to switch between First Person and Third Person narration. The results are patchy and, at times, confusing.

Towards the end the characters take on a cartoon-like quality, as if they have been assembled purely for the greater glory of the Haggadah, the inanimate object that is the real star of this book. What saves the novel as a reading experience, is the author's sincerity of purpose, and the deeply affecting and important message she wants to share

Christopher Kremmer is a journalist, author and a research scholar with the Writing and Society Group at the University of Western Sydney