

People of the Book,
By Geraldine Brooks
Penguin Group, 2008, 368 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

Certain books seem written by authors who love reading as much as the craft of writing. Their words penetrate, whisper, sing and speak with reverence. *People of the Book*, by Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks is such a book. We travel to distant places rich with history, as well as those long ago times. Sarajevo and Vienna in 1996, and many decades earlier, Venice in 1609, and Spain in the 1400's are some of these places and times. As the story moves forward in the present, the parallel tale that it revolves around takes steps further back in the past. Religions clash against culture. Power and wealth weave a fabric of greed and corruption. Characters are alive with depth and complexity. Death is a constant no matter the era. Some things never change.

I found the back and forth structure of the novel somewhat wearing on one hand, while being comforting in its expectations on the other. Each historical context was set-up by a clue in the present time. It didn't take long to see that the mysteries of one chapter were solved by the next one's final paragraphs, though the delivery of each was clever in a Da Vinci Code way. And through Hanna, we feel the losses and triumphs.

Hanna, who is an expert in rare books with an assignment to authenticate an ancient Hebrew manuscript. This is made all the more intriguing by unusual illustrations that make the book truly unique. On this level, the story unfolds as a scholarly mystery. The intensity rises with the gruesome bloodshed of the Inquisition of one era and Nazis in another. Treachery weaves a thread throughout that becomes more defined in the later stages, setting a faster pace of traditional whodunits.

Hanna's own history takes mysterious turns too, from her roots in Australia, while she pulls us back and forth across time, geography and individuals as a narrator. "*I like to work alone, in my own clean, silent, well-lit laboratory, where the climate is controlled and everything I need is right at hand.*" Soon we learn that this isn't the environment intended for Hanna in following the destiny of the haggadah, or the people of the book.

A mystery that takes up more than one chapter is about a missing clasp that may have been an ornate piece of hand-tooled silver. How did it come to be on this book? What circumstances lead to its removal? One of the settings is Vienna at the end of the 19th century, where a doctor is treating a patient with the social disease of the era. The patient seeking relief from pain and embarrassment happens to be a bookbinder who can't afford his treatment. The doctor himself is feeling guilty about his own affair. A double dose of discretion yields an original solution to that particular part of the tale.

Brooks tells her story in descriptive details of behavior, as well as scene and setting. With Hanna, we confront the isolated scholar whose work is artistry hiding a love life and tenuous family bonds that are distinctly not. The characters from bygone ages possess each of Hanna's opposing parts. A child paints as a master. A priest steals like a thief. One father protects his family while the other sells his down the river. When the book ends in Australia, you may almost feel the pleasant exhaustion of satisfying exercise. It was a long journey, these many continents and hundreds of years.

The *People of the Book* will reward you because the people in this book are fascinating in their stories, with a poetic collection of voices heard above occasional harsh ones. At heart there is a soul, comprised of those we meet along the journey.