

# **People of the Book Study Guide**

## **People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks**

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# Plot Summary

Note: This study guide refers specifically to the 2008 Penguin Paperbacks Edition of *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks.

“*People of the Book*” is an historical novel by Geraldine Brooks which fictionalizes the history of the real-life Sarajevo Haggadah, leaping back and forth between the contemporary era where conservator Hanna Heath investigates the Haggadah, and the past, which details the Haggadah’s history. When the novel begins, the Australian conservator Hanna is called to Sarajevo to analyze and conserve the Sarajevo Haggadah, an illuminated (illustrated) book of Jewish prayer and order regarding Passover Seder. The Haggadah has miraculously survived an attack on the museum in which it has been kept during the Bosnian War, rescued by head librarian Ozren Karaman. The Haggadah is unusual because it is so beautifully illustrated, done at a time when Jewish thought prohibited illustrations of any kind in religious works.

Hanna has learned much from her mentor, Werner Heinrich, and comes to see the Haggadah not only as being important to history, but as having a history of its own. She discovers numerous important clues throughout the book, from a black girl being present in an illustration of the Seder to blood and wine stains to a white hair and a butterfly wing fragment. As Hanna travels the world to seek out friends who help her examine such clues, the novel jumps to the past to reveal how such things came to be a part of the Haggadah.

When rescued from the Nazis in the 1940s, the Haggadah was brought from Sarajevo by the Muslim librarian to a friendly Muslim family high in the mountains where a butterfly wing fragment, stirred by a slight breeze, made its way into the pages of the book. The blood and wine stains came from a Catholic priest crushing a wine glass in his hand as he recalled the horrors of his childhood, where he witnessed his Jewish parents taken away and murdered by Muslims in the late 1500s. The white hair came from a Persian cat, with Persian cat hair being used to produce brushes for art. The black girl at the Seder is Zahra, a Muslim slave owned by a Muslim emir forced her to work as an artist, after which she was given as a gift to a Jewish doctor. Zahra went on to paint illustrations of the Jewish faith for the doctor’s deaf and mute son, including herself listening to the Jewish history of freedom after which she made her own way to freedom. The illustrations became a way for the son to pay his passage on a ship, with the illustrations themselves being purchased and incorporated into the Haggadah by its creator, David Ben Shoushan, as a gift for his nephew.

In the present, with the Haggadah now being returned to public display, Hanna makes an unannounced trip to Sarajevo to see it. She discovers the Haggadah on display to be a fake, and informs Karaman and Heinrich about this. Both disagree, saying such a thing could not be possible. Six years later, in 2002, Hanna learns that the real Haggadah has been discovered in a Jewish museum library. It is revealed that Heinrich and Karaman, wanting to ensure no harm could ever again come to the Haggadah, replaced it with a perfect copy and had it taken to Israel. Wanting to spare an

international incident, Hanna agrees to seek out Karaman to return the real Haggadah to the museum. Before she does so, she drops an Australian Moreton Bay fig seed into the book so that in the future, some conservator may come to discover what happened, and so that she herself can record the latest chapter of the Haggadah's history.



# Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996 - An Insect's Wing: Sarajevo, 1940

## Summary

Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996

I – Thirty-year-old Hanna Heath's decision to accept the job to analyze and conserve the famous and sacred Sarajevo Haggadah, she admits, is not her usual kind of job because she has come to work in the war-torn city of Sarajevo, just after the end of the Bosnian War. Hanna has traveled from Australia to work in the boardroom of a bank under the eyes of two bank guards, two Bosnian guards, and two Danish U.N. guards, as well as official U.N. observer, the Scottish Sikh Hamish Sajjan. Hanna lays out the tools she will use, including camera, scalpels, probes, wheat paste, linen threads, gold leaf, gelatin, and glassine envelopes. Most of the materials she uses – such as gold leaf – she makes herself to ensure the quality of the work she does in preservation. She awaits the arrival of the Haggadah from the National Museum, and reflects on being asked by Amitai Yomtov, top of their field, to see to the Sarajevo Haggadah since the Bosnians and Serbians will not let an Israeli in.

The Sarajevo Haggadah, created in medieval Spain, is an illuminated (illustrated) Hebrew manuscript (also known as a codex), done at a time in Jewish history when illustrations were forbidden. The book came to international attention in 1894, and then disappeared in 1992 when the fighting in Bosnia began. A Muslim named Ozren Karaman, head of the National Museum's library, went in to save the Haggadah when the museum was being attacked. It has been stored in a cold metal safe-deposit box in the bank and may be in bad condition, as much of Sarajevo's destroyed power grid has meant no heat in the winters. Hanna looks forward to her work, for she loves trying to understand the people who put such books together, and why. The book is then brought in by a thin young man of about 30.

II – Hanna knows that no conservator has handled the Sarajevo Haggadah in more than a century. Because it is a Hebrew book, the spine is to the right when opening. It is small with a plain cover, but has been rebound many times with different elaborate covers, though not in the present due to mishandling in Austria a century before. There are no clasps on the binding. The pages are beautifully decorated, but Hanna reminds herself to consider them as art later to understand the science behind them in the meantime. For example, she is able to determine the makeup of colors, such as yellow being from the autumn flower saffron. Although the exterior of the book is in rough shape, the interior seems fresh, clean, and in good shape. The thin young man is introduced as Dr. Ozren Karaman, chief librarian of the National Museum and professor of librarianship at the National University of Bosnia. He asks about Hanna's process.



Hanna explains that she does not wish to restore the book to its original condition, but to conserve it in its present condition in order to make it safe for study and handling, repairing it only where absolutely needed. To restore it to its original condition, Hanna believes, is to disrespect the history of the book itself. To preserve its present condition means being able to understand where the book has been, who has handled the book, why, and so on. Hanna hates dealing with people, and prefers to deal with things like parchment – which is durable enough to last for centuries, but can be carelessly destroyed in a moment. As Hanna turns to the book, she realizes the book is meant for private, home use, but has been lavishly illustrated with expensive pigments found only in books at synagogues and cathedrals. Hanna comes to the famous portrayal of a Spanish Jewish family sitting at Passover along with an African woman. Hanna discovers a silvery-gray hair near the binding and the Passover illustration. She later discovers a portion of an insect wing, grooved binding boards, a saltwater stain, and other stains. At the end of the book, she finds a line in Venetian Latin written by a man named Giovanni, which explains he saved the book during the Inquisition in 1609. The book was sold to the museum in 1894, then saved by a Muslim during the Nazi occupation in the 1940s. As the day ends, Hanna agrees to go to dinner with Karaman.

III – Karaman and Hanna head to the Old City. Much of Sarajevo is damaged or in ruins. Karaman explains that Sarajevans never expected war or ethnic cleansing, despite how politically volatile things had become. But when the fighting began in earnest, Karaman explains he worried what would become of the museum's library. With two police officers, Karaman moved everything of value he could to smaller, inner rooms, including the Sarajevo Haggadah. Karaman explains he feels horrible because he could not save more books. Karaman and Hanna then go to his apartment, where they have sex. Hanna then sees a painting of a woman by Karaman's friend, Danilo. Karaman explains the painting is a portrait of his wife.

IV – Over the next week, Hanna carefully takes apart, reassembles, and preserves the Sarajevo Haggadah. She learns that Karaman's wife, Aida, was killed by a sniper before heavy fighting and shelling began. During that time, she sheltered their infant boy named Alia, with her body. A sniper's bullet meant for Alia hit Aida first, shattered, and allowing only a piece of bullet to enter Alia's head. Alia now barely survives, kept alive by tubes at the hospital. Hanna considers returning for the museum's reopening, when the Haggadah will be securely protected behind a glass case. She decides to forge papers from her mother, a feminist neurosurgeon who disapproves of Hanna's work, for consultation on Alia, allowing her to steal X-rays of Alia. This is in direct contradiction to Karaman's belief that not all endings can be happy, and that his son is best left as he is.

V – Hanna travels to Vienna, Austria, thriving after the fall of Communism, to seek out Amalie Sutter, a childhood friend who runs a science lab on evolutionary biology. Hanna presents Amalie with the insect wing from the Haggadah, which Amalie identifies as the Parnassius butterfly, common throughout Europe but confined to high alpine systems, usually of about 2,000 meters, such as the Alps.

An Insect's Wing: Sarajevo, 1940



Out late, Lola sneaks back into her apartment, and gets into bed with her younger sister, Dora. Lola thinks about attending the Young Guardian meeting that night, which she loves because of the dancing, hiking, and presence of Mordechai, an educated farmer, but also dislikes because she has little interest in learning and studying Hebrew. Lola always feels inferior to the other members of the group, who are well-traveled or have extensive family histories. Her own father, Lujo, works as a janitor, and her mother is a laundress. She thinks about how Mordechai says the only true homeland for Jews is Eretz Israel, for he has been to Palestine, and because of the violence against Jews in Germany and elsewhere. She also thinks about how many of the other Jews of Sarajevo do not worry about the Antisemitism in and around Germany, because they have not yet been touched by it and because they consider Europe to be their home country. But when Mordechai returns to Palestine, a new leader takes over the Young Guardians, causing the group to lose much of its appeal to Lola. Not long after, fascist gangs begin roaming the streets, and young Jews begin leaving for Palestine. Country after country falls to the Nazis.

One day, Lola delivers laundry to the home of Stela Kamal, a young Albanian Muslim woman whose home is full of books and who is married to a man more than twice her age named Serif effendi Kamal, chief librarian of the National Museum. In April, the Germans reach Sarajevo, and declare it part of the new country of Croatia, which is to be cleansed of Jews and Serbs. The Jewish quarter of Sarajevo is looted and burned. Serif protests the new wave of Antisemitism in Sarajevo and looting of museums across Europe. Soon after, arrests begin. Lola's father is taken to a labor camp, and is killed a year later. While Lola is out one day, her mother and sister are rounded up along with her aunt and placed in a burned-out synagogue to await further German orders. Lola finds them and urges them to escape, but is told to leave. As she does, the 11-year-old sister of Lola's school friend Isak, Ina, explains Isak has gone off to fight with the partisans. She reveals she has stolen a Luger from the Germans.

Ina then makes her escape with Lola. They flee the city for the mountains where they meet Maks, best friend of Isak, who is also serving with the Partisans. Lola and Ina are welcomed into the partisan ranks by Maks. Lola puts her launderer skills to good use by cleaning the dirty uniforms of the partisans while Isak thanks Lola for helping Ina. Lola is given the official job of handling a mule to cart supplies. Lola comes to worry about the extremism and often poor decisions of the partisan leader Branko, however, and watches as Isak and Branko become opposed to one another, especially through the winter as Ina falls ill. The group splits between Isak and Branko. Isak's group then splits up further. Lola, Isak, and Ina make up their own group.

## Analysis

The overarching plot of Geraldine Brook's novel *People of the Book* is simple: it is about a historical book with a history of its own, uncovered in the mid-1990s by Hanna Heath. The book draws inspiration from the real-life Sarajevo Haggadah, taking actual history – such as the presence of a black girl at a Jewish Seder in one of the manuscript's illustrations – and transforming it into the novel *People of the Book*. "People of the



Book” is a term used by many of the three major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – to refer to one another, for they all draw themselves from, and believe in, the God of Abraham, the One True God. In the context of the novel, not only does the term “People of the Book” refer to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but refers to people associated with the production, or the history of, the Haggadah.

As Hanna begins to investigate the Haggadah, Hanna herself makes the argument that a book is not just about what it contains, but is a story itself complete with its own history. Much of that history is unknown to Hanna, but manifests itself through various clues ranging from missing clasps to a butterfly wing fragment to the very illustrations themselves – not only the presence of a black girl at a Seder but the inclusion of the illustrations at a time when Jewish thought heavily frowned upon and forbade such illustrations. Much of what constitutes the book itself – the aging on the parchment, and various stains – are things that formulate Hannah’s next argument: preservation - not restoration - is how to properly preserve documents from the past because it takes into account the idea that a historical book is the sum not only of its contents, but its own history as well. This history must be preserved along with the book as a matter of respect and a fuller understanding.

The clues that Hanna uncovers in the book – the stains, hair, wing fragment, and all – also come to underscore an important point that the author makes throughout the novel. What something appears to be may not actually be. For example, the butterfly wing fragment is originally suspected to be from the Alps, rather than the Dinaric Alps above Sarajevo. Although it is from the same kind of butterfly, the fragment of the wing simply comes from a different place. The rescue of the Haggadah in the 1940s is said to have occurred under mysterious circumstances, the truth of which is not known to Hanna and her friends in their own day and age. The circumstances are much less a mystery than perceived, for as will be noted in the coming pages of the novel, the Haggadah was smuggled out of the museum and hidden away. These are not the last misconceptions that will be made clear about the Haggadah in the novel.

The need to hide the Haggadah ultimately comes from the inhumanity of man. As Brooks will argue throughout her novel, man is capable of both good and evil – and good ultimately triumphs in the end. Karaman’s decision to save the Haggadah from the museum comes from the goodness in his heart, his respect for the past, and his love of beauty. The evil that men can do – represented here by the Bosnian War, its ethnic cleansing, and the assault on sites of cultural heritage such as the museum – demonstrates how hard and challenging times can be on other people. As Karaman notes, Sarajevans never expected war or ethnic cleansing, believing it was all a thing of the past in Europe, and something that happened elsewhere in the world in the present. As Karaman demonstrates through his good action of saving the Haggadah, good triumphs in the end. As the novel steps into the past, the reader watches with alarm as Nazi Germany begins invading one country after another, making its way toward Sarajevo. This leads to brutal acts committed against the Jews, including Lola and her family. This demonstrates the evil man can do at its absolute worst.





## Discussion Question 1

Is Hanna a conservator or a restorer? Why? Do you agree or disagree with the philosophy of conservation, rather than the philosophy of restoration? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Sarajevo plagued by evil? How do people like Karaman and Lola stand in the face of such evil? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Hanna accept the job to conserve the Sarajevo Haggadah? How does she approach her work in terms of valuing not only the history contained in a book, but the history of the book itself? Why does this matter to her?

## Vocabulary

Haggadah, abattoir, sabra, figurative, facsimile, tedious, ritual, austere, reticence, sustenance, contemptuously, immodest, reprehensible, impeccably, exegesis, harangues



# **An Insect's Wing: Sarajevo, 1940 (continued) – Hannah: Vienna, Spring 1996**

## **Summary**

An Insect's Wing: Sarajevo, 1940 (continued)

While crossing a frozen river, Isak's foot gets wet and becomes affected by frostbite. Isak becomes unable to walk, and so commits suicide by walking into the middle of the river and falling through the ice. Ina does the same. Lola returns to Sarajevo, knowing she will not be able to make it to liberated territory. She comes to the abandoned finance ministry, where her father had worked as a janitor. There, the man who worked alongside her father, Sava, brings her in to warm them up. From there, he brings her to the National Museum, where Serif brings her to stay in his home with Stela. Stela has aged from the stress of the war, but remains warm and friendly. Stela now has a baby boy named Habib. It is arranged so that Lola will pretend to be a maid sent by Stela's family to help with the baby.

Lola soon becomes used to the ways of Serif and Stela, whose days revolve around prayer and learning. One day, Serif comes home bearing the Sarajevo Haggadah, saying it has been entrusted to him by the museum's director, the Croatian Dr. Josip Boscovic. Boscovic pretends to be complicit with the Nazis, but works against them however he can. He becomes complicit in Serif's stealing of the Haggadah, out from under the nose of German General Faber who seeks to look the museum and destroy all Jewish items. Boscovic blames the theft on an unknown German officer while Serif plans to get the book to safety. Serif drives his wife, son, and Lola up into the mountains with the book the next day to the home of an old friend and his family, including a son named Munib. Munib, 19, studies insects, and is currently studying a tabletop full of insect wing fragments. Munib's father, the mountain village's elder, agrees to save the Haggadah. While it is open, a slight breeze causes a butterfly wing fragment to collect in the book. The book is then placed among volumes of Islamic law.

Hannah: Vienna, Spring 1996

Hanna remembers how the traveling scholarship she won after her undergraduate degree allowed her to come to Vienna to study under Werner Maria Heinrich, a German Catholic famous for the study of Hebrew manuscripts. He is now retired and in his seventies. Hanna goes to visit him to tell him and ask him about the Haggadah. He explains two of the foremost scholars of the 1890s, Rothschild from Oxford and Martell from the Sorbonne, came to Vienna to study the Haggadah when it came to light. He believes the cheap binding may have been Antisemitism, or Vienna's snub that the Haggadah was to be returned to Bosnia. Hanna later speaks with Karaman by phone,



who reveals that after World War II, false accusations of collaboration by the Communists allowed them to get rid of anyone too religious, too intellectual, or too outspoken – just like Serfi, who was imprisoned for six years, released, and died in the 1960s.

Hanna meets with Frau Zweig, a friend of Werner's and chief archivist at Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, to see the old files on the Sarajevo Haggadah. Hanna learns that the author of the Haggadah's introductory letter, a Sarajevo Hebrew language instructor who brought the Haggadah to light, was first shown the Haggadah by a pupil, a son of the Kohen family. All that is known, Hanna reads, is that the Haggadah had been in the Kohen family at least since the mid-eighteenth century. The notes of Herman Rothschild of Oxford University allow Hanna to learn he did not deal with the binding at all, but was primarily stunned by the illustrations. Martell of the Sorbonne's report describes the Haggadah's binding as being damaged and eroded. She also learns that Martell had cleaned the nonworking clasps of the binder, with depictions of flowers enfolded by wings. She notes this information has been crossed out.

Feathers and a Rose: Vienna, 1894

Franz Hirschfeldt, a medical doctor who knows how to be discreet, is employed by many aristocrats to check up on their private sexual lives – such as making sure young girls are not impregnated, and sometimes bedding them himself. It is a sign of the capital of the Austrian-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire's excesses. The city is also alive with wealth, culture, learning, while a marked trend of "Jew-eating" (Antisemitism) is on the rise. Hirschfeldt tends to his younger half-brother, David, who engages in frequent duels, most recently with a man who mocked his Jewish last name based on the Waidhofen manifesto, a German nationalist anti-Jewish publication. Although David is Catholic based on his father's conversion and marriage to a Catholic, he still does not suffer slights to Jews lightly. Hirschfeldt then takes on his next patient, a bookbinder named Florian Mittl.

Mittl hobbles when he walks, and has a stain on his shirt – unusual because Mittl is so careful about his appearance. Mittl explains he still manages to work, despite the tumors all over his body. Hirschfeldt explains there is a potential for a cure, but it is a dangerous procedure undertaken only in Berlin, and without guarantee of success.

At home, Hirschfeldt is enraged to discover his wife has been having an affair. He swings by the home of his mistress, Rosalind, to sleep with her.

Meanwhile, Mittl, who is Antisemitic, considers himself lucky to have the Jewish book he has been given to rebind. He has already grooved new boards for binding to accommodate the existing silver clasps, and knows he must gain more work to travel to Berlin. He decides to offer the silver clasps to Hirschfeldt for money, crying in the process. Hirschfeldt consents to ordering the treatment to be administered in Vienna.

Hannah: Vienna, Spring 1996



Hanna wonders where the missing silver clasps might be, and why the notes about them have been scribbled out. She continues to look through the old records, but finds nothing. She then fills Zweig in on this. Zweig translates a German-language invoice for work on the binding of the Sarajevo Haggadah to a man named Mittl. Zweig consults computerized records to discover the Haggadah was Mittl's last commission because the clasps were either lost or stolen, and were covered up by delaying the book's return to ensure the clasps were forgotten about.

Hanna next heads to Boston, Massachusetts, to see her mother who is giving a talk about aneurysms. She gives her mother the X-rays of Alia. Hanna's mother writes Alia off as "toast." This infuriates Hanna, who argues with her mother about never knowing her father, about her coldness, and about her childhood being so difficult. Hanna then goes to see Razmus Kanaha, chief conservation scientist at Fogg Museum and the Straus Center for Conservation, and an old friend from college. She asks him to look at samples of stains and photographs of the Haggadah she has taken. He agrees, and discovers that one of the stains is not wine as thought, but blood.

## Analysis

There is no limit to the evil that men can do – or the good that it can inspire. The Haggadah, in the 1940s, appears slated to be destroyed by the Germans, but Serif risks his safety and his life to protect the Haggadah by bringing it to a friendly family in the mountains. This is how the Haggadah came to have a butterfly wing fragment among its pages. Likewise, Serif and his wife risk their lives by sheltering Lola from the Nazis, pretending she is their maid. Hirschfeldt, despite the growing Antisemitism around him, and despite the Antisemitic nature of Mittl, nevertheless agrees to accept Mittl's silver clasps as payment for treatment. These are all acts of courage and goodness, from the People of the Book toward one another – between Christians and Jews, and between people associated with the Haggadah.

As Brooks continues to argue, what appears to be at first may not be the case at all. The shoddy Venetian binding of the Haggadah at the hands of Mittl comes less from his hatred of Jews than from his physical inability to do the same kind of work now that he is ill. The disappearance of the clasps comes not from their nonfunctioning nature, but from their use as payment for medical assistance. (Hanna and Zweig will come to learn about this later in the novel.) As Hanna continues to note, and as the reader is now clearly seeing, the clues (or the absence of parts of the Haggadah, which in turn act as clues, such as the clasps) speak to the history of the Haggadah itself. More than 100 years of its history have already been recounted – from being saved in 1996 to being saved in the 1940s to being brought to light for repairs in the 1890s.

At the same time, Brooks also begins to unveil a thematic argument that the past has tremendous bearing on the present. This is true not only when it comes to the history of, and the history contained within, the Haggadah, but true of those whose lives surround, or are associated with the Haggadah. To better understand the history of the Haggadah itself – to know how it came to be in its present state – one must understand the



historical context. This is immensely important concerning the clues – from the butterfly wing fragment to the missing clasps. This is also true where it concerns those lives whom the Haggadah touches. Mittl's illness and prejudice, acquired over many years, come to compel him to steal the clasps. The Haggadah is something observed by Lola (this will have serious implications late in the novel) and hidden away by Serif and his friends. They have been moved by the beauty of the Haggadah, and moved to do good by the evil that has surrounded them. Without this history affecting the Haggadah, it could have been long ago destroyed.

Because of this history, the argument Brooks makes through Hanna – that a book is not just a story or the sum of its contents, but is a story itself complete with its own history – continues to hold sway. In effect, the Haggadah is becoming its own character, given its trials, tribulations and travels. As Amitai will later correctly note, the Haggadah's survival is nothing short of miraculous. And it is because of this storied history that someone like Hanna continues to press for conservation, rather than restoration. Preservation, she continues to argue, is how to properly preserve such things of the past. The experiences through which the Haggadah has survived has become a part of the very Haggadah itself, and so must, therefore, be preserved.

## Discussion Question 1

How is the Haggadah saved during World War II? Why would Serif, a Muslim, choose to save such a holy Jewish book when it is not of his own faith?

## Discussion Question 2

How do the silver clasps of the Haggadah come to be missing? Why does this present such an integral part of the Haggadah's history?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the Haggadah come to represent the best and worst of human nature in this section (*n Insect's Wing: Sarajevo, 1940 (continued) – Hannah: Vienna, Spring 1996*) of the novel? Why is this such an important part of the Haggadah's story?

## Vocabulary

haggard, prostrations, erudite, exasperated, felicitations, obsequiousness, unctuous, imperceptible, psalter, altruism



# Wine Stains: Venice, 1609 – Saltwater: Tarragona, 1492

## Summary

Wine Stains: Venice, 1609

An alcoholic Catholic priest, Giovanni Domenico Vistorini barely makes it through conducting Mass. Afterwards, he drinks some unconsecrated Communion wine, then thinks about the long morning before him where he will serve as part of the Ten, making Inquisition decisions as official censor on any books that contained anything against the Catholic faith, as well as any Jewish or Saracen books. Giovanni is himself a scholar, a lover of books, and a lover of beauty.

As Giovanni heads into the city, he says hello to some while saying silent prayers for the unfortunate along the way, as well as dropping a coin to a beggar. Giovanni thinks about his work, such as the book he currently studies – a Jewish volume that criticizes Catholics for their belief in Jesus Christ. Such writers are usually fined, sometimes imprisoned, and on very rare occasion, put to death.

As he walks, Giovanni comes across Rabbi Judah Aryeh, widely respected among all faiths for his intellect and theology. Giovanni and Aryeh have something resembling friendship. Giovanni shows Aryeh the Jewish book that has criticized Catholics. Aryeh reassures Giovanni that the writer did not intentionally mean to provoke, and notes how year by year, fewer and fewer cases come before the Inquisition. Relations between Jews and Catholics are improving, and Giovanni worries that such writers may antagonize things. Aryeh explains that whether a book is banned from being written, or burned after being banned from being written, the effect is still the same.

Giovanni has long sparred intellectually and theologically with Aryeh, beginning from the time Giovanni found no real fault with some of Aryeh's texts that had been challenged before the Inquisition. Giovanni has since consulted with Aryeh on numerous texts, which has allowed him to redact rather than destroy them, or to grant the texts a complete reprieve. Although Giovanni may be friendly toward the Jews, and even though Aryeh once helped Giovanni after being attacked and robbed, Giovanni will never set foot in their part of the city. Aryeh, meanwhile, meets with Reyna de Serena, a Portuguese Jew who converted to Christianity in thanks for refuge in Vienna, and who uses her massive funds to secretly aid the Jewish community. Aryeh asks for such a sum now. Serena then asks Aryeh for a favor. She hands him the book that will become known as the Sarajevo Haggadah. Aryeh sees that it is very much Jewish in writing and content, but very Christian in design and illustration. She explains it came to her through an elderly manservant of her mother's, who was born at the time the Jews were expelled from Spain. Serena explains it reminds her both of her mother and the



manservant, who was kind and gentle. She wishes to keep it, but only if it will pass the censor.

Serena intends to leave Venice, and wishes to take the book with her. She will go to the Sublime Porte under the Ottomans, who are currently welcoming Jews so that she may live her life as a Jew once again. She has been personally invited to the city of Ragusa by the Sultan himself. In Ragusa, the Jewish community is growing. Aryeh agrees to study the book and bring it before Giovanni personally. Meanwhile, Giovanni has grown very critically lenient in his work, preferring to emend rather than strike out – but indigestion, the heat, and the discussion with Aryeh have left him unhappy.

That night, Aryeh sneaks out of the Jewish Ghetto to attend Carnivale celebrations to gamble on games of cards, a compulsion he feeds with the money taken from Serena. When Aryeh loses his winnings and seeks to play on credit, he is denied the chance because he is a Jew. Aryeh flees, seeking forgiveness from God. He then commits to studying the Haggadah to determine if it is safe to submit to Giovanni. Aryeh wonders who could have illustrated such a book, since Jews forbid such illustrations. He imagines the artist must be a Christian. Considering it safe, he brings it before Giovanni and explains he won it in a game of chance.

Giovanni, drunk once more, studies the book, then explains that the text is innocent, but that there are heresies in the illustrations, such as the movement of Earth and the Sun. The Haggadah shows the sun in an ambiguous position, explains Giovanni, while the Church is debating the issue. Giovanni considers redacting rather than burning the book, based on a game of chance with Aryeh called Apulia. In Apulia, the words of the censor clearing the book (*Revisto per mi*) will be written on scraps of paper, and if drawn in the correct order, Giovanni will write them down and the book will be cleared. Aryeh agrees, noting slight variations in the paper scraps as Giovanni prepares them. Aryeh wins, but Giovanni says the clearance will be worthless without his signature and date. Aryeh protests, during which time Giovanni comes down hard on Aryeh, saying he knows Aryeh is lying about the book's origins and daring to presume he could prevail upon Giovanni's goodwill. Aryeh begs Giovanni to save the book, but do to him as will be done. Giovanni orders Aryeh out.

That evening, in a drunken stupor, the past and the present come to haunt Giovanni. Giovanni grew up an orphan, originally brought up as Catholic by his parents to avoid persecution at the hands of the Muslims in North Africa. He remembers how his parents were secretly Jewish when they were arrested and taken away. In the present, Giovanni does his best to wish away the nightmares of his past, crushing a glass of wine in his bare hand, staining the Haggadah with blood and wine. Giovanni begins repeating his name over and over, denying his Jewish name of Eliahu ha-Cohain, and then finally writes his Catholic name down in the Haggadah beneath the censor clearance. He then puts his head down on the Haggadah and cries.

Hanna: Boston, Spring 1996



Raz thinks it is too bad that he and Hanna will never know what truly happened with the stains in the Haggadah. This annoys Hanna, because she desperately wants to know and believes the truth may be simpler than imagined – such as a husband accidentally cutting himself using the book during a Passover meal.

The next morning, Hanna learns her mother has been in a car accident and has suffered serious spleen damage. Hanna goes to see her at once. She then sees her mother crying for the first time ever. Her mother tells her to look up the Sharansky family at an address she gives Hanna. They will want to see her, since Delilah Sharansky is Hanna's grandmother. Hanna comes to learn her father was Aaron Sharansky, Holocaust survivor born in 1937, who went on to teach Russian language and literature at Boston University, had a family, then moved everyone to Australia to begin teaching in New South Wales. A brilliant painter, his sight failed in his late twenties. During an operation, he was discovered to have a benign tumor pressing on his optic nerve, but after a new round of surgery on the tumor, died of complications from the surgery. Hanna's mother, Sarah, had become his lover, and was four months pregnant with Hanna by the time of his death. Sarah explains she blames herself for referring him to the surgeon who conducted the operation that ultimately led to his death by way of a bleed nobody noticed.

Hanna looks up the Sharanskys, and meets her father's brother, Jonah, an architect. Hanna later gets a message from Raz, saying he has analyzed some other stains and determined they are sea salt water stains, not table salt water stains, such as the kind used in Passover meals.

Saltwater: Tarragona, 1492

In the marketplace, David Ben Shoushan, a scribe, discovers a youth sitting with painted parchments before him. The illustrations are even more beautiful than anything he has seen in Christian prayer books. The boy is a deaf-mute whose slave has abandoned him, and is supposedly the son of a physician to an emir. The boy is selling his art to pay for a ship passage debt. David buys all of the parchments. At home, David hates to hear his wife, Miriam, berate his 15-year-old daughter, Ruti (whom he calls Sparrow) for her timidity.

Miriam is enraged by the purchase of the pictures, even if they are for his nephew's wedding. The pictures will be used in a beautiful Haggadah he is designing for his brother's son's wedding, with his brother, Joseph, being barely distinguishable from a Gentile. As such, Joseph's son should have a beautiful illustrated Jewish book to rival the Christian prayer books given to Christian sons. The parchment of the book is made by hand, and perfected by Sparrow's work.

## Analysis

What appears to be may not actually be, Geraldine Brooks continues to argue in *People of the Book*. Nowhere is this as clear as with Father Giovanni and the wine, blood, and





tear stains in the Haggadah. It is presumed the majority of the wine stains are from Seders; but the truth is far more complicated. At first, Giovanni – clearly a brilliant Catholic priest who struggles with something resembling friendship with Aryeh – seems a relatively straightforward character with a drinking problem. As it turns out, Giovanni's work as censor of the Inquisition deeply troubles his conscience, for he is often required to pass judgment on Jewish writings.

Given his faith in God, and his past, Giovanni is as lenient as possible regarding censorship. Indeed, his drinking comes from his struggles to forget his past. Though he himself was reared as a Catholic, his parents were secretly Jews taken away and murdered by local Muslims. Giovanni is a character who struggles with his Jewish ancestry, and his firm and genuine commitment to Catholicism. His desire to be rid of the horrors witnessed as a child leads him to drink, crush a wine glass in his hand, and cry over the Haggadah. His decision to save the Haggadah is a reflection of, commitment to, and a sign of respect regarding both his Jewish roots and his Catholic works. It is something good done in spite of a traumatic past, and reaffirms the idea that People of the Book – currently Jews and Christians – are working to ensure the survival of the Haggadah.

Hanna, despite her reverence for history, ironically cannot conceive anything even remotely similar to this as an explanation for the presence of blood in the Haggadah. She believes the simplest explanation is usually true, even though the reader now knows differently. Nevertheless, Hanna does acknowledge that she might be wrong, and this further underscores the importance of conservation over restoration. While Hanna may not know the precise history of the book, others may one day discover it. Because of this, it is important to preserve the book as it is, rather than to restore it as close as possible to its original condition. Here, the argument that conservation rather than restoration is critical.

History, as such, continues to hold tremendous relevance in the present. This comes through not only the present state of the Haggadah, but through the lives associated with the Haggadah. Giovanni's own personal history underscores his ultimate decision to save the Haggadah. The journey to discover the truth behind the clues of the Haggadah brings Hanna into contact with Karaman, because of whose son Hanna reaches out to her mother, who then steers Hanna into their own past, and the history of Hanna's father. At the same time, the contextual history of the Haggadah in 1609 shows a world where Jews and Catholics are beginning to get along better as the panic that first brought on the Inquisition has largely subsided. Man is capable of both good and evil, but good ultimately always prevails, Geraldine Brooks continues to argue here. Despite some tension between Jews and Catholics, their relations are largely peaceful – such as that embodied by Giovanni and Aryeh. Note that Catholics routinely listen to Aryeh speak on matters of the Old Testament due to his brilliance and the truth of his words, while he does what he can to ensure that Catholics are not offended or provoked. The horrors of the Inquisition in the past likewise help urge Giovanni to save the Haggadah.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Giovanni save the Haggadah from being redacted or destroyed? How does his past and his current Catholic faith factor into his decision to save the Haggadah?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Hanna, who has such a reverence for history, not believe anything truly complicated can explain the blood, wine, or tear stains (let alone any of the other clues) in the Haggadah? Do you believe she errs in believing so? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the history of the Haggadah bring Hanna in touch with her own past? Why does this matter?

## Vocabulary

innate, reverence, approbated, millinery, expurgated, unambiguously, emending, benighted, mellifluous, premonition, fabrication, implausible, promulgating, sofer



# Saltwater: Tarragona, 1492 (continued) – A White Hair: Seville, 1480

## Summary

Saltwater: Tarragona, 1492 (continued)

While at work, David's pregnant daughter-in-law, a Christian, comes to ask for his help for her husband, David's son Reuben, has been arrested during the night while she has been accused of polluting Christian blood by having the baby of a converted Jew. David is angry that his grandson will be raised Christian, and so he shuts the door in the woman's face. Meanwhile, Reuben faces down the Inquisitors, saying he has converted to Christianity, taking the name Renato del Salvador. Renato is told to confess his heresies, but he does not know what he has done. He is put under torture.

At home, Miriam begs David to go for their son, to help however he can. David says they have no son. David nevertheless goes to see Joseph, who says that all converted Jews must be left to their own fates for their decision to convert, which now brings misery down upon them. Joseph explains that Spain has declared that all the Jews are to be converted or expelled. David is stunned by this, for Jews financed and fought alongside the Spanish to rid Spain of the invading Muslims. Joseph and his family are preparing to leave Spain.

In the meantime, Reuben learns his crime: a leather strap and small wooden box with the word of God, inscribed in Hebrew by his father, has been found in his possession, making it appear to the accusers as if his conversion to Christianity has not been sincere. Without anything else to do, David returns to work on the Haggadah, beginning to conclude the book's composition.

David realizes that only in fleeing Spain will there be safety. To do this, his daughter must quickly be married to a man who will be better able to protect her. Despite the Sparrow's meekness, she has secretly committed to studying the Kabbalah and the Zohar, things forbidden to her due to her age and sex, using her body to appease the local book binder in exchange for borrowing his copies of the books. Over time, Sparrow and the book binder, a married man named Micah, have fallen one another. After her brother's marriage, it was Sparrow who gave her brother the gift of the leather strap and small wooden box, to remind him of better times with his father before his marriage and disownment. In the present, David sends Sparrow to the book binder to have the Haggadah bound using silver from Miriam's ketubah. It is hoped that such a fine gift to Joseph's son will cause Joseph to open his deep pockets. This upsets Sparrow greatly.

At the Inquisition, Reuben confesses to keeping things needed for a Jewish man to pray in his home. Reuben confesses that Sparrow gave him such things. Soldiers then go to collect Ruti. With his daughter and wife out, the soldiers attack David and kill him. They



then follow a lead that brings them to Michah's store, where Micah and Sparrow are in the back. Micah says he does not know what Sparrow is planning to do, hiding her in the shop cupboard. Miriam returns home to find Reuben dead, with their friends and neighbors preparing for a Shivah. Joseph arrives, blaming himself for not ransoming Reuben, and says he will now take David's family under his protection. Miriam refuses to leave, so Joseph leaves a servant with her. Micah comes to pay his respects and to tell Miriam that Sparrow has gone to safe hiding place along the southern road. Sparrow has been given the recently-bound Haggadah to take with her.

Meanwhile, Rosa, wife of Reuben, goes into labor in the same safe place, caves which she and Reuben used to use when courting. Sparrow finds her giving birth, and sets to helping. The baby boy is seemingly born dead, so Sparrow brings the baby along saying she will bury him as a Jew. Sparrow discovers the baby boy is still alive, but does not tell this to Rosa. That night, Rosa baptizes the baby boy in the Jewish faith through immersion in seawater, realizing only afterward some of the water had found its way into the Haggadah manuscript.

Hanna: London, Spring 1996

Hanna goes to the Tate Museum in London, a place which she loves, to see one of her father's paintings. She cries when she sees it, and is comforted by a kind guard. In her hotel, Hanna commits to continuing work on an article about the Haggadah that has been requested as part of her job by the U.N. Hanna attempts to call Karaman but is unable to reach him. A good friend named Maryanne has arranged for the white hair from the Haggadah to be tested at Scotland Yard. Hanna later receives a copy of a photograph from Zweig, featuring a man and a woman wearing earrings matching the description of the missing clasps. Zweig reveals Mittl died of accidental arsenic poisoning administering a treatment to Mittl from Berlin by his doctor, Hirschfeldt, who appears in the photo with his wife. Hanna tries Karaman again, only to learn that Karaman's son has died and that Yomtov has been in Sarajevo, saying he has been working with Hanna on the Haggadah. This confuses Hanna greatly. Hanna then hears from Clarissa Montague-Morgan of Scotland Yard, who explains the white hair is actually a yellow-dyed, cut cat hair.

A White Hair: Seville, 1480

A 14-year-old female black Muslim slave named Zahra bint Ibrahim al-Tarek, remembers her father, a scholar and a healer, under whom Zahra first learned to draw and paint plants with medicinal purposes. Zahra also remembers how she worked at the pavilion of the book for Hooman, where scribes and artists copied, wrote, and illustrated books. Zahra remembers how she was kidnapped by the Banu Marin from a caravan traveling with her father, sold into slavery, and sold to Hooman. From Hooman, Zahra remembers learning that the finest brushes were made of cat hair, and remembers how Hooman used her repeatedly for sex. Zahra also remembers learning that the local emir was preparing for war against the local Christians, and that she herself would come to paint pictures that only the emir would see. In the present, she paints the emir's wife, nude, so that he may take the painting with him when he leaves the city. Zahra is asked



to paint the emir's wife a second time, but she refuses because she knows the emir repeatedly rapes his wife, and to paint his wife would be to assist him. The wife breaks down in tears, and she and Zahra begin spending much of their time together, during which time Zahra is forced to continue her paintings of the wife.

Meanwhile, across Spain, the Christian forces are gaining ground against the Muslims, driving them back. The wife explains her name is actually Isabella, that she is Christian, and that she prays for Christian victory every night. She shows Zahra an illuminated Book of Hours, given to her as a gift by her Jewish physician, Netanel ha-Levi. Isabella becomes pregnant by the emir, and one day asks that Zahra paint a self-portrait instead of yet another portrait of Isabella for the emir. Zahra is then given as a gift to Levi for his good treatment of Isabella, along with Isabella's brother Pedro, in the hopes both will receive better treatment and survive coming violence. The emir has been wounded in battle, it turns out, and his son uses the opportunity to overthrow him. Zahra meets Benjamin, the deaf and mute son of Levi. Zahra decides to illustrate the Jewish faith so that Benjamin might see it and learn from the pictures, recalling the Book of Hours. She includes herself in the illustrations, using cat-hair brushes to render the pictures. Zahra envies the Jewish Passover and its promises of freedom, and hopes she too, one day, may be free.

## Analysis

Yet again, Brooks's argument that something may not be as it appears to be holds sway. The presence of saltwater staining in the Haggadah has nothing to do with a simple seaward journey, but a baptism of faith under persecution. The decision of Sparrow to baptize her nephew in the water comes not only as an act of faith but an act of defiance against the persecution she and the Jews of Spain are now facing. As she baptizes her nephew in saltwater, the pages of the Haggadah become stained – and baptized – in the same instant. The Haggadah here comes to reflect the miracle of human goodness even against a background of human evil and tragedy. It is truly touched by the Hand of God, and will in turn come to touch the lives of all those associated with it in some way, shape, or form. As such, the idea that the Haggadah has its own history is thoroughly reinforced. Tragically, this is only the beginning of the Haggadah's journey, and the good it will experience, and evil that it will survive through.

Brooks's argument that history has tremendous relevance in the present as well as in the past continues to remain central to the plot. Here, it coincides with her argument that what appears to be may not always be as it appears. The reasons the illustrations are included at a time when such things are frowned upon at best by Jewish authorities is revealed to be a thoughtful decision made by the writer of the Haggadah, David Ben Shoushan, as the Haggadah is initially intended as a gift to his nephew, the son of Jews who believe but are not devout. Indeed, much of the book's binding – including its silver clasps – are a desperate measure to secure help from Joseph to have Reuben released from the Inquisition. Without the horrors of the Inquisition, the history of the Haggadah would have been much different. The past, therefore, has direct relevance on the present.



The illustration of the Seder, in which Zahra portrays herself, likewise has important historical relevance. Zahra, a Muslim slave, is given as a gift to a Jewish doctor, through whom she learns much about Judaism. Her decision to paint the illustrations at all is out of a genuine desire to help Benjamin learn about his religion. Zahra includes herself in the Seder in order to demonstrate that she, too, has been moved by the stories of freedom central to the Jewish faith, and as an illustrated prayer that she might soon achieve freedom herself. There is great irony in a slave being held by Jews who is present at a meal meant to commemorate Jewish freedom. As the reader will note, Zahra does indeed achieve her freedom when she abandons Benjamin in 1492.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the Haggadah come to have saltwater stains on its pages? What does this say about the considerations of Hanna and others with respect to the history of the Haggadah?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Zahra decide to include herself in her illustration of the Passover Seder? Why does she choose to portray herself as she does?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is the history of the origin of the Haggadah so important in addition to what the book contains? What does this tell Hanna and the others who have studied it? What messages does the Haggadah's history convey to readers of the novel?

## Vocabulary

immanence, furtive, superstitious, immersion, medicinal, Shivah, elude, desecration, salacious, irreverent, ignominious, effusively



# Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996 – Hanna: Arnhem Land, Gunumeleng, 2002

## Summary

Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996

Hanna returns to Sarajevo without telling anyone she is coming, just before the Haggadah ceremony. She is given a sneak peak of the new display room for the Sarajevo Haggadah, and she finds it to be beautiful. While looking at the Haggadah, she notices something about the parchment and asks to see Karaman. She finds him, and Werner, in Karaman's office. She explains someone has stolen the Haggadah and replaced it with a fake. She believes her friend and colleague, Amitai Yomtov, also an ex-member of the Israel special forces, has stolen it and replaced it with a fake because the parchment is not the same kind used in the actual book – from a breed of extinct fifteenth-century sheep. No matter what she points out, Karaman and Werner are not convinced. They believe Amitai can be trusted, for he has been a trusted member of their scholarly community for three decades. They do not wish to make accusations in a time of healing and peace. Hanna leaves the room.

Lola: Jerusalem, 2002

Lola is now an old woman living in Jerusalem, having survived World War II and the Holocaust, but must still work to support herself at a museum. Lola reflects on being so alone after the war, and marrying Branko in desperation. This turned out to be a mistake, especially when Branko forbade her from going to Serif Kamal's defense when accused of Nazi collaboration by the Communists. Branko died in 1951 from gastric infection.

At work, in the present, while dusting books at the museum library, Lola is stunned to come across the Sarajevo Haggadah. She tells the museum director, the head librarian, and a military-like man about the book. The military-like man said the book's survival had been a series of miracles, so why could one more miracle not be possible.

Hanna: Arnhem Land, Gunumeleng, 2002

Since 1996, Hanna has taken over her mother's seat at her deceased father's foundation, which has deeply annoyed her mother. She also travels the world for the Sharansky Foundation, defending the environment against exploitation – especially in Australia, the landscape her father had fallen in love with. While out on assignment, Hanna is called by Keith Lowery of DFAT, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. A meeting is requested at the DFAT office in Sydney. Hanna consents to the meeting and there discovers Amitai with the Haggadah. She calls him a bloody liar and a thief. Amitai denies this, but Hanna calls for his arrest. Lowrey urges Hanna to be quiet and to



let Amitai explain. Amitai reveals the true thieves are Werner Heinrich and Ozren Karaman. Amitai reveals that during World War II, at the age of 14, Werner was conscripted into a detachment of Germans that looted art and other cultural treasures. He was responsible late in the war for burning Jewish documents, which prompted him to want to study and conserve them after the war.

In 1996, Amitai explains, Werner feared Muslim hatred of Jews and, therefore, feared for the survival of the Haggadah. He reproduced precisely based on Hanna's notes, Amitai explains, then switched the books and arranged to have the real Haggadah hidden at the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem. Currently, Amitai explains, Werner is losing his mind in hospice, while Karaman has been promoted to head the museum. The Israeli government wants to keep things quiet so as not to cause a stir. Amitai will smuggle the real Haggadah into Sarajevo, but it will be up to Hanna to replace it based on her past relationship with Karaman. Hanna reluctantly agrees.

In Sarajevo, Hanna meets up with Karaman again. She confronts him in his home about the Haggadah. Karaman explains he went along with Werner due to grief from his son's death and the idea that the Israelis should have such an important piece of their own history with them, rather than in Sarajevo. After hours, Hanna and Karaman sneak into the museum to replace the fake Haggadah with the real Haggadah. While replacing it, Hanna notices a small line of Arabic script along the hemline of the black servant's dress in the Passover illustration. It is the signature of Zahra. She and Karaman decide to follow her trail and learn more about her. Rather than destroy the fake, Hanna decides it should be given to Israel as a gift from Werner, as a facsimile of the original Haggadah. Hanna then relates that, one day, perhaps, a conservator will discover the Moreton Bay fig seed she has dropped into the binding of the real Haggadah before she returned it.

## Analysis

The idea that the Haggadah's survival is miraculous, and that the Haggadah is blessed by the Hand of God, is given even more evidence when Lola finds the Haggadah in an Israeli museum library. Once again, it has survived a decade of being missing, only to be found in a very safe and very secure place, hidden in plain sight. The history of the Haggadah has thus taken yet another dramatic turn. What appears to be is not actually true. At first, Hanna blames the theft of the Haggadah on Amitai, but later learns that Heinrich and Karaman are to blame.

The Haggadah discovered in the library in the Israeli museum is verified as the real and original Haggadah thanks to Hanna's decision to conserve, rather than to restore the Haggadah. Yet, at the same time, the thieves –Heinrich and Karaman –have done what they have done not to harm the Haggadah, but to protect it. What appears to be theft is not actually simple theft. Though they mean well, their act of theft is still a human evil, which is made right when Hanna and Karaman return the Haggadah to the museum in Sarajevo. The return is an act of human goodness, as was the intention to secure the Haggadah elsewhere.





Yet again, the idea that a book is not just a story or the sum of its contents, but is a story itself complete with its own history, is made relevant once more. The newest chapter of Haggadah history is supplemented by Hanna's own contribution to its history, by way of a Moreton Bay fig seed dropped into the binding. She hopes that someday, a future conservator will find the seed and try to determine the history behind it. Unlike Hanna herself, who tends toward simple explanations, Hanna hopes the future conservator will be able to guess at the unique recent history of the Haggadah. She also hopes that the mysteries of many of the clues of the Haggadah, including the stains, will fully come to light as technology improves in the coming decades.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you believe that Heinrich and Karaman should be arrested, or punished in some way for stealing the Haggadah, despite their good intentions? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Hanna's decision to conserve, rather than restore, the Haggadah beneficial to her in 1996 and 2002? Do you believe this justifies conservation, or does Hanna's own philosophy of conservation justification enough?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Hanna drop a seed in the Haggadah before she returns it? Does this support or oppose Hanna's own belief about answers, explanations, and truths to clues contained in the Haggadah? Why?

## Vocabulary

vitrine, multiethnic, intercommunal, solipsistic, existential, incriminating



# Characters

## Hanna

Hanna Heath is a 30-year old Australian historical conservator hired to conserve the Sarajevo Haggadah. Hanna is a philosophical conservationist, preferring to conserve the historical documents and books she encounters as a respect to the history not only of their contents, but their history as well. The Haggadah is no such exception. Despite her reverence for history, Hanna ironically believes that simplest explanations are usually true.

Hanna comes to have a sexual relationship with Karaman as she conserves the Haggadah, then travels the world to pursue answers to the clues she has uncovered in her work. Just before the Haggadah is to be displayed to the public, Hanna notices the real Haggadah has been replaced by a fake. She is told by Karaman and her mentor, Heinrich, that this is nonsense – but is proven to be correct six years later. When Hanna helps Karaman secretly return the real Haggadah to the museum, she drops a Moreton Bay fig seed into its binding to add to its history.

## Amitai Yomtov

Amitai Yomtov is an Israeli archeologist and conservator, who is ex-Israeli special forces and who has been longtime friends with Hanna. It is Amitai who first recommends that Hanna be the one to conserve the Sarajevo Haggadah. It is later Amitai who learns from Lola that the real Haggadah is being stored in an Israeli museum library. Amitai then works with Hanna to smuggle the Haggadah back into Sarajevo to ensure Hanna can replace it. Amitai's investigation yields Heinrich and Karaman as the culprits of the theft, but Amitai ensures no action is taken against them to prevent an international incident.

## Ozen Karaman

Ozen Karaman is the Muslim library director at the Sarajevo National Museum, and later head of the museum itself. Karaman is the individual who rescued the Haggadah during the Bosnian War of 1996, and kept it safe until peace could be reached. Karaman oversees Hanna's conservation of the Haggadah while still dealing with the tragic deaths of his wife and son in the war.

Karaman later works with Heinrich to steal the Haggadah to smuggle it into Israel in order to guarantee it will never be harmed again. However, when confronted with this by Hanna, Karaman helps her to restore the Haggadah to its proper place in the museum.



## Serif

Serif effendi Kamal, chief librarian of the National Museum, is the Muslim man who rescued the Haggadah from the National Museum before the Nazis could steal or destroy the book. Serif ensured the book was protected at his home until he brought it up into the mountains to be hidden among the books of a trusted Muslim friend. After the war, the Communists falsely accused Serif of consorting with the Nazis, threw him in jail for six years, and later released him. Serif went back to work at the museum until he died in the 1960s.

## Lola

Lola is a pretty Jewish girl and resident of the city of Sarajevo in the 1940s when it comes under Nazi occupation. Lola and her family are discriminated against, and Lola's entire family is rounded up and sent to their deaths. Lola comes to join a partisan group, then returns to Sarajevo when the group falls apart. There, she is given shelter by Serif and his family, and comes to learn of the Haggadah.

After the war, Lola enters into an unhappy and short marriage with a man named Branko who refuses Lola the ability to defend Serif in court against the Communists. Lola later comes to live in Jerusalem, where she discovers the Haggadah among museum library books in 2002. Lola is amazed at such a twist of fate, and alerts the proper authorities.

## Father Giovanni Domenico Vistorin

Giovanni Domenico Vistorini, is a devout Catholic priest and Censor of the Inquisition who has begun something resembling a friendship with a local rabbi named Judah Aryeh. Giovanni, who loves the written word and the intellectual tradition, does his best to ensure as many books as possible survive. Meanwhile, Giovanni struggles with his childhood. Though raised a Catholic, his parents were secret Jews who were arrested and murdered by Muslims. Giovanni is a man who struggles hard with his Jewish ancestry, and his firm and genuine commitment to Catholicism. His desire to be rid of the horrors that he had witnessed as a child is what compels him to drink, crush a wine glass in his hand, and cry over the Haggadah. His decision to save the Haggadah is ultimately a reflection of, a commitment to, and a sign of respect for both his Jewish ancestry and his Catholicism in the present.

## David Ben Shoushan

David Ben Shoushan is the creator of the Sarajevo Haggadah, having originally composed and constructed the book in 1492 in Spain as a gift for his nephew. With anti-Jewish sentiment rising and later, the expulsion of Jews ordered by the King and Queen of Spain, David decides the Haggadah should be made more ornate as a way to appeal



for monetary help from his wealthy brother, Joseph, to secure the release of David's converted son from the Inquisition. David is later killed by soldiers seeking out his daughter when she is not home, but David is.

## **Ruth/Ruti/Sparrow**

Ruth, also known as "Ruti" or "Sparrow" is the 15-year-old daughter of David Ben Shoushan. So nicknamed "Sparrow" for her meek and dainty nature, Ruth has secretly been carrying on a sexual affair with the local bookbinder for access to his Jewish texts so that Ruth herself may study them.

Ruth watches with sadness as the relationship between her father and brother breaks down when her brother converts to Christianity and marries a Christian girl. It is Ruth who gives her brother the Jewish strap and box that result in his being brought before the Inquisition, confessing their origin, and leading to David's death. Ruth later assists Reuben's wife in childbirth, then runs off with her son. When baptizing the baby in the ocean, Ruth –who has also carried the Haggadah to safety – unwittingly wets - and in so doing baptizes - the Haggadah.

## **Zahra bint Ibrahim al-Tarek**

Zahra bint Ibrahim al-Tarek is a black Muslim teenaged girl who becomes the unknowing illustrator of the Haggadah. Raised to pursue art under her physician father, Zahra was kidnapped and sold into slavery where she eventually came to be in the house of a Jewish doctor in Spain. There, she learned that the doctor's son, Benjamin, was mute and deaf. Seeing the beauty of the Jewish faith, Zahra decided to create a number of paintings for Benjamin so that he might better understand his religion. Zahra herself comes to admire Jewish stories of freedom related to Passover, and so paints herself into a scene of the family enjoying a Passover Seder. This becomes a statement of irony where in Jews celebrate their freedom while owning a slave, and wherein the illustration becomes a prayer to God from Zahra for her freedom. Zahra later does, indeed, manage to escape to freedom.

## **Werner Heinrich**

Werner Heinrich is one of the world's leading experts on historical conservation, and is Hanna's mentor. Werner is a kind, elderly man who survived World War II where he was forced into the German military where he was made to destroy cultural treasures, such as Jewish documents and records. This, in turn, prompted him to turn to saving such treasures throughout the rest of his life. Werner later comes to steal the Haggadah with Karaman in 1996, fearing anti-Jewish sentiments in and around Sarajevo. Werner helps ensure the Haggadah is taken to Israel, where he believes it truly belongs. Werner never faces punishment for the theft, however, as Israel seeks to avoid an international incident, and as Werner is losing his memory in hospice by the end of the novel.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Sarajevo Haggadah

The Sarajevo Haggadah symbolizes the best and worst of human nature as it is saved, shipped, moved, hidden, and nearly destroyed repeatedly throughout its history. It is an illuminated (illustrated) book of Jewish prayer and order regarding Passover Seder that is kept at the National Museum in Sarajevo.

Composed in 1492 by David Ben Shoushan, using illustrations from Zahra, the Haggadah was originally intended as a gift to David's nephew. When the Jews are expelled from Spain that same year, David's daughter, Ruth, carries the Haggadah to safety. It journeys across Europe over the next 500 years, ultimately coming to Sarajevo where Hanna Heath is called upon to conserve the book for future generations. Hanna realizes the Haggadah is important not just for its contents, but for the history the book itself has endured. Hanna spends the novel trying to get to the root of the clues she finds scattered throughout the Haggadah, such as blood stains and cat hair.

## Preservation tools

Preservation tools are used by Hannah to conserve historical documents, such as the Sarajevo Haggadah. These tools include cameras, scalpels, probes, wheat paste, linen threads, gold leaf, gelatin, and glassine envelopes in which to collect physical specimens contained in the documents, such as cat hair and butterfly wing fragments. Most of the materials she uses – such as gold leaf and paint – she makes herself to ensure the quality of the work she does in conservation.

## Viennese binding

A shoddy Viennese binding is placed on the Sarajevo Haggadah in Vienna, Austria, in 1894 by Mittl, and represents the thematic idea that what appears to be may not actually be so. When Hanna consults others for their assistance regarding the cover, Hanna is told the flimsy cover is either due to anti-Jewish sentiment or a slight to the Sarajevo museum for wanting the Haggadah back. In reality, the binding is so poor because the man who made it was suffering from a combination of age and terrible illness while it was being created.

## Butterfly wing fragment

A fragment of a butterfly wing is discovered by Hanna in the Sarajevo Haggadah, and represents freedom and frequent escapes of the Haggadah. Traditionally, wings represent freedom, flight, and escape. The butterfly wing – from a Parnassius Butterfly –



is tumbled into the book by a slight breeze when the Haggadah is taken by Serif into the mountains to be hidden to avoid destruction.

## Cat hair

A cat hair is discovered by Hanna in the Sarajevo Haggadah. Belonging to a white Persian cat, the hair was formerly part of a brush made by Zahra for use in her illustrations. The best brushes for Zahra were made from such cat hair, because the fur was soft and easily used in applying paints. The cat hair, in turn, helps to tell the story of Zahra, including her early life, slavery, and escape to freedom.

## Silver clasps

Silver clasps emblazoned with roses and wings are used to secure the Sarajevo Haggadah in 1492. The clasps, though beautiful, ultimately cease to work by the time the Haggadah comes to Vienna in 1894. There, Mittl steals the clasps to use as payment for medical treatment to Hirschfeldt. The clasps become a set of earrings given to Hirschfeldt's wife, and are later noted in a photograph of the Hirschfeldts by one of Hanna's associates.

## X-rays

X-rays of Alia, son of Karaman, are taken by Hanna to give to her mother, a brilliant but cold neurosurgeon, for her consultation. The X-rays bring Hanna in touch with her mother for the first time in a while, leading to an argument that results in the finding of Hanna's father's family. The X-rays are consulted, leading Hanna's mother to reveal that Alia has no chance of survival.

## Stains

Stains of wine, blood, and tears are discovered in the Sarajevo Haggadah, and represent the agony and trauma not only of the book's past in general, but Giovanni's past in particular. The three kinds of stain, found in conjunction with each other on the same pages, are from when Giovannia drunkenly smashed a wine glass in his hand while recalling the devastating experience of his childhood in which he watched Muslims take away and kill his Jewish parents.

## Book of Hours

A Book of Hours is an illuminated (illustrated) Christian prayer book that becomes Zahra's inspiration for the Haggadah's illustrations. The Book of Hours is given as a gift to Isabella by her physician, Netanel ha-Levi, in honor of Isabella's Christian roots, for she has been kidnapped by the Muslims and forced into Islam and a marriage with the

local emir. Zahra uses the inspiration of the illustrations to create illustrations for Netanel's mute-deaf son, Benjamin, so that Benjamin might learn of his Jewish faith.

## **Seder illustration**

A Passover Seder illustration featuring the Levi family and a self-portrait of Zahra becomes the most intriguing illumination of the Sarajevo Haggadah, and comes to represent not only irony but Zahra's desire and prayer to be free. The illustration features the Levi family celebrating the Seder while Zahra watches on, listening to stories of freedom. Here, there is irony in a Jewish-held slave watching her owners celebrate Jewish freedom. The illustration itself becomes a painted prayer to God by Zahra, indicating her desire to be free.



# Settings

## Sarajevo

Sarajevo is the capital of Bosnia, is the home of the National Museum and the Sarajevo Haggadah, and is where Hanna travels to conserve the Haggadah. Sarajevo is a city that has been largely wrecked by the recent Bosnian War when Hanna arrives. Many buildings are damaged while many others are destroyed. The National Museum has also suffered from bombardment, from which Karaman has saved the Haggadah from destruction. The Museum is repaired and an exhibit is prepared for public perusal of the Haggadah. Hanna later returns to Sarajevo before the opening of the exhibit to discover the Haggadah has been supplanted by a fake, and returns to Sarajevo in 2002 to replace the fake with the real Haggadah.

## Vienna

Vienna is the capital city of Austria, and is where in 1894 the Sarajevo Haggadah is rebound and its clasps stolen for use as medical payment. Vienna is a city at the crossroads of the Hapsburg Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and is the seat of power where many cultures and peoples come together as one. However, despite the sheer wealth, industry, and culture of the city, anti-Jewish sentiment is rapidly rising, and the Empire is beginning to fray (in 10 years, World War I will break out).

## Venice

Venice is a major city in Italy, and a stronghold of the Catholic Church where a branch of the Inquisition operates and the Sarajevo Haggadah is saved by Giovanni. Venice is a demonstration of some of the better times the Haggadah has seen, as the 1600s are a time of tense but generally amicable peace between Jews and Christians, represented by the almost-friendship between Giovanni and Aryeh. It is in Venice that the Haggadah comes before Giovanni, courtesy of Aryeh, and it is in Venice that Giovanni confronts his past in a drunken stupor while clearing the book, crushing a wine glass, and crying over it.

## Spain

Spain is a country in southwestern Europe, is the country where the Haggadah is first created in 1492, and has fallen to ruthless Muslim invasion. Christian subjects are routinely persecuted, enslaved, forcefully converted to Islam, and forced into marriages (such as in the case of Isabella). The Muslims also bring their own slaves to Spain, such as in the case of Zahra. In the 1490s, Christians and Jews rebel against the Muslim rulers, driving them out of Spain in a deadly war. Recently restored to power, the King and Queen of Spain then decide to expel all Jews in 1492 to make Spain a purely





Christian country. The Jews in turn come to suffer greatly at the hands of the government, and it is Ruth who leaves Spain carrying the Haggadah.

## Israel

Israel, the Promised Land, is the land given to the Jews by God to establish a homeland. For thousands of years, Israel has been conquered, liberated, and restored – over and over, ultimately culminating with the establishment of the present-day State of Israel in 1948. It is in Israel's museums that many Jewish treasures are protected and preserved. It is in one such museum in Israel that Lola discovers the real Sarajevo Haggadah, and it is in Israel that Amitov confirms this to be so. It is from Israel that the Haggadah is returned to its rightful place by Amitai, Hanna, and Karaman at the request of the Israeli government.



## Themes and Motifs

### **A book is the sum not only of its contents, but its own history as well**

A book is not just a story, but is a story itself complete with its own history, argues Geraldine Brooks in her novel *People of the Book*. To Brooks, arguing through Hanna, a historical book is the sum not only of its contents, but its own history as well. This is certainly the case of the Sarajevo Haggadah.

On its face, the Sarajevo Haggadah is a Jewish book of prayer and order relating to the Passover Seder. What is unique about the book, however, is that the contents of the book are illuminated with dazzling illustrations, done at a time when illustrations were frowned upon by Jewish leaders. The Haggadah also contains a number of tantalizing clues attesting to its history, including blood, wine, and tear stains, saltwater stains, cat hair, and a fragment of a butterfly wing, in addition to missing its original silver clasps.

Hanna explains to Karaman early on that she will be conserving, rather than restoring the Haggadah to its original form as a sign of respect for the book's own history. All of the things she has found embedded in the book – from the cat hair to the stains – are testaments of its storied history. Because of these clues, the Haggadah's existence can be traced to Spain in the 1490s, then to Venice, then to Vienna, then finally to Sarajevo. Likewise, the Haggadah here becomes not only a story of travels, but of the lives that it has touched, and been touched by in turn – from its creator, David Ben Shoushan to its saviors in Aryeh, Giovanni, Serif, and Karaman, to the present conservation effort by Hanna.

Because of this, the Haggadah is not merely the sum of its contents, but is itself a storied character that has seen the best and worst of history over the past 500 years. Likewise, the Haggadah itself can be seen to be touched by the Hand of God for the number of miraculous escapes it has had, as well as the good that it has done for many who have come in contact with it. For example, Hanna reconnects with her mother, and learns more about her past as a result of having worked on the Haggadah – something which would have either never happened, or happened much later than it did. This blessed nature in turn is made possible by the Haggadah essentially being baptized at the same time Ruth baptized her infant nephew in the ocean. The saltwater stains made by the immersion in water on the pages of the Haggadah may in turn be seen to be the fingerprints of God as a blessing on the book.



## **Conservation, not restoration, is how to properly preserve documents from the past**

Conservation, not restoration, is how to properly preserve documents from the past, argues Geraldine Brooks in her novel *People of the Book*. This argument is expressly made through Hanna, who explains to Karaman that she will be conserving the Haggadah as it is, making repairs where only absolutely necessary, rather than restoring it to its original form. This is done for a number of different reasons.

First, conservation is a nod of respect to the book's history. As argued previously by Brooks through Hanna, a book is not merely the sum of its contents, but the sum of its own existential history. The trials, travels, and tribulations through which the book has been through has made it what it is today – stained, worn, and a depository of a number of important clues attesting to its past, such as a butterfly wing fragment. Cleaning and restoring the book would be like removing a person's past history, and should not be done.

Second, conservation not only means respecting the past, but respecting those whose lives have touched, or have been touched by the Sarajevo Haggadah. From its creator, David Ben Shoushan, to his daughter's smuggling of the Haggadah out of Spain, to its protection in Italy by Giovannia and Aryeh, to its surfacing in 1894 in Sarajevo and Vienna (where part of it was used as payment for a desperate medical treatment), to its rescue in 1996 in which the international community ultimately came together to ensure the Haggadah's conservation, the storied history of the book is a story of the people associated with the book itself. These are thus the people of the book.

Third, in addition to a respect for history and the people whose lives have touched, and been touched by the Haggadah, conserving it also conserves the sacred blessing of God as well as the lessons of history in which good and evil are possible from men, that evil must always be avoided, and that good always wins. The Haggadah is a lesson of the dangers of extremism, from the past to the present, from Nazism to Communism to religious extremism of any kind, while it is also a tale of inspiration, of people of courage ranging from Ruth to Aryeh and Giovannia to Karaman, in their efforts to do good and avoid evil.

## **History has tremendous relevance in the present**

History has tremendous relevance in the present, argues Geraldine Brooks in her novel *People of the Book*. History – of the Haggadah, of a contextual nature, and of a personal history – affects the plot in immense ways. History also comes to affect the fate of the Haggadah itself in immense ways.

Contextually, it is the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 that causes the Haggadah to be carried out of Spain by Ruth – something which may have never happened had the expulsion not occurred, or been preceded by the Jewish-Christian



rebellion against Spain's Muslim invaders. Likewise, without improved relations between Jews and Christians during the Inquisition in the 1600s, the Haggadah may never have escaped burning or censorship. Without the Bosnian War, the conservation of the Haggadah may never have happened at all. Contextually, the survival of the Haggadah is not a justification for the bad things that occurred around it, but is an argument that something good managed to arise from something bad.

Personally, the people who have been associated with the Haggadah have also been instrumental in its fate. Created originally by David Ben Shoushen as a gift for believing-but-not-devout Jewish relatives, the Haggadah was never used for its intended purpose and instead smuggled out of Spain by his daughter. From there, it found its way into the hands of Aryeh, who passed it along to Giovanni. Giovanni's traumatic childhood experiences, in which his Jewish parents were abducted and murdered by Muslims, help to compel Giovanni to save something of them through their Jewish heritage by way of the Haggadah. Likewise, the Islamic faith and love of learning of Serif, and the treasuring of culture by Karaman, compels both Muslim men to save the Haggadah – the former from the Nazis, the latter from bombardment during the Bosnian War. In the present, Hanna's philosophical beliefs about conservation ensure the Haggadah will survive and retain its history.

The Haggadah itself – a Jewish book of prayer and order regarding the Passover Seder – is an illuminated (illustrated) book that recounts Jewish freedom and faith in God, among other things, drawing on history in its contents. The illustrations are, in turn, inspired by the illustrations in a Christian Book of Hours, and are done at a time when illustrations are frowned upon by Jewish leaders. The Haggadah comes to be a repository for numerous clues attesting to its varied history, ranging from cat hair to blood stains to saltwater marks.

## **What appears to be may not actually be**

What appears to be may not actually be, argues Geraldine Brooks in her novel *People of the Book*. Essentially, appearances can be deceiving – both in life, and with respect to the Haggadah. For Hanna, the simplest explanations are usually the truth – an ironic position given her desire to find the truth in conjunction with her reverence for history.

Many of the assumptions made about the Haggadah, and the clues found within it, turn out to be very wrong. The assumption that the Haggadah must have been in the Alps based on the Parnassius butterfly wing fragment is found to be incorrect, as the Haggadah was actually in the Dinaric Alps above Sarajevo. The white cat hair believed to have been dyed with yellow turns out to be a paintbrush hair used to paint the robe of Zahra in yellow in the Haggadah.

Many of the wine stains in the Haggadah are presumed to be from typical wear and accidents relating to the use of the Haggadah during Seders through five centuries, but this is incorrect. Many of the wine stains are traced to Giovanni, who crushed a wine glass in his hand while drunkenly recalling his traumatic childhood. The blood stains,



originally attributed to a careless father accidentally cutting himself while performing Seder, are actually traced to the crushing of the wine glass. The present of saltwater is attributed incorrectly to an ocean voyage, but is, in fact, a kind of baptism for the Haggadah as it became wet when Ruth baptized her nephew in the ocean.

In the present time, Hanna at first believes the Haggadah on display in the museum to be authentic, but upon closer inspection, discovers it is a brilliant facsimile. Her efforts to explain this to Heinrich and Karaman are met with skepticism and dismissal. Hanna, upon learning of the theft of the Haggadah six years later, first incorrectly blames Amitai. It turns out that Heinrich and Karaman are actually responsible for the theft, but not for personal gain as is first suspected. Rather, they have stolen the Haggadah to smuggle it to Israel to ensure it would be protected given rising Antisemitism on the part of Muslim Sarajevans.

## **Man is capable of both good and evil**

Man is capable of both good and evil, but good ultimately always prevails, argues Geraldine Brooks in her novel *People of the Book*. The Sarajevo Haggadah, through its long and storied history, has been witness to the best and worst of mankind. The survival of the Haggadah is a testament to the idea that in the end, one way or another, good always wins out.

When the Haggadah is created in Spain in 1492, it is originally intended as a gift for David Ben Shousan's nephew. This occurs in the same year that the Christian King and Queen of Spain, under the advice of Torquemada, have ordered the conversion or expulsion of all Jews from Spain. This is a blatant betrayal of the Jews, who only so recently helped the Christians throw out the Muslim invaders, with both Jew and Christians having suffered under the Muslims. The Haggadah, a work of beauty involving the illustrations of the Muslim slave Zahra who longs for freedom (with slavery itself being one of the worst parts of human history), is then smuggled out of Spain.

It resurfaces in Venice in 1609 as the Inquisition is weakening and relations are improving between Christians and Jews. The Inquisition, which has in many places been a terrifying thing, represents some of the worst of human history – but the fading of the Inquisition and the decision of the Jewish Aryeh and the Catholic Giovanni to save the Haggadah represent some of the best of human history. When the Haggadah resurfaces in 1894, in Vienna, anti-Jewish vitriol is again on the rise. Despite the anti-Jewish views of Mittl, the Jewish doctor, Hirschfeldt, still agrees to treat the man, representing some of the best of human history directly challenging the very worst of human history.

The Haggadah ultimately comes into the possession of the National Museum in Sarajevo. When Nazism comes to the area, the worst of human nature can be seen in the persecution and murder of the Jews. However, the efforts of the Muslim Serif to save not only Haggadah, but Lola, come to represent the very best of human history. In 1996, when Sarajevo comes under attack, the Muslim Karaman saves the Haggadah

once more, representing the very best in human nature. Even the decision to steal the Haggadah to ensure its survival in Israel is not a wholly evil act, for it is done with good intentions. The mistake is made right by the return of the Haggadah, making up for any bad that has been done.



# Styles

## Point of View

Geraldine Brooks tells her novel *People of the Book* in both the first and third-person narrative modes, each with limited omniscience given the context of their times. Taken together, the limited-omniscient perspectives of the narrators of their times give the reader, and the reader alone, a full and comprehensive view of the events of the novel surrounding the Haggadah. While the characters in their own times are not always fully aware of these events, the reader is. All of Hanna's sections are recounted in the first-person, while the majority of the historical sections are recounted by a third-person narrator. This helps to distinguish the present from the past in some circumstances, but also gives the reader keen insights into the thoughts, feelings, and actions of particular characters – such as Hanna, Zahra, and Lola – in very unique circumstances. This is especially true of characters absolutely crucial to the Haggadah, such as Zahra, who contributed the paintings included in the Haggadah.

## Language and Meaning

Geraldine Brooks tells her novel *People of the Book* in language that is simple and straightforward, even though the narrators, settings, and times may change. This is done for at least two reasons: first, much of the novel occurs in the contemporary era (the 1990s-early 2000s), and is begun by Hanna. As such, Hanna's narrative voice sets the tone for the course of the novel. As a young woman of the modern age in which causal, simple, and straightforward language are normal, so too is the language that Hanna uses. Second, the simple and straightforward language acts as a common, unifying thread that bridges and draws together the very diverse characters, times, and places of the novel. This helps the reader transition not only between characters, but between leaps through hundreds of years of time.

## Structure

Geraldine Brooks divides her novel *People of the Book* into unnumbered, titled chapters that leap back and forth through time. Each chapter primarily focuses around one or two characters in a set time and place in history. Most of the novel takes place in 1996 as Hanna seeks to uncover the secrets and the past of the Haggadah. Beginning with a chapter recounted by Hannah in 1996, the chapters alternate between Hannah's research in the present and the events of the past regarding the Haggadah. Each one of Hannah's chapters involves her coming to regard or study a specific clue from the Haggadah, while the succeeding chapter brings the reader back in time to learn where and how that clue came to be. Only at the end of the novel does the pattern break with the final three chapters, moving from Hannah in 1996 to Lola in 2002, and then Hanna in 2002 to reveal the newest chapter of history relating to the Haggadah.



## Quotes

I might as well, say, right from the jump: it wasn't my usual kind of job.  
-- Hanna (Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996, I)

**Importance:** When the novel begins, Hanna immediately explains to the reader that the job she has accepted – to conserve and analyze the Sarajevo Haggadah, is not her usual job. This is not merely because the job itself is so different – in a different place and under different circumstances (such as armed guards being present). It is also because, in a measure of foreshadowing, the job Hanna undertakes will not merely be about preservation, but understanding the people and the times which the Sarajevo Haggadah has seen.

By linking research and imagination, sometimes I can think myself into the heads of the people who made the book. I can figure out who they were, or how they worked. That's how I add my few grains to the sandbox of human knowledge. It's what I love best about what I do.

-- Hanna (Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996, I)

**Importance:** As Hanna prepares to examine the Sarajevo Haggadah, she thinks about her own work. She does not only try to analyze and preserve the books and documents she is given, but tries to understand the people who wrote them, and how those people worked. It gives her a fuller understanding of the document or book she is handling – but as Hanna explains later, is only a part of the book's history.

To restore a book to the way it was when it was made is to lack respect for its history. I think you have to accept a book as you receive it from past generations, and to a certain extent damage and wear reflect that history. The way I see it, my job is to make it stable enough to allow safe handling and study, repairing only where absolutely necessary.

-- Hannah (Hanna: Sarajevo, Spring 1996, II)

**Importance:** Hanna meets Dr. Ozren Karaman, the man who saved the Sarajevo Haggadah from being destroyed. He inquires about her process, wherein she explains that she will not be doing a restoration. Instead, she will be conserving the book as it currently exists to preserve the history the book has undergone from creation to its place before her in the present. She will repair only what is absolutely necessary, ensuring that anything else the book has experienced will be protected, because that in turn is a question of respect regarding the book's survival and experiences.

As a child entered carrying a tray of tea, one small piece of butterfly wing rose on the slight breeze from the open door and fluttered to rest, unnoticed, on the haggadah's open page.

-- Narrator (An Insect's Wing: Sarajevo, 1940)

**Importance:** The truth behind how the butterfly wing fragment came to be in the Haggadah is revealed here. Having escaped capture by the Germans, the Haggadah is





taken by Serif and Lola to a friendly family in the mountains. There, the Haggadah is examined, during which time a light breeze settles a butterfly wing fragment into the book. The book is then tucked away among volumes of Islamic law so that it will be kept safe.

That's blood.

-- Razmus Kanaha (Hanna: Vienna, Spring 1996)

**Importance:** When Hanna leaves Vienna, she travels to Boston to meet Razmus Kanaha, chief conservation scientist at Fogg Museum and the Straus Center for Conservation, who is also an old friend. Raz carefully examines stains found in the Sarjevo Haggadah, and concludes that not all the stains are wine. One of them is blood. This is especially telling of the importance of the history of the Haggadah,

Censura praevia or censura repressive, the effect is the same. Either way, a book is destroyed.

-- Rabbi Judah Aryeh (Wine Stains: Venice, 1609)

**Importance:** While out walking and speaking with Rabbi Judah Aryeh, Father Giovannia Domenico Vistorini brings up a new book that criticizes Catholic belief in Jesus Christ. Aryeh explains the author does not mean to provoke. Giovanni, who is happy to see improved relations between Jews and Catholics in the past few years, worries such books may upset things. Writing is important, Aryeh explains, and whether a book is banned from being written, or burned after being written, the effect is the same. A book, and all it has to say, is still destroyed.

Well from what you've told me, the book has survived the same human disaster over and over again... same old, same old. It seems to me the book, at this point, bears witness to all that.

-- Razmus Kanaha (Hannah: Boston, Spring 1996)

**Importance:** As Hanna and Raz contemplate the blood, wine, and tear stains in the Haggadah, they wonder about the book's history. Raz explains the book has managed to survive hundreds of years of human disasters. By this, he means that a society like Spain will be tolerant, inclusive, and thriving, only to have fear, hatred, or a need to demonize or destroy everything – except the book. The book is a testament to history and survival.

Because he had not known what else to do, David Ben Shoushan had returned to his scriptionale and gone right back to work on the Shefoch Hamatcha, near the conclusion of the haggadah.

-- Narrator (Saltwater: Tarragona, 1492)

**Importance:** When Spain enacts laws requiring Jews to either leave or convert, the creator of the Haggadah, David Ben Shoushan, is beside himself. His son is being held at the Inquisition for heresy; his family has departed for safer places; and he feels powerless to do anything to make things better. He returns to work on the Haggadah,



originally intended as a gift for his nephew, but now seemingly useless. Instead, the Haggadah becomes a testament of survival, of the very worst and very best of human nature, and which in turn paves the way for the course of the novel.

But as I considered Benjamin, in his silence, shut out of understanding the beautiful and moving ceremonies of his faith, I remembered Isabella's prayer book, and the figures in it, and how she said it helped her to pray. The idea came to me that such drawings would be of like help to Benjamin.

-- Zahra (A White Hair: Seville, 1480)

**Importance:** Given as a gift to a Jewish doctor for her safety as the Muslim hold on Spain collapses, Zahra learns her new owner's son is deaf and mute. She decides to render illustrations depicting the Jewish faith so that Benjamin might learn and understand. These illustrations are ultimately sold by Benjamin to David during a time when Zahra abandons him for freedom. The illustrations are then included in the book.

I have set my head at an attentive angle, and imagine myself listening as the doctor tells of Musa, who defied the king of Mizraim, and used his enchanted staff to win his people's freedom from their bondage.

-- Zahra (A White Hair: Seville, 1480)

**Importance:** Among the illustrations that Zahra paints is one of her new owner celebrating Passover with his family. Zahra includes herself as listening to an account of gaining freedom. In so doing, she communicates her own desire symbolically by illustration to be free.

Well, why not, kinderlach? The entire story of this book, its survival until today, has been a series of miracles. So why not just one more?

-- Amitai (Lola: Jerusalem, 2002)

**Importance:** Upon discovering the Haggadah tucked away on a bookshelf in the Yad Vashem Museum, Lola tells her superiors about this. One of her superiors is Amitai. He recognizes the importance of what has happened. He rightly believes it to be a miracle, only the latest in a long line of miracles related to the Haggadah where the book has once again been saved.

A Moreton Bay fig seed, from the fruit of the big twisty trees that line the shore of Sydney Harbour. I had done it on a whim, my last day in Sydney. My mark. A clue, for someone like me in the far future, who would find it, and wonder...

-- Hanna (Hannah: Arnhem Land, Gunumeleng, 2002 paragraph 368)

**Importance:** Here, Hanna relates to the reader the most recent chapter of the Haggadah's history. It is one she has commemorated and written by dropping a seed into the binding of the Haggadah. It attests to her involvement with the Haggadah, and adds a final piece of evidence to the idea that a book is not just the sum of its contents, but its history as well.