

MINUTES  
of the Meeting of  
the Novel Club of Cleveland  
Tuesday, May 10, 2011

Location: Home of Nicholas and Anne Ogan, 115 West Juniper Lane, Moreland Hills

Hosts: Nicholas and Anne Ogan

Novel: *People of the Book*, by Geraldine Brooks

Papers: Biographical, Caroline Morgan; Critical, Bob Brody

**Opening:** After sumptuous and convivial opening refreshments, the meeting was called to order by Vice President Leon Gabinet. No committee reports were presented. Minutes of the April meeting were presented without objection.

**Caroline Morgan presented the biographical paper:**

Geraldine Brooks grew up in suburban Sydney, Australia, daughter of a journalist and a proofreader. She had delicate health as a child and so was home-schooled, but later gained enough strength to attend Bethlehem College and the University of Sydney. She became a journalist, even spending some time in Cleveland, Ohio. She took a Master's degree in journalism at Columbia University in 1983; the following year (in France) she married American journalist Tony Horwitz, and converted to Judaism. As a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal* she went to Palestine to cover political events. She and her husband did award-winning journalism there and also in Africa and the Balkans. She took a leave from journalism to write *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994), based on her experiences among Muslim women. That first book was an international bestseller and was translated into 17 languages. Brooks spent some time in jail as part of her reporting experience. She left journalism as a result of this jail time, deciding it was time to start a family. She now has two sons and two dogs, and no longer has migraine headaches.

Brooks' first novel, *Year of Wonders*, about a young woman's battle against the bubonic plague in a Derbyshire village in 1666, was published 2001 and also became an international bestseller. She then began work on *People of the Book*, starting from experiences she had in Bosnia while working on United Nations affairs. This project stalled because of difficulties with the narrator. Her second completed novel, *March*, was inspired by her memories of her childhood reading of *Little Women*. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2006 (having been delayed in its publication by her battle against breast cancer). At that point, Brooks went back to *People of the Book*, solving her problem by switching from a Bosnian to an Australian narrator. Her research on the path of the Sarajevo Haggadah over its history including times of war formed the basis of the novel; she used a Harvard fellowship year to learn more about the

Haggadah and about various conservators' adventures in the course of their work.

Reviews of *People of the Book* have not been uniformly enthusiastic—critics have said it “resides comfortably between serious and popular literature” and that it is “overburdened by research.”

Brooks and her family now divide their time between homes in Martha's Vineyard and in Sydney, Australia. She is working on another historical novel, probably with some religious/philosophical content.

**Bob Brody presented the critical paper and discussion questions:**

This is a fictionalized story of a real book. The Sarajevo Haggadah dates back to at least 1535, maybe further. It is now on display in Bosnia. It is so unusual because most Haggadahs are not illustrated, but this one is. It contains 34 beautiful plates illustrating the Passover story. Its value is estimated at approximately \$7million. In the novel, Hanna Heath, an Australian book conservator, is hired by a United Nations agency to do conservation work on the Haggadah. The novel's chapters alternate between contemporary and historical episodes, telling the history of the book and of Hanna's investigations of its history intertwined with her own personal adventures and relationships (with her mother, her lover, and the book) in the 1990s.

But the real concern of the book is why people in different groups so often can't live together—in contrast to the Spanish "convivencia," a period of relatively peaceful co-existence among the Catholics and the Jews and Muslims in a multi-religious Spanish society between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, up to 1492. Some of the novel's chapters blame the Catholic church; others talk about territorial conflicts and other problems. Several characters in the book stand out as crossing ethnic divides—and many of them are based on real historical characters.

The central character in the modern level of the book is Hanna Heath, an emotionally unavailable book conservator raised by an unloving mother.

A reader can't help but notice parallels between this novel and *The DaVinci Code*, which however is comparatively slick and superficial. *People of the Book* is also comparable to Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in that both depict horrors of the Inquisition, focus on particular books which survived in spite of efforts to destroy them, and deal with important moral issues. This novel also has elements in common with Michener's *The Source*.

*People of the Book*, as noted in the above biographical commentary, has received mixed reviews. Critics have noted that the characters' relationships are sometimes melodramatic; and perhaps the book is choked with historical detail in spots. On the other hand, the book is also given credit for handling

“the work of literature” in handsome prose. Perhaps Hanna’s personal life seems “contrived.” The historical speculations may sometimes be too “busy.” Generally however, on balance reviews have been positive. Bob’s paper concludes that the historical chapters are the most well-written and engaging segments of the novel.

**In discussion**, we considered, initially, which of the historical characters in this book is most sympathetic and why? Nominees included:

--Vistorini —the priest who signed the book—because he had elements of own past to wrestle with, and because he took a large chance in passing it, since there are parts of the Haggadah which could have made it objectionable and therefore caused him trouble;

--Lola, the Jewish girl who goes through so much and then is told to go home to Sarajevo—because she was such a strong person and later is able to reciprocate by saving the child of the man who saved her;

--Dr. Hertzfeld, who took the clips and made them into earrings, and treated Mittle for cancer; and

--Nura, the painter who is given to the Jewish doctor along with the brother of the princess.

Also mentioned in terms of sympathetic quality were some of the fictional characters—Hannah, called “striking” though not especially sympathetic; the museum curator; and Werner Heinrich, who created the fake and stole the genuine Haggadah.

On the question of **whether the historical chapters ring true**, consensus was that they do, and are for many readers more engaging than the modern segments. Several readers, however, felt that this book is less well-focused than some of Brooks’s other works, perhaps because she tries to include too many different historical matters here.

On the question of **whether Hanna developed as a person** as a result of her experiences while restoring the Haggadah, those who spoke suggested that Hanna’s character is consistent through the book with a strong professional/ethical standpoint on conservation rather than restoration, but a continually troubled personal life. She was called a “worthy heroine,” who shows courage and confronts conflicts, even if she doesn’t change.

Over all, club members felt that this novel has a “popular fiction feel” with its fast pacing and crowded content, but also has depth which might move it into the “literature” category with time—though it’s too early to tell yet. Some suggested that it has characteristics of an “airplane book” or a political tract on interfaith relationships and the blending of ethnic groups over time. The group expressed appreciation for the historical elements of the book, including the

sense of how an artifact changes over time, but also some concern over less-than-satisfactory joining of the contemporary and historical sections into a unified work.

The formal meeting adjourned for closing refreshments and visiting at approximately 10 p.m.