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Threads of Abraham: Interfaith memory and sacred survival in Geraldine Brooks' People of the Book

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ABSTRACT

Geraldine Brooks's People of the Book is often introduced as a historical novel about the Sarajevo Haggadah, yet its deeper achievement lies in the way it turns a Jewish ritual manuscript into an Abrahamic archive of shared custody, injury, and repair. This article proposes the concept of interfaith memory to describe how Brooks's fiction connects Judaism, Christianity, and Islam not by smoothing their differences into a sentimental theology of harmony, but by staging the material survival of a sacred object across scenes of exile, censorship, war, artistic borrowing, and bodily risk. The Sarajevo Haggadah, a Passover book associated with Jewish telling and transmission, becomes in the novel a witness to Christian persecution, Muslim protection, secular conservation, and the unstable intimacy of cultures that have often lived together without living peacefully. Reading the novel through cultural memory studies, book history, material religion, trauma theory, and historiographic metafiction, the article argues that Brooks reimagines sacred survival as an ethical practice rather than a miraculous fact. Hanna Heath's forensic conservation, the reverse chronology of the manuscript's imagined past, and the repeated intervention of marginal figures—women, converts, artisans, librarians, servants, and endangered strangers—together form a narrative in which religious interconnection is carried by hands before it is declared by doctrines. At the same time, the article evaluates the limits of Brooks's rescue plot, especially its tendency to make coexistence legible through exceptional acts of goodness. The novel's value, I argue, is strongest when it refuses grand reconciliation and lets the damaged book remain damaged: a fragile, stubborn, humanly handled reminder that Abrahamic kinship is never pure inheritance but an unfinished labor of preservation.

KEYWORDS: Geraldine Brooks; People of the Book; Sarajevo Haggadah; Abrahamic religions; interfaith memory; material religion; historical fiction; sacred survival; Jewish memory; Bosnia

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Introduction: Repairing a Book, Reading a World

The most compelling object in Geraldine Brooks's People of the Book is not simply a book. It is touched, hidden, stained, translated, trimmed, carried under clothing, locked in safes, and restored with instruments that ask the past to speak without destroying it. The Sarajevo Haggadah enters the novel as a Jewish ritual manuscript, but Brooks quickly makes it a scene of contact among the three Abrahamic traditions. A Muslim librarian shields it from fascist seizure; a Catholic priest prevents its burning; Jewish families carry its ritual memory through exile; and a secular conservator, Hanna Heath, reads its damaged body as if every speck of matter were a witness. The result is not an interfaith parable in any simple sense. The novel does not say that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are the same, or that shared ancestry cures violence. Instead, it imagines sacred survival as an ongoing, risky, and often imperfect practice of keeping another community's memory alive.

This article argues that People of the Book should be read as a fiction of interfaith memory: a narrative in which the memory of one religious community survives through the care, hostility, appropriation, fear, and courage of others. The phrase "interfaith memory" is meant to shift attention away from abstract tolerance and toward embodied preservation. Brooks's Haggadah does not survive because religious communities agree with one another. It survives because particular people, under pressure, decide that the destruction of another's sacred object would also damage the moral world they inhabit. That decision is never pure. It is entangled in politics, desire, censorship, shame, and chance. Yet its recurrence across the novel gives Brooks's fiction an ethical pattern: the book's life depends on the human capacity to recognize value outside the borders of the self. The title People of the Book already carries this double movement. In Islamic usage, the expression recalls Qur'anic discourse about communities of scripture; in Brooks's novel it also names the many hands that make, use, endanger, and preserve one particular book (Peters 1982; Firestone 2001; Levenson 2012). The title therefore works literally and theologically, but also materially. These are people formed by books, people who misunderstand books, people who wound books, and people who risk themselves for books. By placing the Sarajevo Haggadah at the crossing point of Jewish ritual, Christian power, Muslim custodianship, and modern scientific restoration, Brooks converts a religious manuscript into a portable archive of Abrahamic interdependence.

My reading builds on Ksenija Kondali's account of history and identity in the novel, especially her attention to postmodern historical reconstruction and ethno-spatial representation (Kondali 2008). I extend that line of criticism by concentrating on three features of Brooks's narrative: first, the Haggadah as a material object whose physical traces shape the novel's form; second, the Abrahamic structure through which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim histories become mutually implicated; and third, the ethics and limits of rescue as a literary pattern. The point is not to praise Brooks for representing interreligious harmony. It is to ask how her novel thinks about religious connection after catastrophe, when the ordinary languages of coexistence have been discredited by persecution, war, and cultural destruction.

The historical Sarajevo Haggadah makes such questions unavoidable. The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina describes it as a parchment codex of 142 leaves, with sixty-nine illuminated miniatures in its opening section, probably produced in medieval Aragon, most likely Barcelona, around 1350; the museum also records its sale to the National Museum in 1894 and the wartime efforts that kept it from Nazi seizure (National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina n.d.). UNESCO similarly presents the manuscript as a witness to history whose preservation has become a sign of cultural diversity and interreligious responsibility (UNESCO 2020). Brooks does not merely retell these facts. She fictionalizes the unknown intervals between them and turns uncertainty into narrative method. Where history leaves gaps, the novel invents; where evidence appears as residue, the novel gives it a life.

This movement from evidence to life is what makes People of the Book a valuable literary case. The novel is not a museum label enlarged into fiction. It is a meditation on how fragile artifacts outlast people, and how people, for reasons they may not fully understand, accept responsibility for fragile artifacts. In that respect, the Haggadah's sacred survival is inseparable from the novel's humanized texture. Brooks's strongest scenes are not proclamations of tolerance but practical moments: a body concealing a codex, a woman agreeing to hide a stranger, a conservator deciding how little she can touch without betraying the object in her care. Such moments bring the grand vocabulary of Abrahamic religion down to a scale of fingers, stains, cloth, fear, and breath.

Critical Framework: Interfaith Memory and the Ethics of Preservation

A critical approach adequate to the novel must combine several fields that are too often kept apart. Cultural memory studies helps explain why the Haggadah functions as more than a document. For Maurice Halbwachs, memory is socially framed; for Pierre Nora, modern memory often crystallizes around sites and objects; for Jan and Aleida Assmann, Astrid Erll, and Alison Landsberg, cultural memory depends on media, institutions, circulation, and the sometimes prosthetic relation between personal experience and inherited remembrance (Halbwachs 1992; Nora 1989; Assmann 2011; Assmann 2011; Erll 2011; Landsberg 2004). Brooks's Haggadah is precisely such a memory medium. It gathers ritual repetition, artistic form, institutional custody, and traumatic interruption. Yet it also exceeds any one community's frame because the manuscript's survival repeatedly depends on those who do not belong to the ritual community that produced and used it.

Paul Ricoeur's work on memory, history, and forgetting is especially useful here because Brooks's novel stages both the desire to remember and the danger of claiming too much knowledge (Ricoeur 2004). Hanna's conservation work treats memory as partial, mediated, and ethically constrained. She can test a stain, identify salt, examine hair, and reconstruct a binding, but she cannot fully recover the lives behind these traces. The novel's reverse chronology dramatizes this limit. Each historical episode gives readers a fuller story than Hanna can possess, but the overall structure also reminds us that every act of recovery is selective. Sacred survival is thus not the restoration of an untouched origin; it is the movement of a damaged object through damaged histories.

Book history and material culture sharpen this point. Robert Darnton's classic question, "What is the history of books?", leads away from isolated texts toward circuits of production, circulation, reading, and preservation (Darnton 1982). Roger Chartier, D. F. McKenzie, and Jerome McGann similarly insist that meaning is shaped by the physical and social forms through which texts are transmitted (Chartier 1995; McKenzie 1999; McGann 1991). Brooks makes that bibliographic insight narrative. The Haggadah's parchment, binding, clasps, pigments, marginal notes, and damage become plot devices. Its meaning lies not only in what it says about Passover but in what has happened to it as a thing among people.

This is where thing theory and the anthropology of objects become valuable. Bill Brown argues that objects become "things" when they interrupt habitual use and force attention to their material presence (Brown 2001). Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff show that objects have social lives and cultural biographies, moving through regimes of value that change over time (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). The Sarajevo Haggadah in People of the Book has precisely such a biography. It is a ritual script, artwork, commodity, threat, heirloom, national treasure, forensic puzzle, and ethical demand. Each identity is real, but none is complete. The novel's art lies in making these identities rub against one another.

Material religion adds another dimension. Scholars such as David Morgan, Birgit Meyer, Robert Orsi, and S. Brent Plate have shown that religion is not only belief or doctrine; it is mediated through images, bodies, objects, gestures, sensory habits, and spaces (Morgan 2012; Meyer 2012; Orsi 2005; Plate 2002). A Haggadah is therefore not merely a text to be decoded. It is a ritual object handled at a table, stained by wine, and folded into family memory. Brooks's emphasis on physical traces honors that materiality. The manuscript survives as sacred not because it is kept untouched, but because it has been used, loved, endangered, and handled.

The novel also belongs to the tradition of historical fiction and historiographic metafiction. Georg Lukács understood the historical novel as a form that brings large social forces into the lives of ordinary people; later critics have examined how historical fiction turns archival gaps, genre conventions, and narrative desire into formal problems (Lukács 1983; Waugh 1984; McHale 1987; Hutcheon 1988; Hutcheon 1989; De Groot 2010). Hayden White highlighted the narrative shaping involved in historical discourse itself, while Fredric Jameson's work reminds us that narrative forms are socially symbolic and historically pressured (White 1973; White 1987; Jameson 1981; Jameson 1991). Brooks's novel is not postmodern in an aggressively experimental way, but it is deeply conscious of the problem of historical reconstruction. It asks how fiction may responsibly imagine what archives cannot fully confirm.

Trauma theory complicates the ethics of this imagination. Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra, Geoffrey Hartman, Primo Levi, Giorgio Agamben, and Saul Friedländer have each, in different ways, warned that traumatic history resists easy narrative consumption (Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992; LaCapra 2001; Hartman 1996; Levi 1988; Agamben 1999; Friedländer 1992). People of the Book

risks turning catastrophe into a sequence of emotionally satisfying episodes. Yet the novel also resists closure by grounding memory in remnants: a hair, a wing fragment, a stain, a missing clasp. Such details refuse the smoothness of total explanation. They make history tactile but incomplete.

Finally, the Abrahamic frame must be approached critically. Works by F. E. Peters, Karen Armstrong, Reuven Firestone, Jon Levenson, Daniel Boyarin, Mark Cohen, and Maria Rosa Menocal have shaped modern understandings of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relation, but they also reveal the danger of reducing historical complexity to a pleasant story of shared origins (Peters 1982; Peters 2003; Armstrong 1993; Firestone 2001; Levenson 2012; Boyarin 2004; Cohen 1994; Menocal 2002). Brooks's novel is most persuasive when it avoids a simple celebration of Abrahamic unity. Its interconnection is not a family reunion. It is a record of proximity: sometimes generous, sometimes coercive, often intimate, and frequently violent.

Historical Object, Fictional Archive: The Sarajevo Haggadah

The Sarajevo Haggadah's historical aura matters because Brooks writes into the space between documentation and imaginative repair. The manuscript's known history already seems novelistic: medieval Iberian production, post-expulsion movement, Italian traces, Sarajevan purchase, wartime concealment, and later public display. The National Museum's account emphasizes both its aesthetic significance and its value as evidence of Jewish figural representation in medieval manuscript culture (National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina n.d.). Studies of Hebrew manuscript painting and medieval Haggadot confirm the importance of such objects for understanding Jewish visual culture, especially in relation to Christian and Islamic artistic environments (Vishnitzer 1922; Gutmann 1978; Epstein 2011; Shalev-Eyni 2010; Verber 1983).

Brooks begins from the fact that the Haggadah is both Jewish and intercultural. Its illuminations invite questions about artistic exchange in medieval Iberia, where Jewish artisans and patrons lived within worlds shaped by Christian rule, Islamic memory, and Mediterranean circulation. Scholars of medieval Spain have long debated convivencia, a term that can illuminate contact but can also sentimentalize it (Mann, Glick, and Dodds 1992; Dodds, Menocal, and Balbale 2008; Ray 2006). Brooks's fiction participates in this debate. Her imagined origins for the manuscript do not present Spain as a paradise of harmony. Instead, they suggest that beauty can be born in an atmosphere of danger, borrowing, hierarchy, and unequal dependence.

This is crucial to the novel's interfaith logic. The Haggadah is not a neutral object floating above religious difference. It is a Jewish book whose survival is repeatedly shaped by Christian and Muslim institutions. In medieval and early modern Christian Europe, Jewish life was often organized by vulnerability: protection and persecution could come from the same political order, and Renaissance Italy offered both cultural exchange and ghettoizing constraint (Baer 1961–66; Stow 1992; Kamen 1997; Bonfil 1994; Roth 1930). In Islamic and Ottoman contexts, Jewish communities could experience forms of relative security that still remained structured by hierarchy and minority status (Cohen 1994; Goitein 1967–93). Brooks's novel compresses these long histories into episodes that are dramatic, sometimes melodramatic, but thematically coherent: the book exists inside systems of power that can either shelter or destroy it.

The Haggadah also has a Bosnian life. Histories of Sarajevo stress the city's layered religious landscape, its Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Yugoslav, and postwar transformations, and the fragility of multi-communal life under nationalist pressure (Donia 2006; Malcolm 1994; Donia and Fine 1994; Fine 2006; Pinson 1994). During the Second World War, Sarajevo's Jews, Muslims, Christians, and others lived under the violent distortions of occupation and fascist racial policy (Greble 2011). Later, the Bosnian war and the siege of Sarajevo turned cultural institutions into targets, not incidental casualties (Sells 1996; Riedlmayer 2001; Maček 2009). Brooks's use of Sarajevo is therefore not decorative. The city is the twentieth-century testing ground for the novel's central question: can shared civic memory survive when the shared city is being unmade?

The real story of Derviš Korkut gives Brooks a powerful ethical foundation. In her New Yorker essay, Brooks recounts the wartime rescue of the Haggadah and the rescue of Mira Papo, a young Jewish woman hidden by Korkut and his wife Servet; the essay also follows the later chain of testimony and restitution that connected Jewish and Muslim families across war and exile (Brooks 2007). Other accounts of the Haggadah's preservation likewise place the manuscript within a broader history of threatened books and cultural survival (Gienger 2002; Rose 2001). The novel fictionalizes this history through characters and scenes, but the moral pattern remains: saving a book and saving a person are linked. The manuscript is never only an artifact; it is

part of a broader economy of human rescue, delayed witness, and intergenerational gratitude.

Yet a literary reading must not allow the romance of rescue to erase the violence that made rescue necessary. The Haggadah survives because others do not. This is the ethical shadow cast by every preservation narrative. James Young's work on memorial texture and Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory help clarify the problem (Young 1993; Rothberg 2009). A rescued object can create solidarity across histories, but it can also become a comforting substitute for confronting loss. Brooks's best strategy is to let the book's material scars remain visible. The stains and fragments do not heal the dead. They keep the reader in contact with the cost of survival.

The Title's Double Address: "People of the Book"

The expression "people of the book" performs several tasks at once. It recalls a theological vocabulary in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims are linked by scripture, revelation, and the figure of Abraham. It also pluralizes ownership. The Haggadah belongs liturgically to Jewish Passover practice, but the novel's title refuses to reduce its story to one community's possession. The people of this book include makers, readers, censors, thieves, scholars, soldiers, servants, refugees, and conservators. Some love it, some misunderstand it, some wish to control it, and some risk their lives to protect it.

This pluralization can be ethically productive, but it is also dangerous. To say that many communities are connected to a Jewish book must not mean that Jewish specificity disappears. Brooks avoids this erasure by repeatedly returning to Passover, exile, and the command to tell. The Haggadah's core ritual function is Jewish memory: the annual narration of liberation from Egypt, the passing on of story in the household, the transformation of historical suffering into communal identity (Yerushalmi 1982; Epstein 2011). The novel's Abrahamic interconnection begins from that specificity. Other communities become involved not because the book is generically spiritual, but because a particular Jewish object enters their moral field.

The novel is therefore not simply about "three faiths" in the abstract. It is about what happens when the sacred object of one faith becomes the responsibility, temptation, or target of another. A Catholic priest's act of preservation matters because Christian authority has also endangered Jewish books. Muslim protection matters because it occurs within European histories that often ignore Muslim moral agency or reduce it to exotic background. Jewish endurance matters because the book's ritual life persists despite the repeated displacements of Jewish communities. The Abrahamic thread is not a shared doctrine but a shared burden.

Here Brooks's fiction benefits from a dialogic form. Bakhtin's account of the novel as a space of multiple voices is useful because People of the Book refuses a single historical idiom (Bakhtin 1981). Its chapters move among forensic modernity, wartime Sarajevo, fin-de-siècle Vienna, Venice, Barcelona, and Seville. Each setting brings a different language of value: scientific evidence, family memory, anti-Semitic suspicion, ecclesiastical judgment, artistic labor, and exile. The Haggadah is the connective thread, but it does not speak in one voice. It becomes meaningful through a chorus of incomplete, competing acts of interpretation.

The title's power also lies in its modesty. "People of the Book" does not say "heroes of the book." Brooks is interested in heroism, but she is also interested in ordinary weakness: fear, pride, desire, ambition, professional vanity, family injury, and hesitation. Hanna is brilliant but not saintly; rescuers are brave but not abstract icons; religious communities preserve beauty and produce cruelty. This humanization is essential. Interfaith memory becomes credible only when it passes through imperfect people. A novel that made everyone noble would betray the very history it seeks to honor.

Conservation as Secular Devotion

Hanna Heath's conservation work is sometimes treated by readers as the modern frame that simply allows the historical episodes to unfold. Yet Hanna's role is more important than that. She represents a secular mode of reverence. She does not approach the Haggadah as a believer using it at a Passover table, but she does not treat it as dead matter either. Her discipline requires touch without possession, interpretation without fantasy, and intervention without domination. In this sense, conservation becomes the novel's ethical model.

The conservator's first obligation is restraint. She must preserve the manuscript's integrity even when the object tempts her toward knowledge. This discipline has clear implications for literary criticism. The reader, like Hanna, wants the past to disclose itself. Brooks satisfies that desire by giving us historical scenes Hanna cannot

fully know, but she also builds the novel around the smallness of the evidence. A fragment of insect wing, a hair, salt crystals, a wine stain, and damaged clasps become thresholds between matter and memory. The book yields stories, but never in a way that erases its silence.

Derrida's Archive Fever helps describe this tension. Archives promise recovery, but they are also structured by absence, authority, and desire (Derrida 1996). The Haggadah is not an archive in the bureaucratic sense, yet Brooks turns it into one: a place where traces are stored, guarded, misread, and activated. Hanna's desire to know is not innocent. Like every archival desire, it risks consuming the past for present satisfaction. The novel partly contains that risk by making Hanna professionally accountable to the object. She cannot simply narrate; she must care.

That care is secular, but not desacralizing. In literary terms, Hanna's work resembles what Martha Nussbaum calls the ethical attention made possible by narrative imagination (Nussbaum 1990; Nussbaum 1995). To handle the Haggadah well, Hanna must imagine lives unlike her own, yet she must also respect the difference between imagination and ownership. Suzanne Keen's work on empathy and the novel is helpful here because Brooks clearly invites empathetic extension, but she also shows that empathy needs form, discipline, and humility (Keen 2007). Hanna's science is one such discipline.

The novel's most persuasive version of interfaith memory may therefore be neither liturgical nor theological but custodial. Custodianship asks a simple question: what do I owe to a memory that is not mine? Hanna's answer is professional, but the question recurs across the novel. A Muslim librarian, a Catholic priest, a Jewish scribe, an enslaved or marginalized artist, a mother, a servant, and a scholar each confront a version of it. The book survives when someone accepts custody without reducing the object to personal property.

This is why the physicality of the Haggadah matters so much. The manuscript's damage prevents sacred survival from becoming an abstract triumph. Conservation does not return the book to innocence. It stabilizes what remains. Such stabilization is a quiet but profound ethical act. It acknowledges that history cannot be undone and that survival is not the opposite of injury. The repaired book is still a wounded book. Brooks's fiction is at its best when it allows that wound to remain legible.

Fragments, Traces, and the Forensic Imagination

People of the Book is structured as a forensic romance with a reverse historical movement. The modern plot discovers material clues; the historical chapters supply their imagined origins. This design risks becoming schematic, but it also mirrors the way cultural memory often works: from trace to speculation, from remnant to story, from damaged surface to reconstructed life. Mieke Bal's idea of travelling concepts helps explain the mobility of the novel's key terms—memory, archive, witness, and sacredness—as they move between disciplines and historical settings (Bal 2002).

The reverse chronology is particularly important. Instead of beginning with the manuscript's creation and moving forward toward modern rescue, Brooks begins near the present and travels backward. This structure makes survival feel less inevitable. We encounter the book as already old, already damaged, already precious, and then gradually learn how many contingencies made its survival possible. The effect is not simply suspense. It is ethical defamiliarization. The reader comes to understand that every artifact inherited by the present has passed through dangers that could easily have ended its life.

The clue structure also revalues the small. A conventional history might privilege kings, inquisitors, armies, and official decrees. Brooks's novel gives narrative force to nearly invisible traces. This resembles Natalie Zemon Davis's interest in archival fragments and the stories they permit but cannot guarantee (Davis 1987). It also resonates with Walter Benjamin's attention to historical debris and the afterlife of objects (Benjamin 1968). Brooks's fragments do not tell history by themselves. They require an interpreter, and interpretation is always a moral act.

The wine stain is a particularly rich figure. As a trace of Passover use, wine marks the Haggadah's participation in ritual life. It suggests that the manuscript was not merely admired but handled at a table where liberation was recited as family memory. Yet in the novel, stains also merge with violence. Wine, blood, and other residues blur the boundary between celebration and injury. This blurring prevents sacred memory from being sealed off from the body. The Haggadah remembers because bodies touched it, drank near it, bled near it, hid it, and feared for it.

The insect wing and hair perform a related function. They turn the manuscript into a habitat of unintended witnesses. A book collects the world as it travels through it. This is not metaphor alone. Material objects carry dust, fibers, oils, pigments, and biological traces. Brooks uses that fact to create a poetics of residue. The past does not return as a complete voice; it clings. Such clinging has theological resonance, but it also has a deeply human ordinariness. People leave pieces of themselves on what they touch.

This residue-based narrative is a form of sacred survival. It differs from heroic monumentality. Monuments often seek durability, clarity, and public authority; the Haggadah's traces are private, accidental, and vulnerable. Young's distinction between memorial meaning and material form is useful here, as is Rothberg's account of memory moving across communities rather than remaining sealed within one group (Young 1993; Rothberg 2009). Brooks's object remembers not by proclaiming a single message but by carrying multiple histories in intimate proximity.

Abrahamic Entanglement: Judaism, Christianity, Islam

The interconnection of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in People of the Book is neither symmetrical nor simple. Judaism anchors the manuscript's ritual purpose; Christianity appears through both artistic proximity and institutional violence; Islam appears through both the memory of Iberian cultural exchange and the Bosnian Muslim act of protection. The three traditions are not arranged as equal representatives in a classroom diagram. They meet in scenes of power. This is one reason the novel can support a serious critical approach rather than merely an interfaith celebration.

Jewish memory in the novel is inseparable from exile. The Passover Haggadah already ritualizes the movement from bondage to freedom, but Brooks places that ritual memory within later histories of expulsion, diaspora, and persecution. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's distinction between Jewish memory and modern historical consciousness helps clarify the issue (Yerushalmi 1982). The Haggadah is not only a record of the past; it is a script for re-enacting memory. In Brooks's fiction, that script is itself forced to migrate, carrying an older story of liberation through newer experiences of vulnerability.

Christianity in the novel is deliberately ambivalent. Brooks includes Christian persecution, censorship, and anti-Jewish violence, especially through the histories of the Inquisition and European anti-Semitism. But she also imagines a Catholic priest who saves the manuscript from destruction. This double representation matters. It prevents the novel from turning Christianity into a monolithic villain while still acknowledging the historical role of Christian institutions in Jewish suffering. The priest's rescue is meaningful precisely because it occurs against a background of ecclesiastical danger.

Islam enters the novel with a different but equally complex force. The Muslim rescuer of the Haggadah does not function as an exotic emblem of tolerance; he represents a Bosnian history in which Muslim intellectual and civic life was bound to the protection of a multi-religious urban culture. Brooks's essay on Korkut emphasizes his interest in Bosnia's minority communities and his refusal of fascist pressure (Brooks 2007). In the novel, this moral inheritance becomes part of the Haggadah's survival story. The Jewish book is hidden in a Muslim context, and that hiding becomes a rebuke to nationalist fantasies of pure culture.

The phrase "Abrahamic religions" can sometimes flatten difference by implying that shared ancestry guarantees mutual recognition. Brooks's novel is more honest than that. Abrahamic connection in People of the Book is not a natural peace waiting to be recovered. It is an inheritance repeatedly betrayed and occasionally renewed. Jon Levenson's work on Abrahamic legacy reminds us that Abraham is claimed differently in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; his legacy is shared, but not in a way that dissolves disagreement (Levenson 2012). Brooks's novel dramatizes that uneven sharing through material rather than doctrinal relation.

In this sense, the Haggadah becomes an Abrahamic contact zone. Homi Bhabha's language of cultural location and hybridity is useful, though it must be applied carefully (Bhabha 1994). The manuscript's history is hybrid not because identities are pleasantly mixed, but because minority survival often depends on negotiating dominant cultures. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism is also relevant, especially when reading Brooks's Islamic and Mediterranean settings (Said 1978). The novel's challenge is to represent Muslim and Jewish histories without turning them into decorative alternatives to a Christian European norm. At its strongest, Brooks meets that challenge by giving Muslim custodianship ethical centrality.

The Abrahamic thread, then, is a thread of responsibility rather than sameness. The three traditions

intersect in the fate of a book that cannot be fully claimed by any one historical narrative, even though it remains Jewish in ritual identity. This is a delicate balance. If the book becomes everyone's equally, Jewish dispossession is repeated at the level of interpretation. If it becomes only Jewish in a narrow possessive sense, the novel's record of cross-religious rescue is obscured. Brooks's fiction asks readers to hold both truths: the Haggadah is specifically Jewish, and its survival is interfaith.

From Convivencia to Catastrophe: Against Easy Harmony

The idea of convivencia hovers over People of the Book, but the novel does not simply endorse it. Popular accounts of medieval Spain often remember Muslims, Christians, and Jews living together in creative coexistence; revisionist accounts warn that such memory can obscure legal hierarchy, violence, and instability (Menocal 2002; Cohen 1994; Mann, Glick, and Dodds 1992; Ray 2006). Brooks's fiction draws energy from both sides. It wants the beauty of contact, especially in art, language, and craft. But it also knows that contact can be coerced, unequal, and haunted by future expulsion.

This tension is visible in the novel's imagined origin story for the manuscript's illuminations. The very fact of a richly illuminated Haggadah invites questions about Jewish visual practice in relation to Christian and Islamic art. Scholars of medieval Jewish art have shown that Hebrew manuscripts were not isolated from surrounding visual cultures; they borrowed, transformed, resisted, and refunctioned artistic conventions (Vishnitzer 1922; Gutmann 1978; Epstein 2011; Shalev-Eyni 2010). Brooks turns this art-historical problem into a human drama, asking who made the images and under what conditions.

The result is a critique of purity. No culture in the novel makes beauty alone. The Haggadah's images are not evidence of an untouched Jewish essence, nor are they simply borrowed Christian forms. They emerge from a Mediterranean world of artisans, patrons, prohibitions, markets, and risks. This does not weaken the manuscript's Jewishness. It deepens it. Jewish cultural survival, in Brooks's novel, is not the preservation of sealed identity but the capacity to carry ritual memory through changing forms.

The Christian scenes sharpen the critique. The Inquisition and censorship remind readers that cultural contact can become surveillance. A book may be admired as art and still threatened as religious danger. This is why the Catholic priest's rescue is so narratively important. It shows that institutional identity and individual conscience are not identical. Yet the scene also raises a difficult question: does the novel rely too heavily on exceptional rescuers to redeem oppressive structures? That question cannot be ignored.

A similar question applies to Muslim rescue. The story of Korkut, fictionalized in Brooks's narrative world, is extraordinary. But when extraordinary rescue becomes the main form through which interfaith goodness appears, ordinary coexistence may recede. The danger is that the novel could make tolerance visible only under spectacular threat. Against this, Brooks includes quieter forms of relation: scholarship, domestic care, artistic exchange, professional respect, and the everyday mixed life of Sarajevo. These quieter forms matter because they suggest that interfaith memory is not only made in crisis.

Still, the crisis scenes dominate, and perhaps they must. Sacred survival becomes narratable when destruction is near. A manuscript locked safely in a museum case might inspire admiration, but a manuscript hidden from fascists or saved from fire becomes ethically charged. The novel relies on danger to make care visible. The task of criticism is to honor that narrative force without letting danger become romantic. Brooks's damaged Haggadah should move us not because catastrophe gives beauty a dramatic background, but because beauty's survival exposes the moral obscenity of those who would destroy it.

Gendered Custodianship and the Intimacy of Rescue

One of the most important ways Brooks humanizes interfaith memory is through gendered labor. Public histories of rescue often remember male officials, librarians, priests, scholars, soldiers, and directors. People of the Book includes such figures, but it also turns repeatedly toward women whose work is intimate, domestic, artistic, or hidden. Women shelter bodies, make images, carry family memory, negotiate danger, and absorb the costs of decisions made in public worlds. Their labor complicates any heroic account of sacred survival.

This matters because the Haggadah itself is a household ritual object. Passover memory is not confined to synagogue or archive; it is enacted around a table, among family members and guests, with food, wine, questions, and repeated telling. Brooks's attention to women and domestic spaces therefore aligns with the

manuscript's ritual life. The sacred does not survive only through official custody. It survives through kitchens, bedrooms, veils, garments, and the difficult hospitality of homes under threat.

Derrida's reflections on hospitality are useful but insufficient by themselves (Derrida 2000). Hospitality in Brooks's novel is not a philosophical abstraction. It is dangerous domestic labor. To hide a persecuted person is to endanger one's family, rearrange a household, manage appearances, and live with fear. Judith Butler's writing on precarious life helps clarify why such hospitality matters: ethical response begins when another life becomes grievable and protectable, even when political orders mark it for abandonment (Butler 2004; Butler 2009). Brooks gives this ethical response a domestic texture.

The novel's gendered dimension also intersects with postmemory. Marianne Hirsch's work describes how later generations inherit traumatic memories through images, stories, and family structures (Hirsch 1997; Hirsch 2012). People of the Book is filled with such mediated inheritance. Hanna inherits not only professional habits but also unresolved maternal wounds; Jewish characters inherit exile and ritual memory; Bosnian characters inherit the layered violence of the twentieth century. Women often become the carriers of these inheritances, not because memory is naturally feminine, but because family and domestic life are central media of transmission. Brooks is not always subtle in plotting Hanna's personal life, and a rigorous reading should admit this. The mother-daughter conflict, romantic entanglement, and revelations around Hanna's origins can feel melodramatic beside the historical chapters. Yet even these weaker elements serve a thematic purpose. They make Hanna's conservation of the Haggadah parallel her attempt to understand her own damaged inheritance. She is professionally skilled at reading traces, but personally wounded by what has been withheld. The analogy is imperfect, but it gives the modern frame emotional pressure.

More importantly, the female figures associated with the manuscript's imagined past resist the idea that books are made only by official authors. The novel is fascinated by anonymous or marginalized makers. This fascination aligns with feminist and postcolonial concerns about voices excluded from archives (Spivak 1988; Bhabha 1994). The Haggadah's beauty may depend on those whom history would not name. Brooks's fiction invents names and stories for such figures, an act that is both ethically generous and risky. It gives the silenced imaginative presence, but it also speaks where the archive cannot confirm.

Sacred Survival and the Limits of the Rescue Plot

The greatest strength of People of the Book is also its greatest risk: it makes preservation emotionally legible. Readers are invited to feel the value of the Haggadah because they witness the lives attached to its traces. This is the power of historical fiction. But emotional legibility can become simplification. The rescue plot may suggest that the worst of history is answered by the best of individual conscience. Such a pattern is moving, but it can understate the structural force of anti-Semitism, nationalism, colonial fantasy, and religious power.

A critical reading must therefore distinguish between ethical exemplarity and historical consolation. The Muslim librarian, the Catholic priest, and other rescuers are ethically exemplary, but they do not cancel the systems that made rescue necessary. Brooks's narrative sometimes approaches consolation when it turns the Haggadah into a symbol of interfaith cooperation. UNESCO and the National Museum also understandably emphasize the manuscript's contemporary value as a sign of cultural harmony (National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina n.d.; UNESCO 2020). Literature, however, can do something more difficult: it can hold harmony and horror together without letting either erase the other.

LaCapra's distinction between working through and acting out is helpful here (LaCapra 2001). People of the Book works through traumatic history by giving fragments narrative relation, but it risks acting out a repeated fantasy in which a threatened Jewish object is saved by a righteous outsider. The repetition is not false; such rescues happened. The question is what the repetition does. Does it create a usable ethics of care, or does it reassure readers that catastrophe is balanced by goodness? Brooks's answer is mixed, and that mixture is part of the novel's interest.

The novel's use of violence also requires scrutiny. Historical fiction about persecution must decide how much suffering to represent and how to prevent suffering from becoming spectacle. Brooks generally avoids gratuitous description, but the episodic structure can still make trauma consumable: one crisis follows another, each tied to a clue, each resolved enough to move the plot backward. Trauma theory warns against exactly this kind of smooth narrativization (Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992). Yet the manuscript's persistent damage

interrupts the smoothness. The book survives, but it does not emerge whole.

There is also a politics of global readership. Brooks writes in English for a broad international audience, translating Bosnian, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Spanish, Italian, and Australian materials into an accessible historical novel. Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism reminds us that such translation can carry asymmetries of power (Said 1993). The novel sometimes depends on familiar market pleasures: mystery, romance, revelation, and exotic historical settings. A top-level critical approach should not ignore those pleasures. It should ask how they shape what readers understand as interfaith memory.

At the same time, readability is not a scholarly defect. Wayne Booth, J. Hillis Miller, Derek Attridge, and Nussbaum each offer ways to think about the ethical seriousness of literary encounter (Booth 1988; Miller 1987; Attridge 2004; Nussbaum 1995). Brooks's accessible form may carry complex ethical questions to readers who would never open a monograph on medieval Haggadot, Bosnian cultural destruction, or memory theory. The question is not whether the novel is popular or scholarly. The question is whether its popular form makes ethical attention more possible or less demanding. I would argue that it does both.

The limits of the novel's interfaith vision become clearest when one compares symbol and practice. As a symbol, the Haggadah can stand for Abrahamic coexistence. As a practice, its preservation requires institutions, money, expertise, political will, and public courage. The National Museum's account of secure display and environmental conditions reminds us that survival continues after the dramatic rescue ends (National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina n.d.). Sacred survival is not only a wartime act. It is also maintenance. It is conservation budgets, climate control, catalogues, trained staff, and civic trust.

This practical dimension is easy to overlook because maintenance is less glamorous than rescue. Brooks's novel, through Hanna, gives maintenance narrative dignity. The conservator's work is slow, technical, and often invisible. That slowness counters the melodrama of danger. It suggests that interfaith memory is not sustained only by extraordinary bravery, but by ordinary competence. A person who repairs a binding, records a trace, or refuses to overclean a stain may be participating in the same ethical world as the person who hides the book from soldiers. Such maintenance also echoes Hannah Arendt's sense that durable human worlds are made by work, care, and public responsibility rather than by private feeling alone (Arendt 1958).

Close Reading: The Book That Reveals Its Readers

The novel's central achievement is to make the Haggadah both symbol and character without collapsing it into either. As symbol, it gathers Jewish endurance, Abrahamic contact, and the persistence of beauty. As character, it has a body, a history, vulnerabilities, and relationships. It changes the people who encounter it. Hanna's professional identity is tested by it; religious and political authorities project fears onto it; rescuers discover themselves through their willingness to protect it. The book has no consciousness, yet it produces conscience.

This is a subtle reversal of agency. Usually people use books. In People of the Book, the book uses people in the sense that it reveals them. Their choices around it disclose what they value. The Nazi officer's desire to seize it, the censor's suspicion of it, the priest's protection of it, the librarian's concealment of it, and Hanna's conservation of it are all acts of interpretation. To interpret a sacred object is never merely to decide what it means. It is to decide what kind of world should exist around it.

The Haggadah's Jewishness is therefore not diminished when non-Jewish characters protect it. On the contrary, their protection dramatizes the ethical demand made by Jewish sacred memory on those outside it. This is one of the novel's most important contributions to thinking about interfaith relation. Too often, interfaith discourse centers on mutual understanding as conversation. Brooks imagines mutual responsibility as custody. One may not understand the full ritual life of another's book and may still be obligated not to let it be destroyed.

Such responsibility is not sentimental because it involves risk. The people who save the book do not merely express admiration. They expose themselves. In this regard, Levinas's ethics of the other, although not explicitly invoked by Brooks, helps illuminate the moral structure: the other's vulnerability commands response before it becomes an object of knowledge. The Haggadah, as the vulnerable carrier of other lives, calls forth response. Brooks translates that philosophical relation into narrative action.

The strongest evidence for this reading is the novel's recurring linkage between books and bodies. The Haggadah is hidden against a human body; people are hidden as if they too were forbidden texts; stains mingle

ritual and injury; a conservator's hands must be steady because careless touch can harm. This repeated linkage prevents bibliophilia from becoming fetishism. The book matters because people matter, and people matter partly because their memories need forms that can outlast them.

For this reason, People of the Book belongs to a broader modern literary concern with archives, fragments, and belated witness. But Brooks's religious object makes her case distinctive. Many archive novels explore family secrets or national trauma; this novel explores a ritual manuscript whose sacredness is inseparable from repeated communal use. The Haggadah is not a lost diary waiting to be decoded. It is a living liturgical form whose survival supports future acts of telling. This future orientation is central. Preservation is not nostalgia; it is preparation for another telling.

The Passover dimension reinforces the point. A Haggadah is designed to be read again, and the story it tells is itself a story of liberation remembered across generations. Brooks's narrative adds layers to that repetition. The book used to remember Exodus must itself be remembered as an exile. The object that helps a community tell how it came out of bondage becomes an object carried through later captivities and threats. The sacred text and its historical body mirror one another without becoming identical.

This mirroring gives the title "Threads of Abraham" critical force. Abrahamic relation in the novel is not a tree with three stable branches but a textile repeatedly torn and repaired. Some threads are doctrinal, some artistic, some linguistic, some domestic, some violent. The metaphor of thread also acknowledges fragility. Threads bind, but they fray. Brooks's Haggadah is a woven object in this extended sense: parchment, pigment, ritual, history, and human custody interlace. Sacred survival depends on the weave holding long enough for repair.

Contribution to English Literary Studies

For English literary studies, the importance of People of the Book lies in the way it brings together the archive novel, the historical romance, and the ethics of world-literary reading. Brooks is not writing from within medieval Iberia, early modern Venice, or wartime Sarajevo as a native witness. She writes as a contemporary Anglophone novelist who translates dispersed histories into a form available to a wide reading public. That position demands scrutiny, but it also marks the novel's relevance. The book asks what contemporary fiction can do with histories that are not wholly its own. Can a novel in English become a responsible host for Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Bosnian, Spanish, Italian, and Australian memories? Brooks's answer is partial but serious: fiction can host such memories only by making its own acts of mediation visible.

The novel therefore contributes to debates about world literature and historical responsibility. It does not simply circulate a foreign artifact for Anglophone consumption; it repeatedly emphasizes the labor and danger behind circulation itself. The Haggadah's movement is not the smooth mobility of a global cultural commodity. It is forced migration, secret transport, sale, theft, rescue, and conservation. This distinction matters because the contemporary literary marketplace often rewards stories of portable multicultural beauty while forgetting the violence that made such portability necessary. Brooks's object resists that forgetting. Its beauty is never detachable from displacement.

A journal-level argument about the novel should also recognize its formal conservatism. People of the Book is not stylistically radical in the manner of high postmodern fiction. Its prose is accessible, its clue structure readable, and its historical episodes often shaped by familiar suspense. Yet formal accessibility does not prevent theoretical complexity. Indeed, the novel's conventional pleasures may be the means by which it carries difficult questions about memory, faith, and responsibility. Hutcheon's account of historiographic metafiction is useful, but Brooks's novel is less interested in ontological play than in ethical repair (Hutcheon 1988). It uses metafictional awareness without abandoning narrative hospitality.

That hospitality may explain the novel's appeal for teaching and scholarship. It offers a way to discuss Jewish memory without isolating it from Muslim and Christian histories; it offers a way to discuss Islam in Europe without reducing Muslim characters to threat or background; it offers a way to discuss Christianity without denying the difference between institutional violence and individual conscience. Most importantly, it asks students and scholars to think about books as vulnerable bodies in history. In a discipline built around reading, that question should feel uncomfortably close. What do literary critics owe to the objects, languages, and communities that make reading possible?

The article's contribution, then, is to name "interfaith memory" as a critical category for reading Brooks's novel and similar works of contemporary historical fiction. Interfaith memory is not the memory of agreement. It is the memory produced when communities are forced, invited, or compelled to carry traces of one another. It includes rescue, but also censorship; admiration, but also appropriation; hospitality, but also fear. People of the Book matters because it gives this uneven memory a material form. The Sarajevo Haggadah is the thread, but the thread is never smooth. It knots, catches, and sometimes cuts the hand that holds it.

Conclusion: What the Haggadah Teaches the Novel to Remember

People of the Book should be read not only as a historical novel about the Sarajevo Haggadah but as a sustained meditation on what it means to preserve another's sacred memory. Its interfaith significance lies less in an abstract message of tolerance than in a repeated narrative action: someone recognizes that a book belonging to another community must not be destroyed. That recognition is small compared with doctrine and large compared with fear. It is the place where Abrahamic interconnection becomes humanly credible.

The article has argued that Brooks's novel constructs interfaith memory through material form, narrative fragmentation, and custodial ethics. The Haggadah's physical traces generate the plot; its Jewish ritual identity anchors the novel's memory work; Christian and Muslim figures enter not as decorative representatives of "other faiths" but as agents within histories of danger and care; and Hanna's conservation gives the modern frame an ethics of disciplined attention. Sacred survival, in this reading, is not the miraculous persistence of an untouched object. It is the difficult continuity of a damaged object through the hands of flawed people.

This reading also requires criticism of the novel's consolations. Brooks's rescue pattern can soften structural violence by making goodness appear through exceptional individuals. Its accessible historical romance can make trauma more consumable than it should be. Its interfaith symbolism can be too easily converted into a comforting lesson. Yet the damaged Haggadah resists that comfort. The book is saved, but not purified of history. Its scars remain. That remainder is the novel's strongest ethical resource.

The final value of People of the Book, then, is not that it solves the problem of Abrahamic relation. It does not. It offers instead a literary practice of attention: look closely at what survived; ask who risked something for it; ask who tried to destroy it; ask whose labor remains unnamed; ask what future telling it makes possible. In a world where sacred objects are still drawn into wars over identity, territory, and memory, Brooks's novel reminds us that preservation is never neutral. To keep a book alive is to choose a future in which someone else's story can still be told.

The Haggadah at the center of the novel is a Jewish book. It is also, by virtue of its journey, an Abrahamic witness. That witness does not speak in the language of easy reconciliation. It speaks through parchment, pigment, stain, damage, concealment, restoration, and use. It tells us that the deepest interconnections among religions are not always found in official dialogues or doctrinal comparisons. Sometimes they are found in the moment when a person holds a fragile object from another tradition and decides, against fear or convenience, that it must survive.

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