

Geraldine Brooks
Viking Press, Penguin Group
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Dear Geraldine Brooks,

I've just finished reading—AND LOVING--People of the Book. I can't wait to reread it! Your book is exactly for me!

Why? I will attempt to explain.

Following a divorce and raising my four children, I went back to school for a graduate degree in Byzantine Medieval Art History. With Empress Irene's 8th C. reign of iconoclasm, no Byzantine manuscript art exists, but early Irish and 9th C. Carolingian Gospel books served as style models for my academic work along with later Byzantine icons, mosaics and frescoes.

For my thesis I researched a small Serbian chapel in Studenica Monastery, titled Milutin's King's Church, built in 1313-14. King Milutin, the third in a dynasty of Serbian nouveau-riche Nemanja-family rulers, was increasing his military strength at the same time as the Paleologan Byzantine Emperor Andronicus II was losing battles against the Turks, as well as skirmishes against the upstart Balkan states. Serbia until the middle of the 13th Century had been a poor and undeveloped country. But by Milutin's time it had become relatively rich, through a lively east and west shipping trade in natural mineral resources and agricultural products. Among other things it had grown a small but strong army of well-equipped nobles on horseback who had shown their prowess in battles against Constantinople's tottering imperial armies. Emboldened by these victories, the upstart Serbian king, began to

threaten Emperor Andronicus by suggesting that his fierce horsemen might join forces with the Turkish armies.

Hoping to pacify King Milutin, Andronicus offered his widowed sister's hand in marriage. But, following a visit to the uncouth dirt-floored Serbian court, she refused. Milutin, insulted by this rejection, again became bellicose, forcing the embattled Emperor to offer his beloved five-year old daughter, Simonis! To be invited through marriage to join the imperial Byzantine family was an enormous prize—despite the fact that the empire was rapidly falling apart. And to prove that the infant Serbian Nemanja dynasty was worthy of this honor, Milutin ordered a very special royal chapel be added to the Nemanja family monastery in Studenica.

The king wished symbolically to reflect the connection between his three-generation Serbian dynasty and the 1000 year-old Byzantine one. In the tradition of the times, he hired the most skilled artisans available to decorate the nave with impressive regal processions led by himself and his soon-to-be bride. When Simonis actually arrived in the Serb court she was only 8 years old. However, in painted effigy she was portrayed as a fully adult princess, wearing a crown so heavy it seemed to engulf her royal head. To reinforce the idea that Serbia was indeed of royal lineage, the jewel-like tiny chapel was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, suggesting that somehow, the little virgin Byzantine princess provided the sacred spiritual connection between Constantinople's sacerdotal court and the powerful but still primitive Serbian court.

My art history problem was to research how it was that Milutin's chapel frescoes are in the early Renaissance rounded style of Giotto, rather in the traditional flat Byzantine style. And in the

course of my work, I became somewhat of an “expert” in various historical and art historical events of the early 14th century.

Before my late-in-life foray into this graduate work, I was an Art History major at Wellesley. Following graduation I was hired as “secretary” to emeritus Edward W. Forbes at the Fogg Museum in Cambridge. We had a sort of honorary office in the attic of the Fogg while in the basement Mr. Milton Worthley labored over all sorts of restorations. I reveled in many different art problems while in that position, including completing Mr. Forbes’ huge mosaic of the Santa Sophia Madonna and Child, made out of iridescent shell tessera from the family’s Nashon Island beach.

So you can see how my eye was caught by the colorful illustration for your Dec.3 New Yorker article The Book of Exodus. Of course I searched out more information and found that it was adapted from your forthcoming book People of The Book. Our local Borders had a copy which I rushed out and bought, read, and now look forward to re-reading.

Incidentally, I wonder if by choosing to release the book at the holiday shank of the year, the publisher felt it was too complicated to add the wonderful little passover scene. I hope that later printings will include that. The end papers art is a delight!

Researching the history and political significance of the frescoes in King Milutin’s Church was exciting. To discover that its creators were undoubtedly part of the early Renaissance importation of craftsmen from Italy to the Constantinople court gave me a sense of becoming an uncoverer of long-buried very personal events. And I have always thought that story which combined art, politics and human emotional drives, craved being put into a novel.

I never traveled to Serbia so that I have not actually seen “my” lovely little King’s Church, but there are many photographs of the story-telling frescos. I feel as if I have actually stood in the small 15X16 foot domed structure. Since I did my research in the early 1970s there has of course been much senseless destruction in the Balkans and I don’t know whether that little sacred space still exists. I am too old now to go and see, but perhaps someone younger, who has business, art or literary interests in that area, might be persuaded to travel to that part of Serbia to find out if the Studenica Monastery’s little chapel is extant. Maybe that creative adventurer might be you?

I have in the bookshelf my original typewritten 1973 M.A. thesis from the University of Oregon. Just in case you need more detailed information to whet your appetite!

Thank you for reading all this. I know that authors enjoy hearing from their readers that the children of their creative minds have found good homes in other people’s heads

Very sincerely,