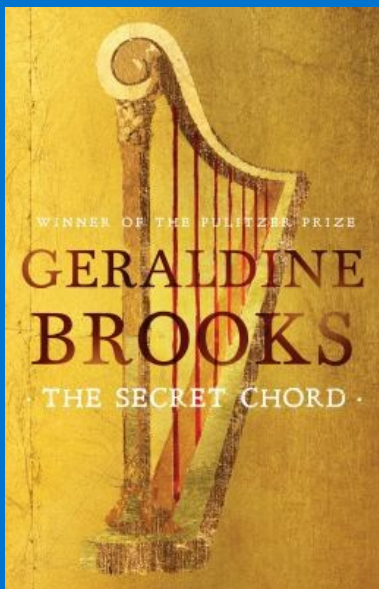


The Secret Chord



Author Background

- Born— Sydney, 1955
- Raised— Sydney
- Education—The University of Sydney and Columbia University
- Currently resides in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

Geraldine Brooks is the Pulitzer Prize winning author of five novels including *March* (2005), *People of the Book* (2008), and *Caleb's Crossing* (2011), as well as non-fiction such as 1994's *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Muslim Women*.

Raised in a working class inner-west suburb, Brooks suffered recurring illnesses in her childhood which prevented her from attending school, resulting in her being in effect home-schooled by her mother - "a great wise person" who guided Brooks through her "painfully shy" start at the University of Sydney. Her mother's advice saw Brooks throw herself into situations that scared her, including joining the University Drama Society and, years later, agreeing to cover the Middle East for the *Wall Street Journal* despite feeling completely unqualified and inexperienced.

As a foreign correspondent, Brooks subsequently reported on crises in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans, and together with her husband Tony Horwitz was awarded the Overseas Press Club's 1990 Hal Boyle Award for "Best newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad", for her coverage of the Gulf War. After years of often dangerous, always exciting work, a turning point came when Brooks was imprisoned for three days in Nigeria while on an investigative trip. She left journalism, started a family and was soon writing historical novels to general critical acclaim.

Brooks has certainly struck a chord with her particular approach—applying her strong journalistic expertise to thoroughly researching historical events and characters and then asking the question "what would it have been like?" As the author has stated:

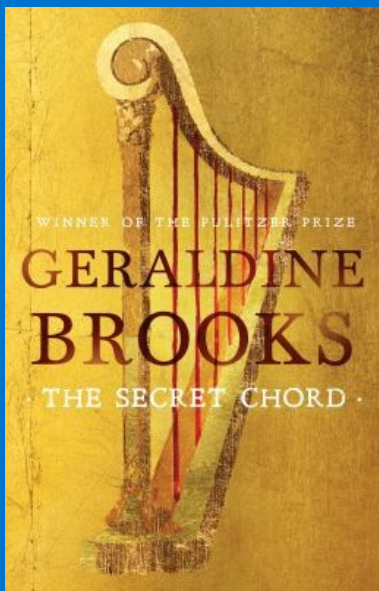
*"I really believe in following the line of fact as far as it leads, to make a good strong scaffolding for the imaginative enterprise. Then, when you come to the place where that line of fact frays and disappears, I let imagination take over."*¹

Brooks was awarded the Order of Australia in 2016 "for distinguished service to literature as a leading author, as an advocate for improved Indigenous literacy, as a role model for young writers, and as a journalist."

¹ "Scaffolding for the Imagination: A conversation with Geraldine Brooks", Key West Literary Seminar [website], posted 7 October 2008

Sources: Author's website, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, The Key West Literary Seminar, and Wikipedia

The Secret Chord



Book Summary

“It is one thing to transmit the divine through a blasting storm of holy noise, another thing entirely to write a history forged from human voices, imperfect memories, self-interested accounts” (*The Secret Chord*, p. 2)

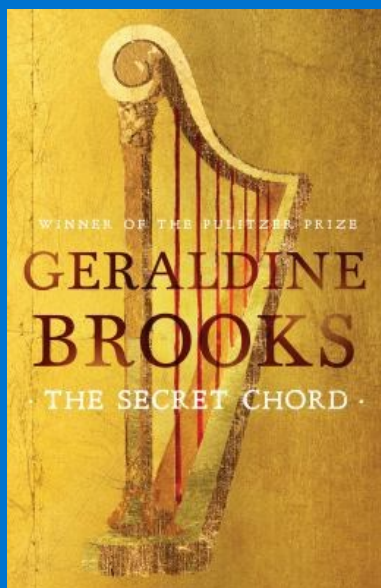
A rich and utterly absorbing novel about the life of King David, from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *People of the Book* and *March*.

With more than two million copies of her novels sold, *New York Times* bestselling author Geraldine Brooks has achieved both popular and critical acclaim. Now, Brooks takes on one of literature’s richest and most enigmatic figures: a man who shimmers between history and legend. Peeling away the myth to bring David to life in Second Iron Age Israel, Brooks traces the arc of his journey from obscurity to fame, from shepherd to soldier, from hero to traitor, from beloved king to murderous despot and into his remorseful and diminished dotage.

The Secret Chord provides new context for some of the best-known episodes of David’s life while also focusing on others, even more remarkable and emotionally intense, that have been neglected. We see David through the eyes of those who love him or fear him—from the prophet Natan, voice of his conscience, to his wives Mikhal, Avigail, and Batsheva, and finally to Solomon, the late-born son who redeems his Lear-like old age. Brooks has an uncanny ability to hear and transform characters from history, and this beautifully written, unvarnished saga of faith, desire, family, ambition, betrayal, and power will enthrall her many fans.

Source: Publisher website - Penguin/Random House

The Secret Chord



Discussion Questions

1. How does David's childhood inform your understanding of the man he will become?
2. Would David make a good leader today? Why or why not?
3. David is a man driven by passion and violence, but he loves his God with equal fervour. How would you explain this?
4. Natan's first prophecy spares him from certain death but also sets him apart from other men. Is his ability a gift or a curse?
5. What is the nature of Natan's feelings toward David? Would you be able to serve or work for a man like him?
6. Which of David's wives do you believe suffered the most at his hands? Did he love Yonatan more than any of them? If so, why might that be?
7. Some reviewers have commented negatively on Brooks's use of Hebrew transliterations such as "Shlomo" and "Beit Lethem" instead of the more familiar "Solomon" and "Bethlehem", with one critic considering this to introduce an "unstylish anxiety"¹. What was your reaction to this choice?

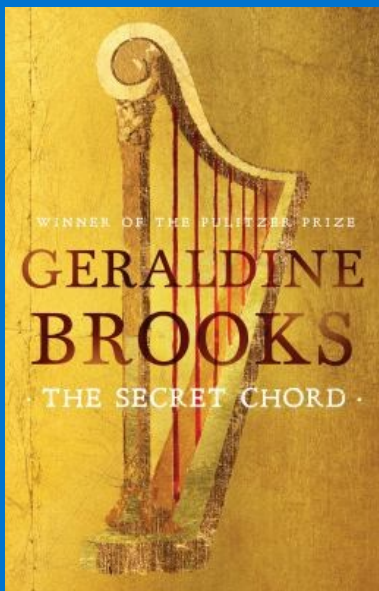
Just for fun...

8. As part of her research, Brooks spent time herding sheep in the Judean desert². If you could have a year off to conduct all-expenses-paid immersive research for a novel about an historical figure, who would you choose to write about?

¹. J. Thomas Westbrook, "*The Secret Chord* Slowly Achieves Resonance", *The Harvard Crimson* [website], posted 6 October 2015

². Marc McEvoy, "*The Secret Chord* by Geraldine Brooks Shows a Bible Hero's Human Flaws", *The Sydney Morning Herald* [website], posted 24 September 2015

The Secret Chord



Reviews

In her gorgeously written novel of ambition, courage, retribution, and triumph, Brooks imagines the life and character of King David in all his complexity...The language, clear and precise throughout, turns soaringly poetic when describing music or the glory of David's city ... taken as a whole, the novel feels simultaneously ancient, accessible, and timeless.

- ALA Booklist

Brooks cannot change history – that *The Secret Chord* is an “almost” tragedy is no criticism. In writing *The Secret Chord*, Brooks has demonstrated her ambition: to uncover the story of this legendary man, with no real proof of his existence beyond religious texts, and to bring him richly alive.

The Secret Chord is powerful storytelling, its landscape and time evoked in lyrical prose. Using the disaffected Natan as both character and narrator allows Brooks to examine David's life in critical detail. And while *The Secret Chord* is a historical novel, it also owes a huge debt to the tone of the Old Testament.

As king, David has been anointed by God and to defy God is to evoke his wrath. David is supposed to be beyond reproach but by succumbing to his weaker and viler instincts, he proves that he is mere mortal. Here is a man who is both great and flawed, just like those tragic heroes Oedipus and King Lear. But in making David so satisfyingly human, Brooks has crafted from *The Secret Chord* a compelling read, contemporary in its relevance.

- Meredith Jaffe, *The Guardian*

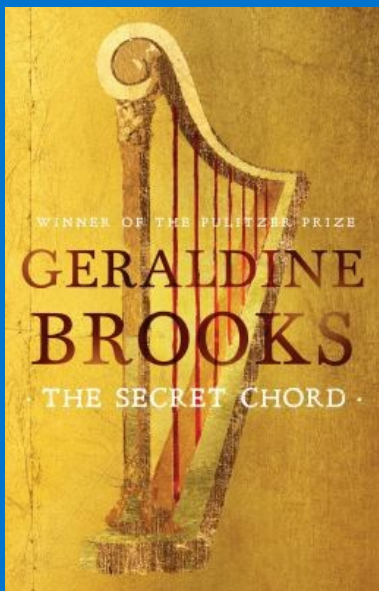
The Secret Chord is a work of passionate reinterpretation. In the Books of Samuel, David is God's anointed, warlord, minstrel, sensualist, trickster, covenanted friend. Brooks tells his story through the prophet and scribe, Natan, who interviews witnesses of David's life with a view to bequeathing to posterity a full record: “Not just the deeds. The man.”

...The episodic structure of *The Secret Chord*, as Natan solicits divergent testimonies and reports his own experience, makes for a certain slackness of narrative tension. As a scribe, Natan represents the authorial quest for a larger truth than Scripture affords. Bible women, muted and sidelined by their culture, are given voices. The folkloric story of David and Goliath is demystified – the giant originating in a very tall Philistine.

... The biblical story of David arouses readers through its laconic brevity; *The Secret Chord* is a work hybrid between fiction and exegesis, which sends us back to the original, our curiosity quickened.

- *The Independent*

The Secret Chord



Reviews (Continued)

Brooks's interest in religious commitment (*People of the Book*) accrues rich rewards in this ambitious and psychologically astute novel about the harp-playing, psalm-singing King David of the bible. ... While most of the plot is fictional conjecture, Brooks evokes time and place with keenly drawn detail. Although her decision to use archaic language, including the Hebrew spelling of names (Solomon is Shlomo; Bethlehem is Beit Lethem; the Philistines are the Plishtim) sometimes slows the narrative, she compensates with the verve of an adroit storyteller.

- *Publishers Weekly*

Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks's *The Secret Chord* bills itself as a bloodstained reimagining of the life of King David. But it initially raises concerns with its awkward beginning. Brooks appears determined to disprove an assumption that good history and a good novel cannot meet in a single book. And so, in the midst of otherwise beautifully crafted prose, in which historical facts and details are melded seamlessly into a vivid, compelling narrative, Brooks inserts transliterations from Hebrew. From her preliminary declaration that she uses Tanakh transliterations like "Shaul, Shmuel and Shlomo, for example, rather than the perhaps more familiar Saul, Samuel, and Solomon" onward, an unstylish anxiety prevails. This implied request to treat the book with the seriousness owed to a work backed by research distracts in the beginning from its literary qualities. *The Secret Chord* picks up steam, however, to become an excellent novel that elegantly handles its historical context.

- J. Thomas Westbrook, *The Harvard Crimson*

"He was big enough, but no giant." With that gently dismissive allowance, spoken by the biblical King David, Brooks (*Caleb's Crossing*, 2011, etc.) continues to explore the meaning of faith and religion in ordinary life.

...David emerges from Brooks' pages as a complex, somewhat wounded man, dogged by trauma but mostly resolute all the same; in one of the most telling passages, Brooks imagines David eating a chicken leg calmly just after the death of a baby, reasoning, "Now he's dead, why should I fast? Can fasting bring him back again?" Of just as much interest as her view of the politically astute lion in winter are Brooks' portraits of characters who are somewhat thinly fleshed in their biblical accounts, such as Batsheva, Yoav, Avner, and even Avshalom—for, as Brooks sagely writes, "David, who so often saw so clearly, who weighed men to a fine grain, was utterly blind to the failings of the men he begat."

...A skillful reimagining of stories already well-known to any well-versed reader of the Bible gracefully and intelligently told.

- *Kirkus Reviews*