

THE SECRET CHORD by Geraldine Brooks

The story of King David is more than that of his fight with Goliath, his Psalms, his kingship of Judah and Israel, and his adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah, her husband. Geraldine Brooks enables us to see David as a man of his times: a warrior, a leader who led his land toward peace, a man of human failings, a lover of many women, a loving father, and someone who honored his God with poetry and music.

The biblical story of David begins in 1 Samuel 16 when Saul's death is near, God sends the prophet Samuel to find a king among the sons of Jesse. When David emerges as the favored son, he is anointed king by Samuel. David's story continues through 2 Samuel and winds up in 1 Kings 2:10 at his death after forty years as King. Throughout his life, we find that David finds solace in his poetry and playing of the lyre, his gift to the people of his kingdom. As he lay dying, Ms. Brooks envisions all musicians of the land coming to the city of David (Jerusalem), playing instruments and singing their beloved King's compositions.

The surge of sound rose and swelled. Then, for a long moment, all the notes came together, all the music of the heavens and eat earth combining at last into one sustained, sublime, entirely glorious chord. (p. 300)

Brooks tells David's story through the writings of Nathan (Natan) the court prophet, who is mentioned especially in 2 Samuel, the second and twelfth chapters. Nathan has prophesied that David lineage will go on long after his death, and Nathan suggests that he (Nathan) write a history of David's reign so that he will not be forgotten. After some thought, David proposes that to get a clearer view of his early life, Nathan should interview three people who had known him then. Nathan adds to the record his own experiences at court and with David and his family. Among Nathan's other prophecies, he tells David that he will not build the temple that he so longs to construct, because of his brutal acts and betrayal of those close to him. But one day, the temple will be built by his heir.

Is this a book that should be included in the collection of the Genevieve Seese Library? I think that it should be. David's story here is told as a novel in contemporary English. The writer, Geraldine Brooks, has carefully researched her subject and his times — as she does with all of her books. In its novelized form, the thoughts and emotions of the characters are imagined so that they become believable. Yes, unpleasant, even horrible, events are recounted, but they appear in the Bible, as well, although in a less readable format. David's relationships with women are typical for the times and location. He married a daughter of the leaders of most of the tribes or areas that he conquered (and thus had many sons who were possible heirs). And he kept concubines. David did not adhere to the morals of our day, but to know who he really was, we need to know what his life was like and with whom he associated.

On the negative side, the reader may find it difficult to keep track of the characters. Luckily, Ms. Brooks includes the cast of characters at the beginning of the book. I kept referring back to this list as I read along, because it wasn't easy to keep track of who was David's son, and who, his brother, for instance. Some of his wives have similar names and also are easily confused. Another drawback is that the names of people and places are spelled as they may have been spelled in the language of David's day or of the time when the Hebrew Bible was compiled. I wish that the editors had included a glossary of old names with their modern counterparts. This is a book for a careful reader who enjoys literary novels. One needs to be wide awake when reading this one.

Arleen Twist, February 16, 2016