

Book club: *Knowing Anna*, by Sarah Meyrick

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Sally Welch enjoys Sarah Meyrick's pilgrimage narrative *Knowing Anna*

ONE of my most powerful memories of being a young girl is watching a recording of Jacqueline du Pré playing the opening of Elgar's Cello Concerto, and my father telling me that this wonderful musician, whose playing was so intense and so passionate, had been forced to give up performing owing to the onset of multiple sclerosis, the disease that finally killed her.

The haunting beauty of du Pré's playing provided an inner accompaniment for me to Sarah Meyrick's lyrical book *Knowing Anna*, with the reminder of Anna's gift as a cellist and the importance of music in her life running like a golden thread throughout the novel — this thread in ply, however, with the dark colour of death, since we are told from the very beginning that Anna is already dead. With the breaking of the thread of her life, the tapestry of relationships which she has woven with those around her has been ripped apart, and her friends and family are left torn and broken.

But, even at the point of death, Anna has taken steps to help those who loved her to find a new meaning for their lives: one of her last requests is that those who mourn her should make a pilgrimage together in her memory. The book is a record of the journey and the story of a new composition, as the strings of lives frayed by death are gathered together and the mending process is begun.

The details of the pilgrimage itself provide a rich and colourful background for the novel. We are able to share the rhythms of the way with the characters as they walk from Winchester to Canterbury in the course of a week. It is evident that Meyrick has done her research thoroughly: the nature of the pilgrimage and the landscape of the Pilgrims' Way are described not only with accuracy but with the love of a true pilgrim for the adventure that such a journey holds.

This is a book that will resonate with anyone who has undertaken a long-distance walk or who is interested in walking; she writes eloquently of the challenges and the joys of hours of physical exercise through an ever

changing landscape, which, by the very slowness of its unfolding, emphasises the enchantment of every detail.

The journey is more than merely a walk, however: it is described as a pilgrimage, and fits well within this category. Although the motives for the various pilgrims are all different, the overarching paradigm is definitely Christian. The pilgrimage is led by Father Stephen, who, from the beginning, sets out the framework of the journey as a spiritual act along a sacred way to a holy site. Carefully polite, in a truly Anglican way, he merely invites others to share the pauses for reflection and the times of silence, but through his conversations with other characters the historical background and spiritual value of pilgrimage are revealed as the journey progresses. Implicit, too, are the Christian concepts of reconciliation and healing, found by some through the journey and sought by all the travellers.

Meyrick is careful, however, never to let the journey overwhelm the characters themselves as the focus of the novel moves from one to another, exploring the effect of Anna's life and death on each individual, teasing out the significance of events and actions, and observing how differently the same incident plays out in the memories of those who experienced it. Just as each stage on the route builds on the previous day's journey, the characters learn more about themselves and each other through conversations and interactions — layer on layer of information, shared memories, and experiences building up to a picture not just of Anna, but of each traveller.

It is impossible to discuss the gradual development of each character without spoiling the narrative. It is enough to say that Meyrick succeeds in holding our attention throughout the book by revealing aspects of each individual in a subtle and gradual way that demonstrates her skill as a novelist. Although some of the twists and turns of plot and character might seem surprising, on reflection the reader can appreciate how skilfully small pieces of information are blended into discussions and conversations so that each discovery is not so much a revelation as an unveiling of what was already apparent, as if the outer layers of clothing had been shed to show the true form of the figure beneath.

With the arrival of the party at Canterbury, the journey and the book are completed, but such is the strength of the characterisation and the power of the description of the route that the story lives on in our imagination,

encouraging us to weave for ourselves a new cloth out of the threads that have been left dangling — or, better still, to hope that Meyrick continues the fabrication herself.

The Revd Dr Sally Welch is the Vicar of Charlbury with Shorthampton, and Area Dean of Chipping Norton. She is the author of Making a Pilgrimage (Lion, 2009) and Pilgrim Journeys (BRF, 2017).

Knowing Anna by Sarah Meyrick is published by SPCK at £8.99 ([CT Bookshop £8.10](#)); 978-1-910-67436-9.

KNOWING ANNA — SOME QUESTIONS

1. What makes a pilgrimage more than a walk, in your view?
2. What effect does the daily period of silence have on the walkers? Does silence necessarily bring peace?
3. “It’s hard enough just putting one foot in front of the other, some days.” How important is the physical act of walking in the novel?
4. What part does Father Stephen play in the pilgrimage? Does leadership weigh on him?
5. “That’s the promise . . . forgiveness freely given.” What does *Knowing Anna* have to tell us about forgiveness, both of others and of ourselves?
6. What did you make of the changing landscape of the walk? How do the characters react to different spaces (e.g. churches, homes, main roads, nature reserves)?
7. “My hunch is we’re all carrying burdens.” Pilgrimage is often associated with effort or struggle. What, for you, were the most poignant struggles of the characters in *Knowing Anna*? Did the pilgrimage help?

8. On several occasions in the novel, characters remember or repeat poems. What part does poetry play in communication and grief?
9. “She couldn’t bear all that ghastly emoting”. What different versions of grief do you find in *Knowing Anna*?
10. Several characters in *Knowing Anna* harbour secrets. How is secrecy and knowledge dealt with in the novel?