A journey of the feet and heart

Sarah Meyrick's new novel unfolds against the backdrop of a pilgrimage. She explains why

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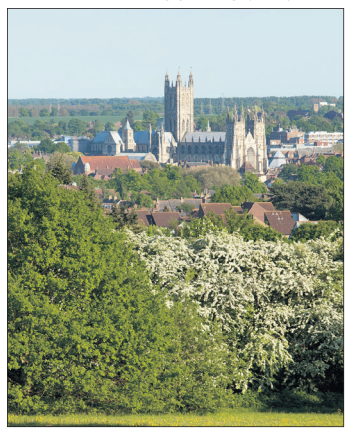

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On the way: *top:* a 1648 map showing pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela; *above, left:* Canterbury Cathedral from the Pilgrims' Way; *above, centre:* a panel from a 13th-century stained-glass window in Canterbury Cathedral; *above, right:* a Compostela pilgrim sign in Parthenay, France; *right:* a pilgrim rests en route to Compostela

JUST when organised religion seems to be losing its appeal (in Western Europe, at any rate), pilgrimage is not merely holding its own, but seeing an exponential rise.

To take one of the most famous Christian pilgrimage routes as a case study, statistics available show that, last year, more than a quarter of a million people (262,458, to be precise) walked the Camino to Santiago de Compostela. It was even higher (272,703) in 2010, because that was what is known as a Holy, or Jubilee Year, which occurs whenever St James's Day (25 July) falls on a Sunday.

But, to put this in context, a glance back through the decades shows that in 2005 the figure was 93,924; in 1995, it stood at 19,821; and, in 1985, only 690.

IT IS not just Spain, of course: about a quarter of a million pilgrims visit Walsingham each year, either as individuals or as part of a parish group. Nor is it simply a Christian phenomenon: in 2014, at the first International Congress on Tourism and Pilgrimages, the UN released a study that showed that one in every three tourists worldwide was a pilgrim — a total of 330 million people a year.

That figure includes 30 million who travel to Tirupati in India, 20 million to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, 15 million who go to Karbala in Iraq, and four million to Lourdes.

Although they nearly always describe themselves as "pilgrims", only a small number of these travellers report that their reasons for following a pilgrim route are directly related to faith. About one fifth (21.5 per cent) of those who followed the Camino in 2013 said that they had a "spiritual or religious" reason for undertaking the pilgrimage. Others reported that they were motivated by the physical challenge. Some were after adventure. Others said that their motivation was to spend time with friends and family. Many more were using the experience to mark a particular birthday or life event, while some were simply interested in the cultural aspects of the landscape.

THIS surge of interest is one of the factors that led me to set my novel *Knowing Anna* against the backdrop of a pilgrimage. In my book, the main character, Anna, dies in her early forties, leaving behind a grief-stricken family and bereft friends and colleagues. Before she dies, she asks her parish priest and friend to lead a group along the Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury in her honour. The reason for her request is that she herself walked the Camino at a particular crossroads in her life, and found the experience transformative.

Four months later the group sets out. The story explores what happens over their nine-day journey, and looks back over Anna's life as those who knew her share their stories and memories.

Of course, it is not an entirely original idea to set a book on a pilgrimage. I was inevitably inspired by Chaucer, and the particular pilgrim route I chose is a conscious nod to *The Canterbury Tales*. The most obvious difference, perhaps, is that the stories that my pilgrims share are all interlinked.

There are plenty of modern variations on the theme, too. You only have to think of Martin Sheen's 2010 film The Way, about a father who walks the Camino to try to establish what happened to his estranged son; or the 2014 film *Wild*, based on a real-life experience of a daughter along the Pacific Crest Trail in search of answers after the death of her mother.

MY OWN experience of pilgrimage bears out the almost elemental call that propels so many of us on journeys to enrich our spiritual lives. There is something about the experience that nurtures and feeds us, often in ways we least expect.

I have made several pilgrimages to the Holy Land, on all but one occasion as part of the organising team. As anyone who has done this knows, shepherding pilgrim sheep can be exhausting and demanding, not only practically but in terms of the emotions that frequently come to the surface.

Occasionally a kind member of the party has said to me: "You're working very hard. I hope you're getting something out of this," or words to that effect. My answer is always that, while I travel with no particular expectations — I am, after all, in work mode — I have never yet been disappointed. (That includes the occasion when I was caught up in a riot, and tear-gassed after the 1994 Hebron massacre, but that is another story.)

In pilgrimage, the journey and the destination are one — or, at least, part of a spectrum. There is something about the steps on the way, the encounters with the new and the unfamiliar, and the quality of the air in sacred places which feeds us, if we allow ourselves to be open.

Some of the magic comes from deliberately releasing ourselves from the concerns and routines of everyday life. Our lives are frequently absurdly busy, pressurised, and noisy. It is unsurprising that about 15 per cent of pilgrims on the Camino reported that they were motivated by a search for peace and solitude. Travelling to a special destination provides something that an ordinary holiday rarely delivers; and intentionally framing the experience as a sacred journey adds yet another dimension.

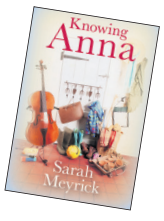
ANOTHER aspect of pilgrimage that lends itself to a novel is the group experience. A couple of years ago, I was part of a small team that created a new pilgrimage route — the Thames Pilgrim Way — along the Thames Path (Feature, 30 January 2015). Over ten days, in September 2014, more than 200 people took part in the experience, walking all or part of the 104-mile route, visiting churches, reflecting, and praying on and off through the day. While a handful of us walked the whole route, many more dipped in and out as they could. Several who intended to come for a single day found themselves drawn back for more.

Walking together was fascinating: people talked, laughed, and shared their stories with whoever they found themselves alongside. The conversation ranged from the trivial to the profound. The act of walking side by side without eye-contact opens the way to sharing confidences, as anyone who has done the washing-up or gone for a drive with a grumpy teenager can testify. Even periods spent in silence were enriched through being shared. A pilgrimage on foot allows you to get alongside another person, both literally and metaphorically.

And then there are the physical benefits of walking. In my story, the participants on the journey are carrying the particularly heavy burden of bereavement. It has long been recognised that exercise is good for us, and there is now a suggestion that walking is as effective as drug treatments for treating depression.

Exactly why this should be so is still uncertain, but some of the effect, at least, can be attributed to the release of dopamine and serotonin. More prosaically, perhaps, many of us can identify with the benefits of getting out into the fresh air, clearing our minds, and enjoying the sensation of tired limbs.

Finally, the gift to the novelist is that with a pilgrimage — even when the journey's end is fixed — you never know quite where it is going to take you. So while the story ends, in one sense, at Canterbury, in another the group's arrival there simply marks another step on the way.



Knowing Anna *by Sarah Meyrick is published by Marylebone House at £8.99* (Church Times Bookshop £8.10).