

All in a Canterbury tale

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Peggy Woodford on an emotional journey for a group of friends

Knowing Anna

Sarah Meyrick

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USING a pilgrimage to Canterbury as a fictional theme immediately brings to mind Chaucer's great poem *The Canterbury Tales*, in which he meets the other 29 pilgrims by chance when he stays at the Tabard Inn to prepare for departure.

Sarah Meyrick's ambitious first novel has a different starting-point: the family, friends, and neighbours of the cellist Anna decide to honour her dying request: to celebrate her short life before cancer kills her, aged 42, by walking the 100 miles of the ancient Pilgrim's Way from Guildford to Canterbury.

Anna's back story is told through each of the walkers, and, as we are given only first names in the text itself, it is useful that Meyrick provides a list of the main characters and the part they play in Anna's life; so the reader can focus on what matters rather than asking "Who is this?"

Anna's husband, Theo, 15-year-old daughter, Beth, and ten-year-old son, Sam, set out in a group of 16: close family, friends, and parishioners, all led by Fr Stephen, their parish priest. He is an essential pivot, and turns out to be adept at keeping this eclectic bunch of pilgrims on an even keel, while experiencing his own private spiritual awakenings in the course of the journey.

Practical back-up is provided by Anna's grieving parents, William and Ruth, who fill their car with everyone's basic needs for a night's sleep, and meet them at pre-arranged stops. (I wondered, at this point, about the nitty-gritty need-management of medieval pilgrims, but that did not form part of Chaucer's epic poem.) And, this pilgrimage being in the 21st century, most of the pilgrims are in web contact with the world outside: Beth's texts to her boyfriend Matt are exactly right in form and tone — Meyrick,

who is director of communications for the diocese of Oxford, clearly knows the teenage mind.

And, as Meyrick's novel makes clear, the crucial thing about any pilgrimage is that, although you know where you are going, and how you are going to do it, you have no idea what the effect on you is going to be, and where you will be led, despite yourself.

So, when a profound surprise emerges at the end of this pilgrimage, blowing a hole in Anna's family structure, the reader is left, as a pilgrim is left, with no final solution. Life goes on.

Meyrick writes with clarity and lack of fuss, avoiding the clichés of grief; she is also not sentimental about the balm of belief.