
The relationship between pilgrimage and writing is complicated. There is the literature of pilgrimage, that is, accounts scripted by and for pilgrims; pilgrimage in literature, that is, fictional narratives depicting pilgrims and pilgrimages; and literary pilgrimage, that is, devotional visits to sites associated with writers and their writings. Australian author Trish Griffin’s Dancing on the Head of a Pin: Reflections on the Camino falls into the first category. Equally, mixed motives may inspire the pilgrim’s journey. As Griffin puts it, ‘secular-pilgrim companions… modified my sacred speculations’, ‘religious-pilgrim companions… my secular speculations’ (np). Finally, a sense of personal transformation usually dominates the pilgrim’s experience. Griffin thus returns ‘transformed and triumphant’ (p. 4), having learned ‘to let go of my pride’ amidst the dynamics of freely giving and freely receiving that define what Victor Turner famously calls the communitas of pilgrimage (p. 60).

Griffin undertakes a double pilgrimage totalling over 1300 kilometres: the Camino Catalan from Barcelona to Pamplona, there joining the Camino Français to Santiago de Compostela. Reflecting upon the ways in which particular experiences shaped and reshaped Griffin’s preconceived sense of self, others, and the world and her place in it, Dancing on the Head of a Pin comprises 22 chapters—or better, excursuses. Many sections revolve around remembered moments that reflection later reveals to have been rich in transformative significance, like the spots of time propelling William Wordsworth’s The Prelude. On the Camino Catalan, for example, Antoni Gaudi’s Basílica de la Sagrada Família in Barcelona, the medieval Benedictine monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat, and the traditional life of smaller communities reawaken Griffin to the spiritual richness of the Roman Catholic Christian heritage. During the longer Camino Français, encounters with fellow pilgrims and local folk stand out, like the anonymous nun who guides Griffin to an albergue in crowded Pamplona (p. 54) or the Spanish grandmother who returns
cash left in an ATM to a young pilgrim (pp. 60–61). For such figures, the otherwise sceptical Griffin appropriates the conventional moniker of angels, as conditions of despair, loneliness and physical pain slowly yield to conditions of joy, friendship and a strengthening conviction to complete the journey (p. 91). Thus transformed, she eventually offers a ‘heartfelt prayer to God’ for bringing her safely home, the Camino a liminal experience evoking the sense that she had ‘danced on the head of a pin’ (p. 131).

An interreligious flavour also infuses Griffin’s narrative. Despite her Roman Catholic schooling, she has been ‘immersed… in Buddhism’ for over thirty years (p. 45). Simple decisions may thus disguise complex theological issues. Her swollen feet a mess of ‘open wounds’, Griffin appeals to the compassion of the Buddha, rejects Roman Catholic preferences for the mortification of the flesh, and takes a bus for comfort (p. 46). This ‘heresy’ saves her feet and enables her to complete the pilgrimage she otherwise might have abandoned (p. 48). Conversely, the memory of Tibetan Buddhists sweeping away intricate sand mandalas to suggest ‘the impermanence of all things’ (p. 114) helps Griffin understand why pious devotees trample ‘kilometres’ of carefully arranged flowers carpeting a processional route to the Roman Catholic cathedral in Sarria (pp. 113–14). Indeed, in the last analysis she concludes that the spirit of communitas infusing the Camino creates a sense of mutual honesty and openness that transcends differences in belief and attitude, for ‘a compassionate heart’ lies at the heart of both Roman Catholic Christian and Buddhist traditions (p. 124).

Towards the end of the book, Griffin reflects upon the way in which the physical risks of her travels were intensified by type 1 diabetes, which requires regular doses of insulin to avoid potentially fatal diabetic ketoacidosis. Then, however, an Epilogue reconfigures these bodily exertions as ‘a journey of the mind’ (p. 137) that leaves ‘enduring impressions of… the landscape, the people, the food, the architecture and the religion’ and connects Griffin not just to fellow travellers but also to pilgrims past and pilgrims future (p. 138). Over 70 vivid photographs further enliven the text. Ranging widely, subjects include companions along the way, urban and rural scenes, religious sites and symbols, hostels and tourist attractions, and even unnerving close-ups of blisters on an ‘angry foot’ (p. 87). On the downside, careless proofreading has left pagination out of kilter; for example, ‘Contents’ has the last excursus, ‘Passport to Nowhere’, starting on p. 113, but it begins on p. 129. All in all, though, Dancing on the Head of a Pin reminds us of wider horizons, especially amidst the constricting conditions of the SARS-CoV-2
pandemic. Though the literature of pilgrimage is vast, Griffin’s narrative earns a worthy place in the canon, testifying to the continuing power of such journeying to transform lives, whether undertaken for secular or spiritual reasons. In another vein, finally, the book’s lively and contemporary character will easily engage students of the religious from secondary school to college and university.

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