

GUIDEBOOK FOR AN ARMCHAIR PILGRIMAGE

Smith, Phil; Whitehead, Tony; Schott, John.
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Felix Fabri (1441-1502) was a Swiss Dominican theologian who came up with a novel idea. He had travelled to Egypt and made pilgrimages to Palestine. Fabri realized that not every pious person was as fortunate as he. If the pilgrims can't go to Palestine, he thought, then Palestine can come to the pilgrims. He published a number of handbooks to be used as virtual tips to Jerusalem. They could travel, with Fabri's descriptions to the holy city in their minds. Pretty neat.



Here we have a modern day analogue. Phil Smith, aka The Crab Man (he walks sideways) and Tony Whitehead have created a virtual pilgrimage through a section of south Devon. Smith and Whitehead are psychogeographers. It is defined by Guy Debord (1931 -1994), a French Marxist and philosopher as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.”

Messrs Smith and Whitehead have one large advantage over our Dominican wanderer. Not having to rely on illuminated manuscript their work can be illustrated by photography. John Schott's beautiful photography make a mental hologram of the journey, finding something lovely even in the bleakest landscape.

The pilgrimage is broken down into 19 days to help recreate the idea of a journey in temporal as well as mental space. I will not trace the whole trip as this would spoil the book but instead look at some highlights along the way.

The pilgrimage reminds me of the 1964 film *7 Faces of Dr Lao* based on the 1935 novel *The Circus of Dr Lao* by Charles G Finney. At the end of the film Dr Lao, the proprietor of a circus of wonders tells a young boy “*every time you see wonder in a handful of dust you are part of the Circus of Dr Lao*”. Here the mundane becomes wonderful and unsuspected treasures are unearthed beneath your nose. Here are some gems:

Three stone angels, wings aloft and bearing stars on their brows are the monument to three sisters, Emily, Rosamund and Mary, drowned in the Nile when their boat overturned trapping them in their cabin.

Voodoo-esque morris men, crow winged and skull faced lead you in a booze-fuelled dance beneath a great hill.

A hidden Arcadian garden where Pan's pipes played and the wine of Bacchus flowed is explored.

A map of bones is found in a dusty museum were potential creatures burn for a brief moment.

With a vampire squid as your guide you see dragons, sea serpents and whales through the eyes of ancient people.

Why is Arthur Balfour so important?

There is much much more here but you will have to pick up the [guidebook](#) and make a pilgrimage of your own.

Richard Freeman