

*Algeria's Way* by Alex Smith (Umuzi) R130

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The Way of the title of this novel is, amongst other things, the pilgrim's road, along which for centuries travellers have made their way to the tomb of St James at Santiago de Compostela, and which has now become something of an alternative tourist attraction. Algeria, the narrator and main character, is a young South African woman of such astounding beauty that people fall in love with her at sight. In the first sentence of the novel she likens herself to opium: "Imagine, if you will, how opium would feel if it had a conscience and a heart and was born gazing up at Table Mountain."

This is an interesting literary device, but on a realistic level there's something unbearably arch about a narrator who keeps telling you how irresistible she is to her fellow-pilgrims: "I keep my head down and my eyes averted to spare their ignorance." In spite of her efforts, she is forever being fondled and propositioned by men and women alike. To exacerbate her plight, Algeria is a strict vegan, which in a blood-loving country leaves her little to eat. Furthermore, she has been three-timed by her boyfriend in South Africa, and memories of him keep surfacing to distract her from the rigours of the pilgrim's route. There is also a suppressed memory, now hypnotised into consciousness, of something nasty in the woodshed.

At its least problematic, this is an unconventional novel of the road. Spain is, after all, the birthplace of the picaresque novel, characterised by the fact that its protagonist is ever on the move. At this level, *Algeria's Way* offers an intriguing new take on an old form, and the novel works best as a graphic description of the long walk that makes up the pilgrimage: the various town and hostels, the varieties of pilgrims, the landscape: these are vividly and wittily described. "This pilgrimage with all its doped and doting pilgrims" is observed with a satiric edge that does much to cut through their often vaporous musings and enthusiasms.

The fellow pilgrims, in fact, are a needy bunch, and not only because of their infatuation with Algeria; there are abused wives, jilted girl friends, women who lost their babies. Algeria spends half her time trying to get away from them, and on this showing one can hardly blame her. One pilgrim, Diana, is inexplicably wedded to a very heavy rucksack that she doesn't allow out of her sight, even takes to the shower with her. For reasons not clear to this reader she does, though, eventually surrender the bag to Algeria, who uncomplainingly assumes the extra burden. There are mutterings about the mysterious contents of the bag, but the reader is never enlightened as to their nature.

There is also Miguel, the womaniser, almost as magnetically attractive as Algeria herself, although she trumps him in this department in that he falls for her more heavily than she for him. We are told that Algeria is the protagonist in Miguel's diary, but it's difficult to make out whether we are supposed to take the novel we are reading as that diary.

Certainly the form of the novel would suggest otherwise; but why, then, the portentous references to Miguel's diary?

Much of the novel seems to hover between an entertaining account of a difficult trip, and a mystical search for meaning. The down-to-earth details of the journey at times yield to visions of a talkative Spirit of Love, which it is difficult to know how to take: a tongue-in-cheek rendering of the kind of New Age mumbo-jumbo that this kind of event attracts,

or a serious attempt at Meaning? The blurb tells us that this is “a journey of the mind as much as through the landscape of Northern Spain”, and it is in the former respect that Algeria may part company from her readers as much as from her fellow pilgrims. We don’t know whether she’s a seeker after spiritual sustenance or just an anorexic with boyfriend problems.

Still, the writing is competent, the characters intriguing, the pace brisk. If it doesn’t shake down into a coherent whole, that may be part of the design, part of the confusion of the narrator, which, we are given to understand, is cleared up by her vision of Love and her perception, in Santiago, of the “staggering beauty” of Catholicism, not to mention her portentous insight that “Shared rituals are an acknowledgement of all things, a reminder, a reminder we all vitally need, that people are not alone, that people are part of the whole system of life. Confession is psychotherapy!”

It may be that the book’s disjunction of tones stems from the attempt to graft a post-conversion insight onto a pre-conversion experience. The book is addressed to Algeria’s “Sisters”, that is, her fellow-nuns in the Carmelite vegetarian community she has joined. In the nature of things and of Carmelitism, this creates problems for the novelist -- and for the reader.