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Finding a Good Read: Journeys

A regular column to help you find a good read.

Journeys are everywhere in books and there are many different reasons for going: escape, reunion, adventure, exploration. And the landscapes of journeys may be recognisable places or fantastic realms.

One of the earliest literary journeys is Homer's poem **The Odyssey**, about the 10-year voyage home of the Greek hero Odysseus after the Trojan War. It also gave us the word to describe any long and arduous travel.

Geoffrey Chaucer's poem **The Canterbury Tales** is a series of stories told by pilgrims as they travel from London to the shrine of St Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The stories range from morality tales to bawdy sex romps and the tellers include a knight, a merchant, a nun, a miller and a very in your face wife from Bath. The language of 1400 looks very different from modern English but read it aloud and you soon get the hang of it: 'Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote.../ Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimage'. Or there are some great translations around to dip into.



For a more modern take, try Rachel Joyce's **The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Frye**. Harold is a 65-year old retiree who learns that an old friend is ill and in a hospice. He writes her a letter and sets off to mail it. But he finds himself walking the length of England from his home in Devon to the hospice in Berwick. It's a great read and has just been released as a film starring Jim Broadbent and Penelope Wilton.

Science fiction is a *genre* that relies on physical travel into deep space and imaginative exploration of far-reaching ideas and possibilities. Try classics like **2001, a Space Odyssey** or Andy Weir's **The Martian** and **Project Hail Mary** or Douglas Adams' **The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, a brilliant and hilarious read even if you don't like sci fi.

River journeys can be a great escape or a terrifying nightmare. There's Mark Twain's **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, about a white boy who takes to the Mississippi River to avoid the 'sivilising' efforts of his aunt. Along the way he meets runaway slave Jim and discovers true friendship amid the inhumanity of slavery in 19c America.

Joseph Conrad's **Heart of Darkness** centres on a journey down the Congo River in search of a missing white man. But the heart of darkness turns out not to be Africa but the savage cruelty and exploitation of European colonisers. The book was also adapted for the film **Apocalypse Now**, about the horrors of American involvement in the Vietnam War.

American literature is often about journeys, from stories of European settlement and the search for a new home to tales of the restless urge to escape. In some ways, the whole genre of the **Western** centres on journeys, from Charles Portis's **True Grit** to the savage novels of **Cormac McCarthy**. Journeying is also at the heart of road movies and books, from Jack Kerouac's iconic novel **On the Road** to films like **Drive My Car**.



Animal journeys can make for great reading. Jack London's **The Call of the Wild** and **White Fang** explore literal journeys during the Alaskan gold rush of the 1890s but also crossing the boundaries between dog and wolf. Anthony McGowan updated the story in his latest novel **Dogs of the Deadlands** about the re-wilding of dogs and the landscape in the years after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986.

Journeys are sometimes taken to heal broken bodies or minds. Jon Krakauer's **Into the Wild** is based on the true story of a troubled young man who becomes disillusioned with modern society and travels into the Alaskan wilderness to find himself. Cheryl Strayed's **Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Coast Trail** tells the story of her 1100 mile lone hike after the death of her mother and the drug addiction that followed it. Closer to home, in **The Salt Path** Raynor Winn recounts the 630 mile walk along the Southwest Coast Path that she and her husband took after he was diagnosed with cancer and they were both made homeless. It was shortlisted for the 2018 Costa and Wainwright Awards and was described by the judges as 'an absolutely brilliant story that needs to be told about the human capacity to endure and keep putting one foot in front of another'.

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