

# History, adventure in *A Hug for the Apostle*

**A Hug for the Apostle**  
Laurie Dennett  
Macmillan of Canada

review by **Moira Coulter**

**A** Hug for the Apostle is for the historian, the lover of adventure and for anyone who appreciates energy and determination such as that displayed by the book's author, Laurie Dennett.

In the spring of 1986, carrying a backpack containing thirty pounds of possessions, Laurie Dennett walked from Chartres in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, following as closely as possible the medieval pilgrimage route. Thousands of pilgrims dating back to the twelfth century had journeyed to Santiago to honour James, the first of the apostles to be martyred.

Dennett's reason for going was different. Her mother suffers severely from multiple sclerosis (M.S.), and this journey was undertaken to raise money for all those who have the degenerative disease. To all those who are irritated by charities hounding you

for donations, rest easy. Beyond a scant introduction, Dennett barely mentions the M.S. drive behind her walk. Instead, this book is a record of her pilgrimage, the historical sites along the route and the memorable people she met.

"...you realize that the road to Compostela is a beginning, not an end."

Dennett has chosen to structure her book on her journal written while "on the road." This choice has its advantages and disadvantages. While the pilgrimage is incredible and awe-inspiring, her daily life consisting of walking and cathedral-viewing tended to be dull and repetitive. The diary entries written

on a daily basis reflected that repetitiveness. I was soon bogged down in her seemingly endless descriptions of the cathedrals and other historical landmarks. Unless one shares her keen enthusiasm for medieval architecture and monarchs, these travel-guide histories become dreadfully tiresome.

The diary entry form, however, accounts for the ease and informality of style. Her fluidness allows the reader to glide easily through her sightseeing, thus preventing me from judging her dullness too harshly.

The main strength of this book lies in Dennett's characterization of the people she met during her pilgrimage. There is Odile, the warm-hearted French mother and teacher, who, upon hearing of Dennett's pilgrimage, gave bed and breakfast to the author unconditionally and unexpectedly. There is Patrice who despite being confined to his wheelchair as a result of a spinal cord injury refuses to allow, as Dennett remarks, "this affliction to define him." There is even the small incidental people like the boy who revived a fatigued Dennett with a cupful of wine, or the shepherd who noted she was a pilgrim with the cheery greeting: "Please, give the apostle a hug." This greeting is the standard salutation given to all pilgrims and accounts for this book's unusual title.

One of the most memorable characters is Antonio, a pilgrim travelling independently to Santiago, but who accompanied Dennett during the last few days of the journey. Dennett draws a lively and amusing picture of this Spaniard who charms Dennett with his chivalric politeness and his anxiety that she should only retain good memories of his native country. This book would have been undoubtedly richer if Dennett had focused less on the cold and sterile architecture and more on the warm and appealing people.

The mixture of architecture and people presented in the text is reflected in the eight pages of colour photographs. The pictures of imposing and dignified structures are pleasingly offset by the snapshots of Dennett and her friends emanating casual and warm friendliness. Sketches are also liberally scattered throughout the book, aiding the reader's understanding of interesting cultural sites.



Detail from the Church of the Saviour at Villar de Donas near Palas Do Rei.

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Dennett accomplished her goal: she funded the apostle of St. James. She also raised over \$60,000 in Britain and Canada for the fight against M.S. This book is also a fund-raising effort, a second ambitious project for Ms. Dennett. But in reaching that goal, Dennett has realized that she has not reached the end. Quoting Odile, Dennett explains that "you realize that the road to Compostela is a beginning, not an end." If, for one, hope that Dennett sees this book as a beginning for others of the same exceptional quality to inform, to entertain and yes, to inspire her readers.



Resting place of St. James: Santiago de Compostela.

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