

Maura R. O'Connor

*Wayfinding:
The Science and Mystery of How Humans Navigate the World*

New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019, 354 pp.

Reviewed by Juan Acevedo

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Like previous reviewers, I have also been enthralled by the flowing prose of this gem of a book, which straddles with grace the boundaries of travel literature and popular science. I recommend it unreservedly, and I would like to draw attention to some of its aspects I have not found reviewed elsewhere, for it is a narrative on several levels, with several discourses interweaving almost on every page.

At first sight, it is a book about three living wayfinding traditions: the Inuit, the Australian Aboriginal, and the Polynesian. Not little of the charm of the book is owed to the opportunity to have a glimpse into these old ways, and to meet personally some of their representatives, like Solomon Awa and Bill Harney. It is enlightening, from our urban “overmapped” existence, to learn about them and their likes, who are so intimately attuned to their environment that the mere possibility of getting lost is inconceivable. You can tell this is a good travel book because it makes you long for distant places and cultures.

Then, in careful juxtaposition, the author takes us along on a scientific tour, filling us in on the historic detail and bringing us along to visit the laboratories and the university rooms and classrooms, drawing from neuroscience, evolutionary biology, anthropology, psychology, particle physics, philosophy, and other disciplines, to shed light on the central questions: how do humans find their way? how unlike other species or not? and how is our wayfinding related to our cognition and nature? Along this quest, O'Connor succeeds in presenting her scientists and thinkers in a warm human light, thus conveying the genuine burning interest that drives them, as it does so much of scientific research, often unnoticed and overlooked. You can tell this is a good science book because it leaves you with more questions than answers, because some of that burning interest is passed on to the reader, who wants to go and learn more, to go to the libraries and the teachers.

And then somewhere between these two levels, within the counterpoint of exotic vast expanses and lecture halls, is where the most interesting takeaways of the book are to be found: deep insights into our conflicted human longings for home and for wayfaring, into the nature of space, and into the frayed relation between traditional and modern science.

This latter theme runs ever so discreetly through the book, avoiding facile simplifications of both the type “the ancients knew it all” and “we have now done away with the myths.” Instead, thanks to the delightful narrative patchwork, a profound consonance of the two approaches is hinted at, or even just left unuttered, but clearly there, in one comprehensively human scientific view.

On the subject of space, its relation to the constitution of our brain, and particularly the fascinating role of the hippocampus, is like a prelude to a philosophical turn, to wonder how moving and dwelling in space is “an essential aspect of our being.” Beyond egocentric (linear) and allocentric (planar) wayfinding approaches, the key lingering question is to what extent our minds and feelings are “shaped like clay” by space. If as children we learn to read the world through our movements and displacements—learning *by heart*—, if memory and spatial orientation are so intimately related, to what extent is our experience of space integral to our consciousness of self?

The answer lies, as is so often the case with the cardinal questions, in one of the facets of love: *topophilia*, the love of place, of a location in space, and its seminal dialectics with *nostalgia*, the pain of separation, the urge to travel.

Some have read in O’Connor’s book a call to arms of sorts against GPS devices, and as a gloomy take on the modern urban loss of space awareness and navigation skills, but I have found her to be much more subtle, because so much more scientific in a very living, engaging and profound sense of the word. In her “focal” conceptual wayfinding through to *topophilia*, one is keenly aware of all the senses of Greek *philia*, as in *philosophy*, which is not just a vague “love” of wisdom, but a playful and erotic and longing and vitally serious long-life exercise in probing the fundamental questions. You can tell this is a good philosophy book, of metaphysics in particular, and as such it is far from surprising, or rather perfectly appropriate, that its closing pages should evoke Simone Weil’s piercing words: “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”

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