

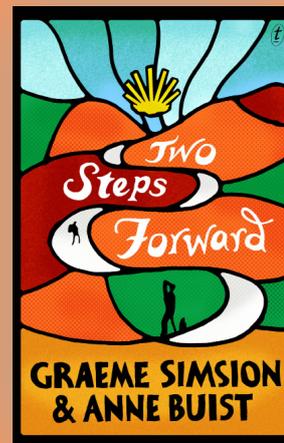
# Two Steps Forward



Graeme Simsion & Anne Buist

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## ABOUT GRAEME SIMSION AND ANNE BUIST

Graeme Simsion is a Melbourne-based novelist and screenwriter. He is the author of *The Rosie Project*, which won the 2014 ABIA Book of the Year and has sold over three million copies worldwide, and *The Rosie Effect* and *The Best of Adam Sharp*. Anne Buist is the Chair of Women's Mental Health at the University of Melbourne and has over twenty-five years' clinical and research experience in perinatal psychiatry. Her novels featuring forensic psychiatrist Natalie King are *Medea's Curse* and *Dangerous to Know*. This is the couple's first book together.

## A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO TWO STEPS FORWARD

The Camino de Santiago is the setting for an old-fashioned pilgrimage and new-world self-discovery – plus a romance between two middle-aged walkers.

Without their necessarily knowing it at first, the walk is a way for both Zoe and Martin – who set off independently from a small town in central France – to come to an understanding of themselves and their unresolved issues before they can 'move on'.

Zoe has made a spur-of-the-moment decision to walk – possibly for what Martin thinks of as 'hazy spiritual reasons' (p. 29) – spurred on by an antique jewelled scallop shell. Martin is doing the Camino for pragmatic engineering and business reasons – to test a cart he has designed – although he acknowledges the personal challenges involved and is looking forward to time for reflection.

Both Zoe and Martin have to mend relationships, even if sometimes posthumously. And they both have to resolve their own issues in solitude before they can be together.

As Zoe walks, she works through her thoughts and emotions, first about her mother and the Catholic Church, then about her husband and his recent death, and then about what she did for her French friend Camille.

Martin has been shaken up by his divorce (p. 28) and has 'a limited toolkit for dealing with human relations' (216). Nevertheless he too comes to understandings, mostly regarding his relationship with his daughter, but also about his ex-wife, and eventually himself.

Perhaps it is 'being in the moment, having space and peace, taking each day as it came' (p. 94) that each finds most helpful.

In the middle of the walk, they both find themselves realising that 'here we both are in the middle of our lives, starting again' (p. 240). Zoe goes on to ask 'Are we going to be bold or just go back to what we were?' As promised by the pilgrimage expert Monsieur Chevalier, the Camino brings change. 'In the end I believed not just in fate, with all its capriciousness, but in the special power of the Camino. It reminded me that sometimes there are things we cannot do alone,' says Zoe (p. 340).

Through the novel's two central characters, the two authors explore ideas about fate and choice, religion and spirituality, understanding and change, and individuals and relationships.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the two quotes chosen as epigraphs. How do they resonate with the novel? Is bravery required for departing without a destination? How do we know when it is time to leave, and what it is that we need to leave? And is midlife inevitably about realising wrong turns in life? Is it possible to move our ladder and change walls?

2. 'Fate' is the first word of the novel proper and there are many discussions of 'Fate, destiny, karma—whatever you want to call it' (106). How do you think the concepts of fate, destiny and choice play out in *Two Steps Forward*? What about in life? The quotation above ends: 'The universe has plans—we just aren't smart enough to know how it works' (106). Similarly, Zoe says: 'We were all shown signs. It was just that we usually missed them, or misinterpreted them' (p. 146). Does the book support the idea that the universe is a guiding force and that we should pay more attention to it? What of Zoe's realisation that 'It was fate that sent me but its lesson was to rely less on fate than I ever had.' (p. 347)
3. Zoe is a lapsed Catholic, and her attitude to the church shifts through the novel. Do you think the book takes a position on formal religion as compared to a more general spirituality?
4. There are several mentions of 'negative energy' in the novel. What do you take this to mean? How does this relate to the idea of the universe guiding and providing?
5. Zoe and Martin set off with different purposes. How do their walks compare in the end? Discuss what they each realise, understand and learn about themselves. Discuss the ways in which each of them changes. Do you have more sympathy or liking for one or other of these two characters?
6. The Texan Ed Walker learns he doesn't like walking and doesn't like being alone. He stops walking after three days to return to his children (p. 116). Is this a 'good' decision? How does it compare to Zoe's and Martin's decisions about continuing to walk—and about their children?
7. How or why does walking the Camino bring about self-knowledge and change? Does it inevitably do so? Towards the end of her walk, Zoe wonders what the point is: 'If I'd stayed in LA and seen a therapist, I'd have worked through the same stuff' (p. 299). Is she right?
8. 'Not walking, for me, would be cheating—peace of mind was within my grasp, and I would never get it, never feel I *deserved* it, if I didn't walk.' (255). Why does Zoe feel so compelled to continue walking? When she asks herself that question she ponders: 'Magic or stubbornness? Or something else?' (p. 256). What do you think?
9. 'We cheat on many things in life...But some things matter more than others,' says Fabiana (343). What are these things for you, the things you wouldn't cheat on?
10. What do you think of the gender roles in the book – the female artist and the male engineer? Do you think Zoe and Martin are equally in touch with their emotions by the end of their story? Are their experiences on the Camino different because of their genders?
11. What about the national stereotypes—the petty French, the loud Americans, the reserved English, the arrogant Germans, the partying Brazilians? Is Zoe a typical Californian? Is Martin a typical Brit? Do you think the novel looks beyond the clichés? Or do these stereotypes hold true in your experience?
12. How does the novel work as a romance? What features of a romance novel does it use (for instance, the hurdles the lovers have to overcome) and which does it subvert? What draws Zoe and Martin together? Is their relationship fated?
13. Zoe tells Martin: 'I don't need you to take care of me' (p. 131). Does this end up being wholly or partially true? Or not true at all? Does Martin need Zoe (beyond her pushing him in the cart)? What should be done alone, and what with help? What is the special power of the Camino?
14. Do you think that individuals have to resolve their own issues before they can have a successful relationship with someone else?
15. Are we supposed to believe that the scallop charm has an influence on the wearer's experience? Discuss other symbols in the novel (the goose outside the antique shop, for example, or the bell in Santiago). How do they work? How literally are we supposed to interpret them?
16. At one point Martin says: 'There was an element of repetition about the walk' (p. 138). How do the authors stop the description of the walk from becoming repetitious?
17. Zoe talks about *The Pilgrim's Progress* and uses it as a basis for her cartoons. Why is it mentioned in the novel? If you are familiar with John Bunyan's allegory, compare the two books. Is *Two Steps Forward* an allegory?
18. Why do you think Martin shares his name with a Jack London novel from the early twentieth century? What about other characters' names: Is Monsieur Chevalier a knight? Does Zoe represent life?
19. Have you / would you walk the Camino or a similar pilgrimage path? Has the book inspired you to do so? What did / would you expect to get out of it?