It was a certain unforgettable ex-girlfriend, Harry Mount confesses — named only as ‘S’ in his dedication — who came up with the idea for this new book, which he has therefore written to honour her, or in the hope of winning her back, or possibly, in some obscure way, to annoy her. Whichever it is, S must surely share some blame for its misleading subtitle.

You can’t follow in the ‘footsteps’ of mythology’s greatest sailor. As Homer repeatedly says in the *Odyssey*, ‘No one travels on foot to Ithaca.’ OK, this is pedantic, but the author doesn’t really follow in Odysseus’s wake either. If that’s the book you want, try Tim Severin, or, better, Beaty Rubens and Oliver Taplin. It’s true that, over several years, Mount swings by and box-ticks many spots fancifully associated with Odysseus’s decade-long journey from Troy to his Ithacan home: Gibraltar, which some identify as the land of the dead; the Messina straits, where Scylla may have lurked and Charybdis squatted; and so on. Yet he also visits places such as Delphi and Marathon, which have no Odyssean connection.

He doesn’t seem all that interested in the *Odyssey* or in the extraordinary (superhuman yet fundamentally down-to-earth) character of Odysseus, whom he refers to scathingly as a ‘love-rat’ (which is, I think, missing the point). What Mount is interested in is history and humour, and it’s in these areas that he repeatedly knocks the ball out of the park.

There aren’t many books that make you laugh on the very first page, but this is one of them. The author contrasts the start of Odysseus’s journey, on the far Aegean beaches, beneath the smouldering wreck of Troy, with his own embarkation point: the Pret A Manger at Heathrow airport’s Terminal 5. That Harry is no hero is his book’s big joke, and it’s a good one.
A loser in love, as he asserts with brave if lugubrious persuasiveness, he is assailed by the fear that everyone he knows is married, getting married or about to make a serious commitment to marriage some time soon, while he himself is merely drifting, growing older and (as he says) balder. Even the news that the X Factor winner Susan Boyle is in a relationship provokes an amusing hissy fit. Elsewhere he admits the most glamorous injury he incurred while writing the book was when he stood up suddenly in the London Library and smacked his head on a metal shelf.

He makes an Eeyore-ishly entertaining tour guide, as he plods through olive groves and swelters on hillsides, scattering alpha anecdotes from his chino pockets. There was the time when Philip II of Macedon, advancing towards the Spartan region of Laconia, warned the inhabitants, ‘If I enter Laconia, I will raze Sparta.’ To which the Spartans responded with what is probably the best one-word comeback in history: ‘If.’

Or there’s the one he heard from the former Greek finance minister, Giorgios Papakonstantinou, whom some have blamed (unfairly) for his country’s economic crisis. A few years ago, after the finance ministry’s Christmas party, the owner of the venue sidled up to him and said, ‘You won’t be wanting a receipt, will you?’ ‘I don’t think you understand,’ Papakonstantinou replied. ‘I’m the finance minister.’ The owner absorbed this information. Then, at length, he repeated, ‘You won’t be wanting a receipt, will you?’

The book is packed with such goodies, even if it flouts the trade descriptions act. A truer title might have been Mount’s Parnassus: An Englishman’s Guide to Ancient Greece.

As he picks his way among the ruins, brooding on the past — his own, and that of Greece — the author remains essentially English. I was reminded of the character of Clive, as played by a moustachioed Hugh Grant in the film of E.M. Forster’s Maurice, who takes a tour of Ancient Greece and
finds amid the rubble a suggestion that, just possibly, homosexuality may not be the way forward. Equally, at times, Harry Mount has an air of being the living embodiment of the study of classics itself: noble, solitary, uneasily beleaguered, and sporting a slightly silly hat.