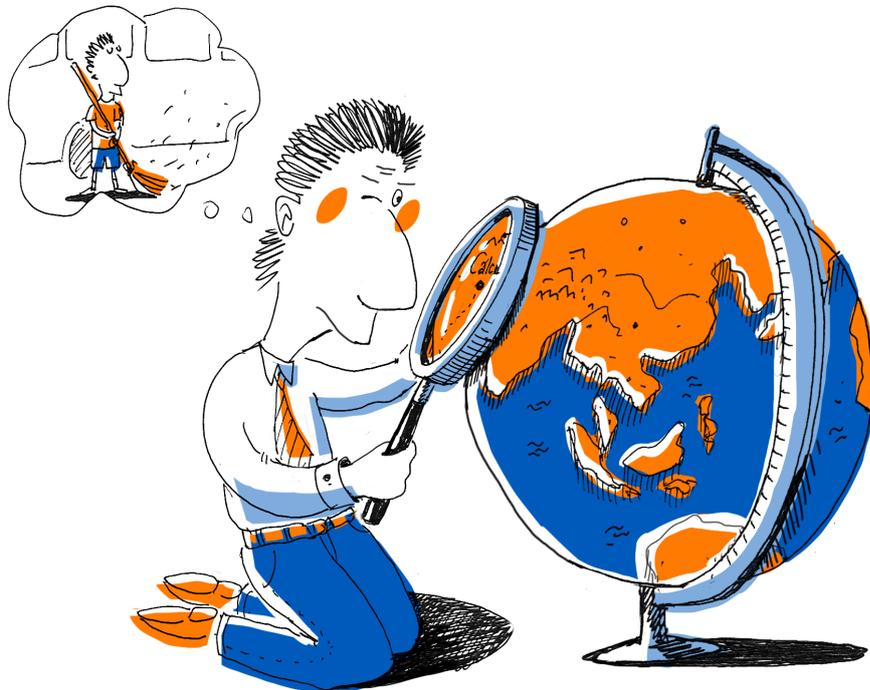


Boy, lost for 25 years, finds home on Google Earth

Saroo Brierley was five when he woke up alone on a train in Calcutta. He thought he would never see his family again. Two decades on, modern technology has helped him find his way home at last.



PSHE
CITIZENSHIP
GEOGRAPHY

Twenty-five years ago, two young brothers boarded a train in a small Indian town. They set out to ride the railway for a few days, sweeping carriage floors in return for a few rupees. When neither boy returned, their mother assumed that both were dead – until, last month, one of them miraculously reappeared on her doorstep.

With his elder brother watching over him, five-year-old Saroo had drifted to sleep in a railway station – but he awoke alone. In his confusion, Saroo boarded a mystery train. It carried him to Calcutta, where he found himself surrounded by uncaring crowds speaking a strange language.

Poor, illiterate and totally lost, Saroo became one of the city's countless street urchins. After a year spent living the harsh life of a beggar, he was rescued by an orphanage.

When a family in Tasmania heard about Saroo, they decided to adopt him. He agreed, and settled there happily. But

in 2004 he began to wonder about his roots. Without memory of names or locations, he browsed Google Earth for images of his vividly-remembered childhood home. It seemed futile; but one night, he came across a waterfall in which he had once played.

Last month Saroo finally returned to the village where he was born. His brother, he discovered, had been found dead on the rails shortly after his disappearance. But their mother was alive; and the reunion stunned them both. For a long time they could do little more than stare.

Saroo's story has become a sensation, and even looks set for the big screen. That is hardly a surprise: homecoming has always captured imaginations. Literature is littered with lost-and-found orphans like *Oliver Twist*.

And Saroo's is only the latest of several recent examples from the real world to have caused a stir. Last year, an Indonesian child washed away by a tsunami in

2004 was discovered by her grandfather in a cafe. She was identifiable only by a few hidden birthmarks and moles.

Then there is Carlina White. Snatched from a hospital as a newborn, she never felt at ease with the family who raised her. Aged 23, she discovered a picture of herself as a baby on a 'missing persons' site. After turning herself in to the police, she was at last reunited with her birth parents.

THE ROOT HOME?

Saroo's story is fascinating; but, ask doubters, why this fixation on our 'roots'? What connection can we really have to a past we barely even remember? Life happens in the present, they say; we should not let our past define us.

But Saroo himself says that since finding his way home he has 'slept better.' For him and many others, it is impossible to feel at ease without understanding where we have come from. Without a link to our past, they say, we will always feel lost.

Q & A

Q Why do people get so excited about this kind of thing?

A On one level, it's just a great story: a mystery, a persevering hero dedicated to discovering the truth, a final moment of revelation. But it also says something about the times that we live in: before the

internet, it's unlikely that Saroo could ever have found his home. Neither could Carlina White. There are many websites now dedicated to reuniting families, and stories like this are now more common than ever.

Q Great.

A Absolutely. Although some are a little disconcerted at how traceable we are these days. In 1985 a book was published called *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be*

Found. Few of its recommendations would work these days, and to some this suggests that we are under constant surveillance.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'A person who has lost their past cannot build their future.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

Calcutta – Calcutta (or Kolkata), is known as the City of Joy, and in many ways it is a vibrant place: a fast-developing city with a thriving economy, low crime rates and an intriguing imperial history. But like many Indian cities, it also has a dark side: a third of its population live in slums, without water

or sanitation. Many children are forced into begging or crime.

Tasmania – In a region of the world that is full of natural wonderlands, the Australian island of Tasmania is among the most unspoiled of them all. It is large and sparsely populated, with over 37% protected as a national park; but it's probably best known for the Tasmanian Devil, a

predatory animal made famous by *Looney Tunes* character 'Taz.'

Oliver Twist – Charles Dickens' famous orphan was probably based on the real-life case of Robert Blincoe, who suffered a youth of dangerous drudgery as a chimney sweep and factory worker. But his story was taken up by reformers and he became a minor hero, eventually finding success as a businessman. Unlike Oliver, though, Blincoe never discovered his family.

YOU DECIDE

1. How much does it matter to know where you and your family have come from?
2. Is it unhealthy to think a lot about the past?

ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you live in a world without mobile phones and the internet. Write a short story about an attempt to trace somebody who has mysteriously disappeared.

2. Saroo Brierley needed an exceptional visual memory to find his childhood home. How good is yours? Do some research on visual memory and design an experiment to test it. If you have time, try it on a partner.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

