

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry: A Novel
Rachel Joyce

Fiction

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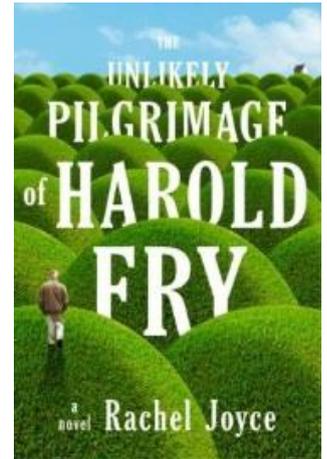
When Harold Fry nips out one morning to post a letter, leaving his wife Hoovering upstairs, he has no idea that he is about to walk from one end of the country to the other. He has no hiking boots or map, let alone a compass, waterproof or mobile phone. All he knows is that he must keep walking. To save someone else's life.

REVIEWS

Publishers Weekly Review

When Harold Fry, a morbidly shy, retired British brewery salesman, decides on a whim to walk the distance between his home in southern England and the hospice where his long-lost friend, Queenie Hennessey, is dying of cancer, he has no idea that his act will change his life and inspire hundreds of people. The motivation behind the trek and why he is burdened by guilt and the need to atone, are gradually revealed in this initially captivating but finally pedestrian first novel by English writer Joyce. During Harold's arduous trek, which covers 627 miles and 87 days, he uncoils the memory of his destructive rampage for which Queenie took the blame. He also acknowledges the unraveling of his marriage and his anguish about the lack of intimacy with his son. Plagued by doubt and exhaustion, he undergoes a dark night of the soul, but in the tradition of classical pilgrimages, he ultimately achieves spiritual affirmation. Joyce writes with precision about the changing landscape as Harold trudges his way across England. Early chapters of the book are beguiling, but a final revelation tests credulity, and the sentimental ending may be an overdose of what the Brits call "pudding."

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DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. Harold's journey is both physical and metaphorical. He is not the only character in the novel to go on a journey and Rachel Joyce has said that writing the book was in itself a journey. What other literary journeys does this novel call to mind?
2. Harold says he is not a religious man but his journey is called a pilgrimage and it is undoubtedly a leap of faith. How much and how consciously do you feel Rachel Joyce draws on Christian tenets and/or other belief systems in the novel.
3. Harold is a man with many flaws. Despite, or perhaps because of this, do you see him as an archetypal Englishman? Or is he an Everyman?
4. When we first meet Harold and Maureen, while they share breakfast they seem in different worlds. To what extent did you see Maureen as the cause of Harold's departure?
5. The mental health of several characters is called into question in the novel. Depression, Alzheimers and addiction are all diseases that touch many of us and yet mental illness remains to a great extent taboo in our society. How is Rachel Joyce using this? Do you find it effective?
6. Harold and Maureen are married but both are lonely. The couple Harold meets at Buckfast Abbey travel together but have also lost sight of what holds them together. What makes a marriage happy? How much is romantic happiness about being a pair and how much about other people and interests?
7. At the start of the book both Harold and Maureen have allowed friends to fall by the wayside. This story is all about how we all connect with one another. What makes someone a true friend and how does RJ represent friendship?
8. Regret is an emotion that plays a key part in the novel. Do you think Rachel Joyce sees it as a positive or negative force?
9. Is Harold's relationship with David the inevitable result of Harold's own upbringing?
10. Rachel Joyce writes beautifully about the English countryside – but how crucial to the telling of her story is the actual landscape she describes? How would it change the novel if it was set in Scotland, perhaps, or France, or . . . ?
11. The sea provides bookends for the novel and plays a vivid part in Harold's memories. Is this significant?

DISCUSSION STARTERS (CONTINUED)

12. How does Rachel Joyce use food, and the sharing of food in the novel?
13. How much are Harold's responses to his fellow pilgrims dictated by his past?
14. Was the ending of the novel a shock or the inevitable conclusion?
15. Who saves who in this novel?
16. Has The Unlikely pilgrimage of Harold Fry inspired you to do something out of the ordinary – take a journey? Renew contact with someone? Look at strangers with a new perspective?