About the Author

Rachel Joyce is a British author. She has written plays for BBC Radio Four, and jointly won the 2007 Tinniswood Award for her *To Be a Pilgrim*.

Her debut novel, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, was on the longlist for the 2012 Man Booker Prize. In December 2012, she was awarded the "New Writer of the Year" award by the National Book Awards for the novel. Her second novel, *Perfect*, was published in 2013 to critical acclaim. *The Love Song of Miss Queenie Hennessy*, a companion novel to *Harold Fry*, was released in 2015.

She is married to actor Paul Venables, and lives in Gloucestershire with her husband and four children.
About the Book

Meet Harold Fry, recently retired. He lives in a small English village with his wife, Maureen, who seems irritated by almost everything he does, even down to how he butters his toast. Little differentiates one day from the next.

Then one morning the mail arrives, and within the stack of quotidian minutiae is a letter addressed to Harold in a shaky scrawl from a woman he hasn’t seen or heard from in twenty years. Queenie Hennessy is in hospice and is writing to say goodbye.

Harold pens a quick reply and, leaving Maureen to her chores, heads to the corner mailbox. But then, as happens in the very best works of fiction, Harold has a chance encounter, one that convinces him that he absolutely must deliver his message to Queenie in person. And thus begins the unlikely pilgrimage at the heart of Rachel Joyce’s remarkable debut. Harold Fry is determined to walk six hundred miles from Kingsbridge to the hospice in Berwick-upon-Tweed because, he believes, as long as he walks, Queenie Hennesssey will live.

Still in his yachting shoes and light coat, Harold embarks on his urgent quest across the countryside. Along the way he meets one fascinating character after another, each of whom unlocks his long-dormant spirit and sense of promise. Memories of his first dance with Maureen, his wedding day, his joy in fatherhood, come rushing back to him—allowing him to also reconcile the losses and the regrets. As for Maureen, she finds herself missing Harold for the first time in years.

And then there is the unfinished business with Queenie Hennesssey.

A novel of unsentimental charm, humor, and profound insight into the thoughts and
feelings we all bury deep within our hearts, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* introduces Rachel Joyce as a wise—and utterly irresistible—storyteller.
Book Club Discussion Guide

*The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*
by Rachel Joyce

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Discussion Questions

1. Why does the story that the garage girl tells Harold affect him so deeply? Do you think Harold would have mused on faith and gone on this tremendous journey had the garage girl told Harold that her aunt died of cancer anyway?

2. How does Maureen’s relationship with Rex allow her the perspective to understand Harold’s decision to walk?

3. The publicity that Harold receives on his journey often feels like a curse. What are some benefits that come out of the media coverage?

4. What does Harold’s choice to live off the land and other people’s kindness mean to him?

5. In what ways is the incident at the beach with his son representative of Harold’s fears about himself? In what ways do those fears reflect the reality?

6. “He had not said goodbye to his son. Maureen had; but Harold had not. There would always be this difference.” Do you think anything would have been different for Harold had he had the moment of closure with David’s body at the funeral home? How did this difference manifest over the years?

7. How might things have been different for Harold and Maureen if she had told him about Queenie’s visit to the house in which she explained why she took the blame? Maureen thinks her withholding of this information caused years of irreversible damage. How might Harold have been affected if he’d known any sooner that Queenie didn’t blame him at all?

8. What state did you think Queenie would be in when Harold reached the end of his
journey? Were you surprised by their interaction once he got there? How do you think that scene might have been changed if Harold had arrived any sooner?

9. Think about all the people Harold met along the way—the garage girl, the barkeep, the woman with the apples and water, Martina, Wilf. Had Harold not met even one of them, might his journey have diverged, stalled, or even ended before he reached Queenie?

10. Where would Harold be today if he hadn’t made his pilgrimage? What would the state of his relationship with Maureen be? How would news of Queenie’s death have affected him? What would his life look like?

11. Does Harold’s journey feel secularly or religiously spiritual to you? Does it change over time? How does his idea of faith fit with your own beliefs?

12. What would it take to get you to make an extraordinary journey? Is there anyone or anything that could compel you to walk six hundred miles? What would such a journey mean to you?

13. The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry has become an international bestseller. Readers from Taiwan, Germany, England, Australia, the United States, Italy, South Africa, and many other countries have embraced the novel. What do you think accounts for Harold reaching the hearts of so many people from all over the world?
Book Club
Discussion Guide

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry
by Rachel Joyce

Reviews

Rachel Joyce’s first novel...sounds twee, but it’s surprisingly steely, even inspiring, the kind of quirky book you want to shepherd into just the right hands. If your friends don’t like it, you may have to stop returning their calls for a little while until you can bring yourself to forgive them.... [Joyce] has a lovely sense of the possibilities of redemption. In this bravely unpretentious and unsentimental tale, she’s cleared space where miracles are still possible.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

Harold’s journey is ordinary and extraordinary; it is a journey through the self, through modern society, through time and landscape. It is a funny book, a wise book, a charming book—but never cloying. It’s a book with a savage twist—and yet never seems manipulative. Perhaps because Harold himself is just wonderful.... I’m telling you now: I love this book.

Erica Wagner - The Times (UK)

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.”

Publishers Weekly

Soon after his retirement from a brewery in a quiet English village, Harold Fry...decides to embark on a 600-mile walk to say goodbye to [a dying friend]..... The result is a novel of deep beauty and wisdom about the human condition; Harold, a deeply sympathetic protagonist, has much to teach us. Verdict: A great novel; essential reading for fans of literary fiction. —Patrick Sullivan, Manchester Community Coll., CT

Library Journal
Solitary walks are perfect for imagining how one might set the world to rights, and Harold does just that, although not always with uplifting results, as he ruminates on missed opportunities and failed relationships.... [A] gentle and genteel charmer, brimming with British quirkiness yet quietly haunting in its poignant and wise examination of love and devotion.

**Booklist**

Those with the patience to accompany the protagonist on this meandering journey will receive an emotional payoff at the end. [A]n allegory that requires many leaps of faith, while straddling the line between the charming and cloying (as well as the comic and melodramatic). Manipulative but moving.

**Kirkus Reviews**