

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* by Rachel Joyce

BOOK GROUP

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rachel Joyce is the author of the international bestseller *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*. She is also the award-winning writer of more than twenty plays for BBC Radio 4. She started writing after a twenty-year acting career, in which she performed leading roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company and won multiple awards. Rachel Joyce lives with her family on a Gloucestershire farm.

## BOOK SUMMARY

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 Hennessey 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 Hennessy.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Talk about the obvious—why Harold Fry never returns from the mailbox. Is he experiencing a mid-life crisis, or spiritual crisis...or what? Has anything like that ever happened to you—a snap decision that turned out to be not just of-the-moment, but momentous as well?
2. What is the significance, thematically, of Harold's yacht shoes?
3. "Life might appear ordinary simply because the person living it had been doing so for a long time." One of the themes in *Unlikely Pilgrimage* is how a seemingly ordinary life can take on extraordinary aspects. Do you consider your own life ordinary or extraordinary? In what way might we see our own lives or, say the lives of our neighbors, as remarkable?
4. How has Harold's past—his upbringing—shaped his adult life, especially his relationship with his wife and son?

5. Talk about the evolution of Harold Fry. What is his state of mind as he begins the journey, and how does he change during his long walk? What does he learn—about life and about himself?
6. Discuss the marital relationship, at the book's beginning, between Harold and Maureen. Maureen wants to believe that Harold's desertion has more to do with Queenie than with the state of the couple's marriage. Is she right...or not?
7. Why do couples continue in a relationship that no longer seems to fulfill a mutual need for either?
8. Describe Harold's relationship with his son, David.
9. What was Harold's relationship with Queenie...and in what way does he feel he betrayed her?
10. What does the waitress mean when she tells Harold that "if we don't go mad once in a while, there's no hope"? Have you ever felt like that?
11. What role does religious belief play in this novel?
12. What is Rachel Joyce satirizing as crowds begin to gather and Harold's journey becomes a cause celebre—with its t-shirts, Tweets, and Facebook posts? How do the people who join Harold in his trek see his journey—what are they looking for, or what do they expect from Harold? Why do the crowds eventually leave him behind?
13. What do Harold and Maureen come to understand about one another and marriage—and how does their marriage change? What do they come to realize about one another?
14. Why is Harold's journey called a "pilgrimage" in the title?
15. What is the relationship between the epigraph from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and this contemporary novel? Why does Rachel Joyce use Bunyan's book at both beginning and end?
16. Do you find the novel's end satisfying? Why or why not?

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