Discussion questions for *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* & a conversation with the author can be found at the end of the book.
About The Author

The author, Rachel Joyce, has written over twenty original afternoon plays for BBC Radio 4, and has created major adaptations for the Classic series and Woman’s Hour, as well as a TV drama adaptation for BBC2. In 2007 she won the Tinniswood Award for Best Radio Play. Joyce moved to writing after a twenty-year career in theatre and television, performing leading roles for the RSC, the Royal National Theatre, The Royal Court and Cheek by Jowl; and winning a Time Out Best Actress Award and the Sony Silver. She currently lives in Gloucestershire with her family and is at work on her second novel.

A letter from Rachel

“Six years ago ‘The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry’ began as a play for BBC Radio 4 that I wrote for my dad as he died of adenoid cystic cancer of the head and neck. I knew he would never hear it – and he didn’t. The last play of mine that he heard, he came to me afterwards and said, “You’ve done it again. You’ve made me cry.”

I was never sure if he was happy or sad about that.

The play won an award for best radio play. He didn’t know that either.

I had wanted for many years to write a book, but never had the courage it would work. I tried several times, and they came to nothing. (For a start, I didn’t show them to anyone.) So I enrolled on a novel writing course as a way of gaining confidence and also making a commitment.

I started writing through the night when my family were asleep. Or I’d have to stop the car on the way to school and jot something down on a bit of paper or the back of a receipt. My children got very good at taking notes as I dictated them. The other day I found one in my bag jotted down by my youngest daughter. It says: ‘what is Harold’s attitude to alcohol?’

In writing the book, I listened a lot to other people. I wove a lot in of what I saw as I passed. People move me very much. Sometimes I think I feel more for them than I can say; it goes into what I write. It was the same when I used to work as an actress. I felt able to express the things inside me that didn’t have a place anywhere else.

The book isn’t about my dad. But it maybe (somehow) is about me wanting him not to die. He was a very fit and sharp man. His battle against cancer took four years and was very distressing to witness. He was reduced and reduced and reduced. We didn’t talk about it because he didn’t want us to. He insisted on doing the London – Brighton cycle race shortly after one operation. After another, I’d go to visit him in hospital and he was in an awful way, but still wearing a shirt and tie. Just like Harold.

This book has my heart in it. I tried to write a story that wouldn’t quite fit the rules. So that the reader might think they knew where they were, and then discover they weren’t there after all. I wanted to make the implausible, plausible after all.”

Source: http://www.racheljoycebooks.com/about-the-author
Rachel Joyce’s ‘The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry,’ reviewed by Ron Charles

By Ron Charles, July 24, 2012

Rachel Joyce’s first novel — about a retired Englishman shuffling off to visit a dying colleague — 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.

The loyalty inspired by this unassuming story is surprising. Joyce was an actress for 20 years before she started writing plays for BBC Radio, but “The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry” is not a story of much drama. It begins on a spring day like any other in a small English village in Kingsbridge. Harold recently retired from the local brewery, and now has nothing to do. “He never did the unexpected,” Joyce writes. “Days went by and nothing changed; only his waist thickened, and he lost more hair.” Worse, after 47 years of marriage, he and his wife, Maureen, live like strangers in their spotless home, where the air is thick with blame. Their once-promising son never calls, never visits.

That grim stillness is disrupted on the opening page with the arrival of a “letter that would change everything.” Queenie Hennessy, a woman Harold worked with 20 years ago, has written to say goodbye; she’s dying of cancer. Recalling the “stout, plain-looking woman,” he composes a bland note of condolence and walks over to the post office. But along the way, he decides instead to deliver it by hand to Queenie’s hospice. That is, he decides to keep walking, past the post office, out of town and another 500 miles.

That marvelous note of absurdity tempers the pain that runs beneath this whole novel. Joyce has no interest in mocking Harold; she just describes his quixotic trek in a gentle, matter-of-fact voice, mile after mile. At 65, he’s never walked farther than his own driveway. He has no map, cellphone or change of clothes, and his thin yachting shoes couldn’t be less appropriate for such a journey across England. “Harold would have been the first to admit that there were elements to his plan that were not finely tuned,” Joyce writes. But when the idea of saving Queenie blooms in the fallow soil of his mind, he can’t be stopped. “I will keep walking,” he declares, “and she must keep living.”
Is this a late midlife crisis? Is Harold suffering the early symptoms of Alzheimer’s, or has he fallen under a spiritual delusion? Shouldn’t someone drive down the street and fetch him home before he hurts himself?

No.

For all of us perfectly responsible, stoop-shouldered suburbanites wearing a path in the living-room carpet, Harold’s ridiculous journey is a cause for celebration. This is Walter Mitty skydiving. This is J. Alfred Prufrock not just eating that peach, but throwing the pit out the window, rolling up his trousers and whistling to those hot mermaids. Released from the cage of his own passivity, Harold feels transformed, though he keeps his tie on. “The abundance of new life was enough to make him giddy,” Joyce writes. “England opened beneath his feet, and the feeling of freedom, of pushing into the unknown, was so exhilarating he had to smile. He was in the world by himself and nothing could get in the way or ask him to mow the lawn.”

If Joyce allows Harold these initial moments of euphoria, she quickly proves herself a stern realist. Over the days and weeks that follow, the physical demands of such a trip take their bloody toll. This may be the first novel that gives you sympathy blisters. And Harold’s ravaged feet are the least of his problems. All this free time in changing surroundings inspires great waves of remembering and reconsideration — most of it miserable. How did his once-happy marriage wither into such aggrieved silence? Why was he such a timid father to the boy he loved? What drives him, after all these years to reach out to Queenie? Considering those questions is far more agonizing for Harold than walking 500 miles in his taped-up shoes.

But his pain resonates with others, too, and soon Harold finds that his strange odyssey serves a purpose beyond himself. “He understood that in walking to atone for the mistakes he had made, it was also his journey to accept the strangeness of others,” Joyce writes. “As a passerby, he was in a place where everything, not only the land, was open. People would feel free to talk, and he was free to listen.” Some of those people are even weirder than he is: “a tax inspector who was a Druid,” “a priest who confessed to tweeting during mass,” “a white witch from Glastonbury.”

The most touching moments, though, are Harold’s encounters with people who need to see firsthand an act of pure, impractical hope like his.