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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry by Rachel Joyce

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. 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 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. 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?

Summary from www.goodreads.com.
Discussion Questions from www.litlovers.com.