The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry

Rachel Joyce, 2012
Random House
336 pp.

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 Hennessy 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.

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. (From the publisher.)
Author Bio

Rachel Joyce is an 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 in Gloucestershire on a farm with her family and is at work on her second novel. (From the publisher.)

Book 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)

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.”

Publishers Weekly

Soon after his retirement from a brewery in a quiet English village, Harold Fry receives a surprising letter. It's from beloved friend and colleague Queenie
Hennessy, whom he hasn't heard from in 20 years, writing from a distant terminal cancer ward to say good-bye. This letter returns Harold to a horrifically painful part of his past, threatens his already troubled marriage, and ultimately leads to a crisis that casts into doubt everything he thinks he knows about himself. He decides to embark on a 600-mile walk to say goodbye to Queenie in person. Joyce, a former actress and acclaimed BBC scriptwriter here publishing her first novel, depicts Harold's personal crisis and the extraordinary pilgrimage it generates in masterly fashion, exploring psychological complexities with compassion and insight. 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

Spontaneity has never been Harold Fry's strong suit, especially once he retired. Just ask his long-suffering wife, Maureen. So imagine her surprise when Harold abruptly decides to walk 500 miles to the north of England in a naive attempt to save a dying woman.... 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. Accomplished BBC playwright Joyce's debut novel is a gentle and genteel charmer, brimming with British quirkiness yet quietly haunting in its poignant and wise examination of love and devotion. Sure to become a book-club favorite.

Booklist

Those with the patience to accompany the protagonist on this meandering journey will receive an emotional payoff at the end. The debut novel by an award-winning British radio playwright (and actor) offers an 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, for readers who don't mind having their strings pulled.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions
Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)

Also, consider these LitLovers talking points for The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry:

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 célèbre—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?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online and off, with attribution. Thanks.)

top of page (summary)
About the Author

Full text biography:
Rachel Joyce

Birth Date: 1962
Nationality: British
Occupation: Playwright

Table of Contents:
Awards
Personal Information
Career
Writings
Sidelights
Related Information

Awards:
Best Actress Award, Time Out; Sony Silver; Tinniswood Award, 2007, for best radio play, named "New Writer of the Year," National Book Awards, 2012, for The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry.

Personal Information:

Career Information:
Writer and playwright. Has also worked as an actor with Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal National Theatre, Royal Court, and Cheek by Jowl.

Writings:
• The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2012.

Also author of radio plays, has adapted works to television plays.

Sidelights:
Rachel Joyce is a writer and playwright. She studied at Bristol University and Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, becoming a theatrical actor before turning her attention to writing. Joyce has written a number of radio plays which have aired on BBC Radio 4 and adapted others as television dramas.

In 2012 Joyce published her first novel, The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry. The shy British salesman Harold Fry decides to venture from his home in southern England to the hospice of his terminally ill friend, Queenie Hennessey. Harold is burdened with guilt over his past relations with Queenie and reflects along the 627 miles of his journey, taking a total of eighty-seven days to walk the long distance. Throughout his trip, he meets an assortment of characters who latch on to Harold and try to attach their own views and sense of priorities onto this pilgrimage of sorts.

Reviewing the novel in the London Observer, Natasha Tripney commented that "at times the novel, with its gentle, episodic and occasionally repetitive structure, borders on the twee but Joyce rarely sugar-coats things. The story is laced with loneliness, with life's numerous small disappointments." In a review for the A.V. Club, Samantha Nelson claimed that the novel's "boldest part ... is the ending, which brings the whimsical premise into the cold light of reality.

4/22/2014
Joyce artfully crafts a finale that's simultaneously tragic and uplifting, a perfect ending to the fulfilling journey on which she leads her readers. "Reviewing the novel in Washington Post Book World, Ron Charles said that the concept of the novel "sounds twee, but it's surprisingly steely, even inspiring, the kind of quirky book you want to shepherd into just the right hands." Charles recalled that "in 2010, I reviewed a spate of 'wandering' novels. ... They were all exquisitely written, more polished than 'Harold Fry,' but I prefer Joyce's novel, even with its detours and rough patches. For all her merciless insistence on the brutality of illness, she 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. When Harold's bitter old wife realizes that 'the world without him would be even more desolate,' I know just what she means."

Writing in the New York Times Book Review, Janet Maslin remarked that "The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry takes its opening epigraph from John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. It takes the stirring spirituality of its ending from Bunyan too. In between Ms. Joyce's book loosely parallels the Pilgrim's Progress at times, but it is very much a story of present-day courage. She writes about how easily a mousy, domesticated man can get lost and how joyously he can be refound." In a review in Toronto's Globe and Mail, Donna Bailey Nurse pointed out that "Harold is embarrassed when people imbue his trek with spiritual meaning. Yet The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry is a decidedly spiritual work. It's about a man who struggles to survive the appalling injuries of his youth without the solace of religion; and about how putting one foot in front of the other--believing things will be okay--is by itself an act of faith." A contributor to the New Yorker suggested that "the palpable pleasures of the pilgrimage are hardly diminished" by the reviewer's suspicion that the journey may not entirely be about Harold's friend.

Writing in Maclean's, Jen Cutts noticed "a few lapses in the story--events and characters that come along at convenient moments." However, Cutts acknowledged that "Joyce captures Harold's emotions with a tidiness of words that is at times thrilling. It's a trip worth taking." Booklist reviewer Carol Haggas called the novel "a gentle and genteel charmer, brimming with British quirkiness yet quietly haunting in its poignant and wise examination of love." A contributor to Kirkus Reviews recommended the novel to "readers who don't mind having their strings pulled," adding that it is "manipulative but moving." A contributor to Publishers Weekly found that "early chapters of the book are beguiling, but a final revelation tests credulity." In a review in Library Journal, Patrick Sullivan labeled The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry "a great novel ... of deep beauty and wisdom about the human condition."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- Booklist, June 1, 2012, Carol Haggas, review of The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry, p. 38.
- Kirkus Reviews, June 1, 2012, review of The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry.
- New Yorker, November 12, 2012, review of The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry, p. 85.

ONLINE

Rachel Joyce Interview, plus links to author biography, book summaries, excerpts and reviews

Rachel Joyce

Rachel Joyce Biography

An interview with Rachel Joyce

A Conversation Between Rachel Joyce and Charlotte Ragan

Charlotte Ragan worked at various jobs, mostly in the fields of architecture and engineering, before teaching herself to write and staying home to bring up triplets. The Lifesave, her first published novel, was one of the 2012 Waterstones 11, a recognition for debut novels published in the United Kingdom; it was also chosen by the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Program and was nominated for the Guardian First Book Award. It is currently being translated into twenty-five languages. After many years in Dallas and a brief stint in Johannesburg, Ragan and her husband now live in Westport, Connecticut.

Charlotte Ragan: When my protagonist Grace Winter came to me, she was defending herself to some unseen authority for things she had done in an overcrowded lifeboat. The story grew from there. Did Harold Fry or the idea of a pilgrimage come to you first, or were the situation and the character inseparable from the start?

Rachel Joyce: The truth is that I don’t know where the story came from. Harold and his journey to Queenie turned up in my head and I realized I wanted to write about them. I think I often don’t understand what stories are about and why they are with me (and where they have come from) until I have finished—and sometimes only years later. But maybe if we understood from the offset we wouldn’t need to write them? If they were clear and complete, they would already be stories as opposed to an idea. Or an inspiration: What do I know that I began writing this as a radio play when my father told me he was dying. He had spent years battling cancer, and after several brutal operations, surgeons told him there was nothing left to be done. He was very frightened and so was I. I was appalled at the idea of not having my father. I was appalled at the idea of watching him die. But both happened, and while they did, I wrote this story about a man who sets off to save someone else. It was my escape. My way of making sense. And somehow also my way of finding the flip side to my complicated, wild grief.

I like what you said about not understanding what your stories are about until much later. I remember the feeling of panic when my publisher first asked me to distill what my novel is about into a couple of sentences. Perhaps most writers think that the book itself is the best and maybe only answer to that question.

Whenever someone asks me what my book is about, it occurs to me that I am the worst person in the world to put it in a nutshell. I remember people talking about an exercise where you supposedly have an elevator ride—twenty seconds, maybe—in which to sell your story. And my heart sinks when I imagine that. It would take me at least thirty seconds to pluck up the courage to open my mouth, let alone say something about the book.

So, yes—being a bit of a tongue-tied person—that is the side of becoming a published writer that I didn’t anticipate. When you write for radio, no one wants to know anything about you. It is the actors who do all the “shiny” publicity, and I was always, as a writer, very happy with that! So I have found it strange that suddenly people want to know about my life and who I am. The truth is, I am very private and very quiet. If you met me at a dinner party, I’d be completely underwhelming. I would smile a lot! But again, this I think, is why I write. Because I need to say the things that don’t get voiced for me in everyday life.

As I think about it, the way Harold’s pilgrimage becomes public and attracts media attention makes a nice parallel to the way your novel became public. Just as you wrote the story for very personal reasons, Harold embarks on his journey with no thought of what it might mean to anyone but Queenie, yet people want statements from him. They...
want not only reasons, but Meaning. Have you been surprised by the public side of becoming a published novelist? (We need to mention your nomination for the Man Booker Prize here.)

I have been bowed over by the worldwide reaction to the book. I thought of it as such a personal story. The part I have loved most is readers getting in touch with me and sharing their own stories. That has been very moving.

The Booker nomination was a complete shock. I didn’t see it coming at all. But I am glad I didn’t see it coming, because I saw it as an honor—and that was enough.

I wrote for twenty-five years without any sort of audience for my work, so for me, too, it has been both terrifying and exhilarating to emerge from the writing closet. One of the many things I have learned from readers in the last months is that they complete a novel in a way that reminds me of the question: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?

I wholeheartedly agree about readers completing a book. The story cannot come alive without a willingness on the part of the reader to make an imaginative leap. Without that leap (and you could call it a leap of faith), Harold and Maureen are simply in my head. I once told someone about a book I had read and how much I wished I’d written it. She said to me, “But in feeling the way you do, you have written it.” I had never thought of readers in this way before, but I think about it a lot now. Reading is a creative process. As writers, we must do everything we can to make a world that stands up as if it could be a real one. Not necessarily the real one, not necessarily the world the reader knows but within its own confines, that world must be plausible. It must add up. After that, the reader meets you halfway. The reader fills out your words with pictures, with breath, with feeling.

Clearly, your story has been heard. The world reaction is a testament to the fact that The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry is wonderful on so many levels. For one thing, the language is gorgeous, and I want to get back to that. But the story is also an illustration of how the universal emerges through the particular.

Harold is an ordinary man. I have gone so far as to call him an everyman. By that I mean he doesn’t consider himself to be any different from anyone else or in any way unique. He accepts his part in the bigger picture—and I think that gives him both humility and openness, despite his sheltered life and his reserved nature.

To me, the universe is in the small. That is the paradox. And it is also where drama lies. It is the basic human struggle between wanting to amount to something and recognizing our mortality. I happened to give a talk about the book recently at a Quaker meetinghouse. And I was very touched when one of the women who looks after the building told me about the graves there, all of which were unmarked. It made me think. Even in our dying, we generally want people to know who we are. We want recognition. We want to stand out from all the other graves.

So I tend to write about small, ordinary people who find themselves at an extraordinary point in their lives, equipped with only small, everyday words. This moves me. Sometimes our vocabulary can seem so clichéd, so overused, so underserved—but we keep on trying. That’s the thing. We keep trying to connect up.

You use the word “ordinary” in the second line of the book—you are describing the day, but of course it applies to Harold as well. The entire first page is terrific. There is so much in it that not only draws the reader in but also telegraphs what the story is about. You mention a few pedestrian (pardon the pun) details of Harold and Maureen’s life together, such as the clean washing and the slice of toast, but other details hint at a deeper, darker layer. The yard is “trapped” by its fence, and the word “vacuum” appears twice. Within this claustrophobic context, you place a “telescopic washing line.” When I reread the paragraph, the telescope allusion jumped out at me as a signal that Harold’s world-view is about to expand. I also love the understated sentence “He thought he might have to go out...”

Writing is an odd mixture of instinct and intention, of creative impulse and painstaking revision. Did your original radio play open in a similar fashion? If not, was it hard to decide how to start the novel?

The radio play was a completely different beast. I had 7,500 words in which to tell the whole story, not to mention a tight budget that stretched only as far as three actors. So when I began to write this take as a novel, I knew I was starting from scratch. Besides, with a radio play, you only have the dialogue through which to tell your story. You only have what people (inadvertently) give away as they talk. With the book, I suddenly had so many other tools at my fingertips. There is the setting, the real physical detail, not to mention the past and the language process. It was like having a whole new set of colors to play with.

However, whenever I begin a story. I like to ask myself. What is the situation here? What is the thing that has to change? All the clues—I think—should lie in the opening scene. But they mustn’t ring round them, signifying, LOOK AT US WE ARE CLUES! The story must work on a superficial level, and it must also work on a deeper level for someone like you who can see to look back and re-appraise. That is the delight of storytelling for me. That it can be all of it, and that it can also carry reverberations, when you go back and look a second time. It’s like life, I think. Life has clues and sometimes we are so busy living we don’t see them.

So I write very carefully. And I keep refining and tweaking. I don’t think anything should be in a story for nothing. And I don’t think anything should appear in a story from absolutely nowhere. There is a bit I always remember from Jane Austen where she uses a pop-up character right at the climax of the plot and she adds that actually the woman passed through the story earlier, carrying some washing. That makes me laugh.

Your experience writing radio plays, with their emphasis on dialogue, must account for the subtlety with which you insert information about settings and characters. I tend to dislike long bits of exposition and exhaustive descriptions of people or places—as a reader, I would rather feel as if I am discovering those things through telling details scattered along the way. In fact, we don’t learn anything about Harold’s looks until chapter 4, when we tell you he is tall and stooped. But because he comes alive through his perceptions and speech, I had a very clear picture of him from the beginning.

Even more than the dying Queenie, David personifies the open wound of the story—the Big Thing that will never be fixed. It was very fitting that the last scene shows Harold...
and Maureen looking out at the ocean and laughing. The ocean not only confirms the fact that Harold has reached his goal of walking the length of England, it is also the thing that dwarfs all our earthly concerns. And there is hope for anyone who can laugh.

RJ: That is very kind of you. You have actually said it so succinctly! I am not sure what to add. Like you, I enjoy discovering things in a story for myself. I remember, when I was acting, a director talking about how you have to earn silence in a play, if you have all the actors dropping pauses whenever they feel they have said something significant, the play goes to a halt. For me, it's the same with backstory. These details must come out of the real story. You have to earn them.

I agree, too, that there are things in life that cannot be fixed. Maybe the best we can do is be open to change—and to accepting who we are. And this is what Harold becomes through his walk. There is a tiny suggestion at the end that even though there is hope, there is also the possibility of loss. But that is life, I think. Besides, Harold could not make the journey he has and not know these things. Yes, he and Maureen have reconciled—or rediscovered how to speak—the love that David's loss forced to a standstill. But inevitably there will be other trials ahead. That is why I wanted to finish with those two small figures holding hands at the edge of the ocean.

For me, laughter is the key.

Language is the first thing that attracted me to writing—how the words can convey character and philosophy and action, but also have a poetry and rhythm of their own. Here are two examples of terrific sentences from the book, although there are so many, I could open to almost any page and find one. But I like these because they do several things at once without being self-consciously showy, the way some contemporary writing can be.

He stopped referring to his guidebooks because the gap between their sense of knowing and his own of not knowing was too unbearable. It was as if Harold had taken off his belt, followed by his shirt, and then several layers of skin and muscle.

What helps you to get into a literary mindset? I know you mentioned writing very carefully, and refining and tweaking, but are there other techniques or habits that allow you to better hear the music of your work? It is a wonderful feeling when you get inside a sentence. It is the most frustrating feeling when you are floundering around on the outside of one. I am anxious of people who can write pithy, elaborate prose, and it has taken me years to accept that what I do is write things simply.

Of course, I read The Lifeboat and I want to be Charlotte Rogan. I want to use your bold, stark sentences. I want to have a lifeboat full of characters, with wildly different backgrounds and objectives. But I can't be you. I can admire you, but then I have to get back to the business of being me.

Having said this, my first drafts are shocking. I re-read them and I want to give up. After that, I go back and I go back and I go back. And every time I look at a scene—or I scrape at the surface—I see things a little more clearly. As for inspiration, sometimes I read poetry. Sometimes I look at authors I admire. But the thing is, I can only be who I am—so I have to keep writing away. Besides, no one knows the story you are writing as well as you know it. And so you have to keep challenging yourself. You have to keep asking, Is this true, as I know truth?

Being an actor has definitely had an influence on me. I think many actors have a good ear for dialogue and the rhythm of dialogue. We all (and I mean human beings, not actors) talk in verses, we use names, repetition, assonance, alliteration, exaggeration, metaphor—all those things to help us put across our point of view. For me, there is poetry in the simplest things. I listen to people. That is the best advice I can give myself. And keep hacking away.

Things are stark in a lifeboat, so that affected the way my story was told. In the case of Harold Fry, England is almost a character, and your reverence for her shines through.

Once Harold commits to his journey, he starts to see his surroundings in a new way. There were so many shades of green Harold was humbled. I imagine that writing so closely about the country gave you a new appreciation for it.

I don't know whether it is because I have spent years writing plays, but I am more comfortable taking the objective voice on a story. I like to be able to stand slightly to one side. It doesn't mean you are not inside your characters but it enables you to step sometimes and place them as passing specks in a bigger landscape.

I read the setting of The Lifeboat—you're descriptions of the sky and sea, and the way they influence the human action. I am very interested in how we relate to the bigger things. How small we are against them.

I think I wisely loved the English landscape before I began to write about Harold Fry. In fact, I think the story partly came from that love. I am a Londoner. Born and bred. We moved out eleven years ago when I was pregnant with my fourth child because I had a sudden and violent reaction against city living. I wanted to see sky, not into another house—and I wanted to see green, real green, not city green. We live now in a very old farm house on the edge of a valley. The wind takes things. We get small poodles inside the house when it rains. But I stop outside and I can see the sky from east to west. And I don't know how to explain this, but I feel contained at last.

So writing about Harold's awakening sense of the English countryside was like being aware for the first time about what I see every day when I step out of my door.

Being true to your setting is one of the ways that truth-informs fiction, and earlier you mentioned your father's illness as part of your inspiration for the book. Are some of the other incidents or vignettes based on things that happened to you, or are they wholly imagined?

As I said before, I draw on what I know and then I fabricate and exasperate from there. So a lot of the characters in my books are people I have been, only briefly. This man in the train I met once in Sweden. The arguing couple I interviewed in a Parisian garden. I had a summer job in a little restaurant where Harold works. I made up the rest. What else, and I imagine from these. I couldn't write, I don't think, without feeling and ground beneath me.

There are many influences. My husband grew up in Penang. In fact, Harold and Maureen's house directly inspired Patrick. I thought they might like this little twist, and that I'd be a bit of a Joseph Conrad here, but I'm not sure. Harold, or he's the wrong name for the protagonist. The scene was taken from a scene in a film again.
Distance from Minnesota to Michigan

Distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 kilometers
This air travel distance is equal to 0 miles.

From
detroit

To
polar bear provincial park

Measure Distance

If Harold had walked north from Detroit area

The air travel (bird fly) shortest distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 km = 0 miles.

If you travel with an airplane (which has average speed of 560 miles) between Minnesota to Michigan,
It takes 0 hours to arrive.
Also check out distances.

http://www.distancefromto.net/distance-from/Minnesota/to/Michigan

4/24/2014
Distance from Minnesota to Michigan

Distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 kilometers
This air travel distance is equal to 0 miles.

From
detroit

To
sioux city

Measure Distance

Distance between Minnesota to Michigan:
1096.55 km = 681.37 miles

The air travel (bird fly) shortest distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 km = 0 miles.

If you travel with an airplane (which has average speed of 560 miles) between Minnesota to Michigan,
It takes 0 hours to arrive.
Also check out distances.
Distance from Minnesota to Michigan

Distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 kilometers
This air travel distance is equal to 0 miles.

From
detroit
To
atlanta

Distance between Minnesota to Michigan:
962.57 km = 598.12 miles

The air travel (bird fly) shortest distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 km = 0 miles.
If you travel with an airplane (which has average speed of 560 miles) between Minnesota to Michigan, It takes 0 hours to arrive.
Also check out distances.
Distance from Minnesota to Michigan

Distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 kilometers
This air travel distance is equal to 0 miles.

From

detroit

To

boston

Distance between Minnesota to Michigan:
985.35 km = 612.27 miles

The air travel (bird fly) shortest distance from Minnesota to Michigan is 0 km = 0 miles.

If you travel with an airplane (which has average speed of 560 miles) between Minnesota to Michigan,
It takes 0 hours to arrive.

Also check out distances.