

Earlsdon Literary Magazine 164

The newsletter of the AVID Readers Group, based at Earlsdon Library

Next meeting: Thursday 8th May 8pm
Venue: Earlsdon Library
Book for discussion: *Sacrilege* – SJ Parris

An Incredible Journey?

Our April Book

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry – Rachel Joyce

When Harold Fry receives a letter one morning from a former colleague, Queenie, to say that she has cancer and will not recover, he writes her a letter and walks out to post it. However he passes the post box and carries on walking. A chance conversation with a cashier at a petrol station, where he stops to buy some lunch, leads him to the conviction that if he walks from his home in Kingsbridge in Devon to Berwick-on-Tweed, where Queenie is in a hospice, she will carry on living. Thus he begins his pilgrimage, wearing yachting shoes and without any luggage or equipment.

A sensible person would have stopped and bought some walking boots, socks and a small rucksack. Not Harold Fry. Similarly, the lack of regular clean underwear did not bear thinking about for one reader, as was no mention of going to the toilet for another. There were annoying inconsistencies too; for example, he spent the whole day walking and only covered six miles. One reader's comment was that this was all so implausible that you just had to suspend disbelief and enjoy the story.

He starts off staying in hotels or guest houses, but soon realises that he is spending too much money. He decides to simplify things by sleeping where he can find shelter – unlocked sheds, barns and so on – and living on the kindness of people he meets. Would it really be that easy? This bit was the most interesting for one reader. Then, near Warwick, he meets a young man who chats to him and takes his photo. Without Harold's knowledge or permission, he and his walk to Berwick are featured in *The Coventry Telegraph*,

no less, and his story becomes a news item! He is joined by others, some described by one reader as 'weirdoes'. But most of them are walking for their own reasons not for Queenie.

While he walks, Harold thinks about his life: his marriage, which started off so well but had foundered twenty years earlier; the lack of a relationship with his son; and Queenie. Meanwhile, at home, his wife is also thinking along the same lines. It is only at the end that we find out what really happened all that time ago, and why Harold feels the need to do something.

Some readers found the start of the book slow and only persevered because it was for the book group. As always, others really enjoyed it. One view was that pilgrimage was the wrong word because it was the journey which was important, not the destination. Another view was that it was a sort of penance: the more he suffered, the more likely Queenie would be to get better. One reader found the final section, in the hospice, very moving and considered it one of the best parts of the book.

For two readers this was a second reading – a good test for a book. In this case, both enjoyed it again. "Once you know the story," one said, "you notice different parts, images and unusual constructions." So, overall, there was a positive reception. Rachel Joyce's next book, *Perfect*, was recommended as worth a read, although we were warned it has a different tone.

Chris Wilkin

Next month we will be reading:

Notes on a Scandal – Zoë Heller

The date for discussion of this book is Thursday 12th June.

Ideas for further reading

I usually start here with other books by the same author, but this time I've been pre-empted. Even Rachel Joyce's own website lists only two others: a short story (*A Faraway Smell of Lemon*, available as an e-book only), and the not-yet-published *The Love Song of Miss Queenie Hennessy* which, as you might expect, is to be Queenie's side of the story we have just read.

Also pre-emptive was the mention last month of the late Sue Townsend's *The Woman who Went to Bed for a Year*. It came up in our discussion again this time because Eva, like Harold, does something extraordinary, for reasons of her own, only to become a minor celebrity with a rather peculiar band of followers. Someone else likened Harold's unexpected notoriety to that of Forrest Gump, and that gets a look-in here because the film, like all the best films, was based on a book. The author is called Winston Groom, and he has also written a sequel, *Gump & Co*. Both have good reviews. I've not been able to track down the story someone described of a business man who jacked everything in for a while and walked across Britain, or maybe just the South Downs Way ... If anyone else has succeeded, please let us know.

For me, with my solidly Catholic upbringing, a pilgrimage *is* about the journey as much as (or even more than) the destination. It's therefore unsurprising that most of the books which pop into my head when I think of the word reflect the way that travelling slowly through the landscape provides an opportunity for change and growth – even though Chaucer's lot seemed to spend most of their time telling tall tales. Of course, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is possibly one of the best known, but did you know that Enid Blyton re-wrote it for children? Her version is called *The Land of Far-Beyond* and is far easier to read, although there is the same moral tone and heavy use of not very subtle allegory. (As you can probably tell, I find both paternalistic and Victorian, rather than inspiring.) By contrast, Paul Coelho's first book, *The Pilgrimage*, is a new-age take on the ancient Camino across northern Spain to Santiago di Compostella which requires a little thought from the reader who wants to take it at more than face value. It is another marmite book: people either love what they see as his profound spirituality, or berate him for 'cheating' by not having done the journey 'properly' himself. However, as Harold has demonstrated, there are secular pilgrimages too and sometimes they start unexpectedly. One of my favourites is Tony Hawks' *Round Ireland with a Fridge*. Yes, it started with a drunken wager and is marketed as a travel book but, like many other enduring examples of the genre, the author grows in understanding of himself as well as the country through which he travels. Perhaps every journey, when undertaken mindfully, is a pilgrimage.

I would love to include more from other people in ELM. A couple of ideas to get you started:

Have you a favourite book about a journey? Would you call it a pilgrimage? Why (not)?

Did you get involved in World Book Night this year? Where? How?

If you have any thoughts on these, reviews or recommendations, tales of literary events, or anything else you think other AVID readers would find interesting, please send them to

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What's On

Both <https://www.facebook.com/coventrylibraries> and <https://www.facebook.com/coventryreads> have pictures of the celebrations for World Book Night but, as I write this, neither has details of book-y things to come.

However, only a little further away, **Warwick Words** is at the start of June. There are lots of events and, in case I forget to attach the programme, you can download it from www.warwickwords.co.uk There is a **Literary Pub Quiz** on **Wednesday 4th June** at **7:30pm**. Should we send along a team?