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Byron Hemmings wakes to a morning that looks like any other: his school uniform draped over his wooden desk chair, his sister arguing over the breakfast cereal, the click of his mother’s heels as she crosses the kitchen. But when the three of them leave home, driving into a dense summer fog, the morning takes an unmistakable turn. In one terrible moment, something happens, something completely unexpected and at odds with life as Byron understands it. While his mother seems not to have noticed, eleven-year-old Byron understands that from now on nothing can be the same.

What happened and who is to blame? Over the days and weeks that follow, Byron’s perfect world is shattered. Unable to trust his parents, he confides in his best friend, James, and together they concoct a plan….

As she did in her debut, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, Rachel Joyce has imagined bewitching characters who find their ordinary lives unexpectedly thrown into chaos, who learn that there are times when children must become parents to their parents, and who discover that in confronting the hard truths about their pasts, they will forge unexpected relationships that have profound and surprising impacts. Brimming with love, forgiveness, and redemption, *Perfect* will cement Rachel Joyce’s reputation as one of fiction’s brightest talents.
Praise for *Perfect*

“Touching, eccentric . . . Joyce does an inviting job of setting up these mysterious circumstances, and of drawing Byron’s magical closeness with Diana.”—*Janet Maslin, The New York Times*

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“(Joyce) triumphantly returns with *Perfect*. . . . As Joyce probes the souls of Diana, Byron and Jim, she reveals—slowly and deliberately, as if peeling back a delicate onion skin—the connection between the two stories, creating a poignant, searching tale.”—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

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Amazon.com Review

Q&A with Rachel Joyce

*The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* began as a radio play and then developed into the novel it is today after many years of writing and revising. But *Perfect* was written within a shorter space of time. How did your process differ in writing the two novels?

The truth is, I have been thinking about *Perfect* for even longer than *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*. The idea
about the cost of perfection and an accident that changes everything, as well as the central characters, have all been loitering in my head for many years. I could always see Byron and Diana and I knew I needed to find out more about who they were and what happened to them. Sometimes I have even tried fitting them into other stories, but it never felt right because this is where they belong.

As with most things, the story has grown over time. New characters have stepped in. Things I couldn’t understand have become clearer. I have played with different versions until I found this one. It was only as I began to write it this time around, for instance, that it dawned on me that it wasn’t a contemporary story and neither was it an urban one. It was only this time, too, that I thought about splitting the story between two tenses and two periods in time.

Otherwise, the writing process was very similar with both books. I sat here every day and I wrote and rewrote and rewrote.

**How much of the novel is based on real places and people?**

The moor setting is fictitious. But – as with Harold Fry’s story – I stepped out of our house and drew on what I saw. I am lucky enough to live on the brow of a valley. I write about the things I see when I look out of my writing shed or walk through the fields. It’s the same with characters. I write about people I glimpse and then I imagine the rest. I think I tend to find people in my head that I want to explore and maybe all of them have an element or two of me in them. I don’t know. In researching the character of Jim, for instance, I spoke to a number of people about OCD and whilst it is not a condition I’ve experienced, it reminded me of other things I’ve felt that had similar beginnings or resonances. For me, writing is about finding the links between myself and the outside world. It’s a way of better understanding.

You have written that *Harold Fry* was inspired in part by your father. Was there someone or something specific that compelled you to write *Perfect*?

It is difficult for me to know why I choose to write certain stories. Often I don’t understand until many years later. But I do remember vividly when the first nugget of this story came to me. It was just over twelve years ago, after the birth of my third child, and I was driving my oldest daughter to school. My second daughter was telling me she was hungry, the baby was crying, and on the passenger seat beside me was the plate of cakes I had got up at dawn to make for the very competitive children’s bake stall. I was driving slowly. Traffic was heavy. I had barely slept for days. And then I had one of those moments when you lift out of yourself, when you see your life from a new perspective, and it occurred to me that if I made a mistake, if someone ran into the road, if anything unexpected happened, I did not have the energy, the space, the wherewithal, the presence of mind even, to deal with it. I was stretched as far as I could go. I began writing the story as soon as I got home.

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