

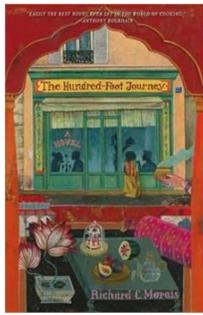
The Hundred-Foot Journey

Richard C. Morais, 2010

Scribner

272 pp.

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Summary

That skinny Indian teenager has that mysterious something that comes along once a generation. He is one of those rare chefs who is simply born. He is an artist.

And so begins the rise of Hassan Haji, the unlikely gourmand who recounts his life's journey in Richard Morais's charming novel, *The Hundred-Foot Journey*. Lively and brimming with the colors, flavors, and scents of the kitchen, *The Hundred-Foot Journey* is a succulent treat about family, nationality, and the mysteries of good taste.

Born above his grandfather's modest restaurant in Mumbai, Hassan first experienced life through intoxicating whiffs of spicy fish curry, trips to the local markets, and gourmet outings with his mother. But when tragedy pushes the family out of India, they console themselves by eating their way around the world, eventually settling in Lumière, a small village in the French Alps.

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The boisterous Haji family takes Lumière by storm. They open an inexpensive Indian restaurant opposite an esteemed French relais—that of the famous chef Madame Mallory—and infuse the sleepy town with the spices of India, transforming the lives of its eccentric villagers and infuriating their celebrated neighbor. Only after Madame Mallory wages culinary war with the immigrant family, does she finally agree to mentor young Hassan, leading him to Paris, the launch of his own restaurant, and a slew of new adventures.

The Hundred-Foot Journey is about how the hundred-foot distance between a new Indian kitchen and a traditional French one can represent the gulf between different cultures and desires. A testament to the inevitability of destiny, this is a fable for the ages—charming, endearing, and compulsively readable. (*From the publisher.*)

Discussion Questions

1. The title of the novel is *The Hundred-Foot Journey*. Discuss the title in relation to where Hassan started and where he ends up—in both the geographic and the psychological senses. Ultimately, which journey do you feel was more important? To which other characters might the title apply, and in what ways? Even characters like Madame Mallory who never leave home are somehow transformed through the course of the novel. Discuss how Hassan's transformation is different or similar to that of other characters in the book.
2. The Haji family first settles in London before embarking on a whirlwind journey across Europe and eventually settling in Lumière. Discuss Hassan's time in London. How did his stay there influence his later life? Why do you think Abbas eventually decided his family needed to move on?
3. After Hassan's hands are burned, Madame Mallory, alone in a small chapel, thinks about her life while staring at the chapel's fresco: "And in the depths of those glinting little eyes she sees the balance sheet of her life, an endless list of credits and debits, of accomplishments and failures, small acts of kindness and real acts of cruelty" (p. 120). Do you see life in the same terms, as a balance sheet of how we act and what we achieve? Do you think her offer to teach Hassan is a true act of kindness, or because she felt she owed the universe a great debt? Or some combination of both?

4. While Hassan's father undoubtedly plays an important role in his son's life, Hassan is strongly influenced by the women around him. Consider his grandmother, his mother, Madame Mallory, Margaret, and even his sister Mehtab. What does he learn from each of these women at various points throughout the novel, both in the kitchen and otherwise?

5. Choose one adjective you think best sums up the character of Hassan and share it with the group. Were you surprised by how others in your group perceived him? What are his strengths and his weaknesses? How is your perception of his character altered throughout the story?

6. Madame Mallory says to Hassan, "Good taste is not the birthright of snobs, but a gift from God sometimes found in the most unlikely of places and in the unlikeliest of people" (p. 235). What do you think about this statement and the particular way she phrases it?

7. Chef Tom Colicchio said that "in *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, food isn't just a theme, it's a main character." Do you agree? Discuss the relationships between the characters and the food described in the book. How does this novel illustrate the old adage that "you are what you eat"?

8. Did Hassan's decision to move to Paris, and eventually open a French restaurant, surprise you? Why or why not? Do you feel his experiences in Mumbai—in the kitchen of his family's restaurant and exploring the city with his mother—were influential in his later work? How?

9. "It was shortly thereafter, sitting in the bathtub, drinking a tea spiked with garam masala and dripping with sweat, all the while thinking of my father, that the name of the new restaurant suddenly came to me" (p. 166). Look up the meaning of "Le Chien Méchant" and discuss its significance as the name of Hassan's restaurant. Compare it to the other restaurants named in the book, such as Paul Verdun's Le Coq d'Or, Madame Mallory's Le Saule Pleureur, or even the Hassan family's Maison Mumbai. How much (or how little) can be told about each character from the name of their restaurant?

10. In reworking the menu of Le Chien Méchant, Hassan tells his staff to "go back to your hometowns, back to your roots across France" (p. 204). Do you think that, until this point, he had forgotten the importance of home and family, of roots and past experiences, in his journey to become the best chef he could be?

11. Later, Hassan walks by a small, hole-in-the-wall Indian restaurant in Paris and stands at the window for a while. As he leaves, he reflects, "I took one longing last look at Madras...leaving behind the intoxicating smells of machli ka salan, an olfactory wisp of who I was, fading fast in the Parisian night" (p. 235). Do you feel this passage is symbolic as well as literal? Did Hassan have to leave behind a part of who he was to keep moving forward? Do you think this was a choice he consciously made? Do you agree with his choice? What did Hassan gain and what did he lose in his journey?

12. In the elite world of haute cuisine, what are the costs of rising to the top? Discuss this idea in relation to Madame Mallory and Paul Verdun, and then to Hassan and his family. Do you think the sacrifices were worth the successes? Do you think that all artists are forced to give up something incredibly vital in pursuit of their passions? Did Hassan manage to avoid the trap of his mentors? (*Questions issued by the publisher.*)