

A Journey Must Be Taken: Playlist

H. L. Howard

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A chance meeting with a much younger woman changes a man's life in the romance novel A Journey Must Be Taken.

In H. L. Howard's romantic novel *A Journey Must Be Taken*, a middle-aged man endures challenges to be with the woman he loves.

Tauri was born in China and moved to the United States, bringing with him his cultural beliefs and ideals. Now in his midfifties, he reflects on his accomplishments, including a successful career, his marriage to his caring wife, and raising his daughter, whom he adores. What he missed out on is love, though.

When Tauri meets Libi, a twenty-one-year-old Chinese woman just beginning her life's adventures, he feels a connection to her that he has never experienced before. Though distance and age separate them, he focuses on proving his love to Libi. She uses an online playlist of songs to communicate her feelings to him; he turns to online tarot readings to gain understanding of the relationship and guidance on where it will lead.

As a hero, Tauri is too suggestible to be convincing. In his daily existence, he muddles through work and responsibilities, looking forward to beautiful sunsets; he lives a more vibrant life in the virtual world. There, even though Libi's posted song playlists cause him concern and doubt, he allows his concerns to be assuaged by online tarot readings, believing that these are best suited to guiding him through the difficult choices ahead. Still, most often, his choices are made for him rather than by him; all is dependent on the next tarot reading.

Further, Tauri allows his burgeoning romance to play out in the virtual realm too; the relationship's drama, tears, and joy are confined to the screen, limited to a flurry of text messages, social media updates, and poems (in addition to the song titles and tarot readings) that are used to bridge the couple's differences in location and age. And Tauri and Libi's exchanges are often awkward and broken, inhibiting their romantic undertones. In addition, Tauri's poems are of a novice quality that puts them at odds with the suggested layers of meaning in Libi's playlists, which change as she matures. And the book's concentration on Tauri's perspective reduces Libi to a secondary status in her own love story. The details of her life and her emotions must be deciphered from her online playlists alone; understanding her is somewhat dependent on knowledge of the song titles that she lists. Despite the apparent spiritual influences upon this love story, the central relationship is uneven—and unconvincing—as a result.

In the romantic novel *A Journey Must Be Taken*, the internet and tarot readings connect two people who are struggling to believe in love at any age.

MARY MCNICHOL (March 2, 2024)

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