

Major Pettigrew's Last Stand

by Helen Simonson

About the Book

In the small village of Edgecombe St. Mary in the English countryside lives Major Ernest Pettigrew (retired), the unlikely hero of Helen Simonson's wondrous debut. Wry, courtly, opinionated, and completely endearing, the Major leads a quiet life valuing the proper things that Englishmen have lived by for generations: honor, duty, decorum, and a properly brewed cup of tea. But then his brother's death sparks an unexpected friendship with Mrs. Jasmina Ali, the Pakistani shopkeeper from the village. Drawn together by their shared love of literature and the loss of their spouses, the Major and Mrs. Ali soon find their friendship blossoming into something more. But village society insists on embracing him as the quintessential local and regarding her as the permanent foreigner. Can their relationship survive the risks one takes when pursuing happiness in the face of culture and tradition?

Praise for the Book

"Funny, barbed, delightfully winsome storytelling . . . As with the polished work of Alexander McCall Smith, there is never a dull moment. . . . It's all about intelligence, heart, dignity and backbone. *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* has them all."

—*The New York Times*

"Delightful . . . Lots of books try to evoke Jane Austen . . . but Simonson nails the genteel British comedy of manners with elegant aplomb."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"A comforting and intelligent debut, a modern-day story of love that takes everyone—grown children, villagers, and the main participants—by surprise, as real love stories tend to do."

—Elizabeth Strout, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Olive Kitteridge*

"[Helen] Simonson invests her grown-up love story with . . . warmth and charm."

—*USA Today*

"With courting curmudgeons, wayward sons, religion, race, and real estate in a petty and picturesque English village, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* is surprisingly, wonderfully romantic and fresh . . . the best first novel I've read in a long, long time."

—Cathleen Schine, author of *The Love Letter*

Courtesy of Random House

About the Author

Title: Helen Simonson

American Novelist (1963 -)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born October 23, 1963, in England; immigrated to United States, c. 1990; daughter of Alan and Margaret Phillips; married, c. 1987; husband's name John F. (a financial executive); children: Ian, Jamie (son). Education: London School of Economics, graduated, c. 1984; State University of New York, Stony Brook Southampton, M.F.A., 2008. Addresses: Home: Bethesda, MD. Agent: Julie Barer, Barer Literary, LLC, 270 Lafayette St., Ste. 1504, New York, NY 10012; fax: 212-691-3540. E-mail: Helen@majorpettigrew.com.

CAREER:

Writer. Worked as advertising copywriter, then executive; formerly affiliated with Celebrity Cruises. Guest on radio programs, including *All Things Considered*, *Diane Rehm Show*, and *Leonard Lopate Show*.

AWARDS:

Chapter One Award, Bronx Writers Center, 2005, for first chapter of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* (novel), Random House (New York, NY), 2010.

Contributor to periodicals, including *East Hampton Star*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Proteus*, and *Southampton Review*. Author's works have been translated into French, German, Italian, and Portuguese.

Sidelights

Helen Simonson has enjoyed unexpected success as a first-time novelist in her mid-forties. After spending years in the advertising industry and then leaving her job to focus on parenting, she began learning her craft in a community writing course and proceeded to M.F.A. studies. In 2005 she won an award for the first chapter of her work-in-progress, and it so impressed an agent that three years later, when Simonson sent her the finished manuscript, the agent quickly took it on. The two worked together to prepare the novel for publication, but when the agent sent it to publishers, she warned Simonson that "it could be weeks before we heard anything," as the author told Rebecca Chastain in an interview for the *Number One Novels* Web site. The warning proved unnecessary. Simonson related to Chastain that the novel "sold two days later in a preemptive offer from Random House." It has since earned critical praise and become a best seller.

Major Pettigrew's Last Stand focuses on the slowly blossoming romance between a dignified retired army officer and a widowed shopkeeper in his small English town. Although he was born in Pakistan and the shopkeeper in England, of Pakistani descent, she is still considered a foreigner and an unsuitable match for the major. Over the course of the novel the two gradually deepen their relationship and find ways to face the opposition of their fellow villagers as well as their own family members.

Simonson's debut won widespread praise. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Ron Charles described it as "thoroughly charming" and "smart" and highlighted the author's "crisp wit and gentle insight." *New York Times* reviewer Janet Maslin remarked that on the very first page readers may be smitten by "Simonson's funny, barbed, delightfully winsome storytelling." Admitting the novel's "conventional" structure, Maslin maintained that it "is enjoyable even when it tootles along with mechanical efficiency" and added that it "feels fresh." The critic found the protagonists "especially well drawn." Fellow novelist Alexander McCall Smith, in a review for the *New York Times Book Review*, considered *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* "entertaining and even rather moving." Acknowledging a few "smallish quibbles" with the work, Smith wrote, "if the place is credible, the same isn't always true of the characters," but he went on to note, "a writer clearly having as much fun as Simonson is perhaps entitled to go over the top and exaggerate a bit." He found the book's central love story a "real pleasure" and commented on Simonson's "great sensitivity and delicacy." Yvonne Zipp stated in the *Christian Science Monitor* that "Simonson's dryly delightful debut" is "one of the most endearing love stories I've read in a long time." Zipp remarked that the author "nails the genteel British comedy of manners with elegant aplomb."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, February 15, 2010, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, p. 37.

- *Christian Science Monitor*, March 19, 2010, Yvonne Zipp, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2009, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *Library Journal*, December, 2009, Beth E. Andersen, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, p. 101.
- *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2010, Susan Salter Reynolds, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *New York Times*, February 22, 2010, Janet Maslin, "Blending Tea and Hearts," p. C1.
- *New York Times Book Review*, March 7, 2010, Alexander McCall Smith, "Virtual Village," p. 16.
- *O, the Oprah Magazine*, March, 2010, Sara Nelson, "It's Never Too Late," p. 121.
- *Publishers Weekly*, January 4, 2010, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, p. 1.
- *Times* (London, England), February 20, 2010, Kate Saunders, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *USA Today*, March 19, 2010, Elysa Gardner, "'Major Pettigrew' Could Be Just Your Cup of Tea."
- *Washington Post*, March 3, 2010, Ron Charles, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *Zoomer*, May, 2010, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, p. 122.

ONLINE

- *BookBrowse*, <http://www.bookbrowse.com/> (September 18, 2010), B.J. Nathan Hegedus, author interview.
- *Curled Up with a Good Book*, <http://www.curledup.com/> (September 20, 2010), Swapna Krishna, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *GalleyCat*, <http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/> (March 23, 2010), Clea Simon, review of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*.
- *Helen Simonson Home Page*, <http://helensimonson.com> (September 20, 2010).
- *Mandythebookworm's Blog*, <http://mandythebookworm.wordpress.com/> (September 18, 2010), "Interview with Helen Simonson."
- *Number One Novels*, <http://numberonenovels.blogspot.com/> (March 8, 2010), Rebecca Chastain, author interview.*

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Author Interview

A conversation with Helen Simonson, author of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*
Wednesday, November 17th, 2010
Courtesy Random House Reader's Circle

Random House Reader's Circle: You had a successful career in advertising and then raised two children. What motivated you to pursue writing at this point in your life?

Helen Simonson: Being a stay-at-home mom is a 24/7 job with very little time off for good behavior! It's been at once the most wonderful experience of my life and the most demanding. Between the baby gym classes, wiping up apple juice, and trying to ensure both sons learned Latin and piano by kindergarten (I'm joking!), I was ready for some small intellectual and creative escape. When modern dance and gardening failed to satisfy (I have two left feet and I hate weeding), I turned to a writing class. Beginner Fiction at New York's 92nd Street Y saved my sanity.

RHRC: You were born in England and raised in a small village in East Sussex, but relocated to the United States twenty years ago. In what ways did your own homesickness, or yearning for home, come into play in the writing of the book?

HS: Perhaps home is more precious to those who leave. Away from the everyday annoyances of town and family life, we are free to recollect only the good bits and pine for a landscape that we remember as always bathed in late-summer evening light. I miss the English countryside with the nostalgia of someone who does not have to put up with the rain, the price of petrol, and lukewarm beer. But seriously . . . I feel a longing for England that is very present and immediate in my head. When it came time to write something just for me—without regard to what others might think—it was natural to write myself back into an English village. Writing my novel was a wonderful way to spend time in a landscape I can never forget.

RHRC: In an age of increasing impersonality and brief digital communication, *Major Pettigrew* is something of a love letter to civility and person-to-person conversation about books and ideas. Was this your intent, or a product of the personalities and locale of the novel?

HS: This is a hard question to answer because the act of writing and the later interpretation of what the writing meant are mostly disconnected. There are ideas and patterns in this book that my husband or writing group had to point out to me. Of course, I always claimed that I meant to write just the thing they admired, but I was usually fibbing. I do love books. I was taken early and often to the library as a child and I filled all those teenage gaps of loneliness and isolation with adventures to distant lands and worlds through the books I read. My mother would still tell you there is no point talking to Helen when “she has her nose in a book.” I do worry that “civility,” or the civilized world (that which includes free education, libraries, and solving our problems through discussion, not violence), is under threat from all directions. While we can't do much, as individuals, about the threats to nations, I wish we would all do a little more to tone

down our own rhetoric and reach out to our neighbors. As someone over thirty, of course I blame the digitalization of the world for some of the disconnection and lack of civility. It seems to me that we communicate much too often but with no depth whatsoever. LOL!

RHRC: A large part of the novel is devoted to exploring the idea of Englishness. The Major, in some ways, personifies its dynamism: He lived in Colonial India as a child, served in the English army, and has a very strong sense of nationalism; but in the end he is able to accept change in a way that others in the village are not. How do you think he fits into the archetype of an Englishman?

HS: My intent (in retrospect) was to present an English stereotype and then peel him apart to show that even we, the English, are individuals. Just because we all wear wellies and we like those waxed cotton jackets doesn't mean we all live in a BBC drama. The Major's appreciation for the long and enduring history of England and Great Britain is, I think, what gives him the strength to accept change. I also think the Major has a deep connection to the land where he was born (Lahore, which is now part of Pakistan). It is an unexplored part of being British that, no matter the rhetoric, we maintain an enduring sense of connection to the Indian subcontinent.

RHRC: Edgecombe St. Mary is painted so vividly in the novel. What is your relationship with the village, and with Rose Lodge in particular?

HS: Creating Rose Lodge was one of those small miracles of being a writer. In writing the Major's home, I got to enjoy the English cottage I have always wanted—and it came free of ants, dry rot, and taxes. I worked very hard at creating the characters and the ideas in my novel, but the descriptions of landscape and homes were pure indulgence for me. It was a wonderful feeling, close to that of being a child with a new box of crayons and a big stack of construction paper. The vivid quality you see is, I think, the result of some very happy and uncensored creativity.

RHRC:What is your writing routine?

HS: I struggle to maintain a proper writing schedule. It has been a shock to discover that now that I am a published writer, I am still a mother and have my full plate of mom obligations, plus the appearances, writing assignments, and office work that comes with promoting a published book. Who knew being a writer was work! I know that to write, I need to start first thing in the morning, with a mind empty of anything else, and to get out of the house. I'm sharing an office space with some other writers, and going to "work" seems to help. I have slowly come to the conclusion that this struggle to find consistency and a good routine, and to pile up creative work, *is* the challenge of all creative people. It is what separates the writer from the person who has an idea for a novel if they could just find the time.

RHRC: The relationship between the Major and Mrs. Ali beautifully evokes the agelessness of love. What prompted you to write about a romance between mature characters, territory often overlooked in contemporary novels?

HS: I started thinking of them as friends. I later realized that this is my view of passion: It is rooted in genuine friendship. Chemistry may be two strangers exchanging smoldering looks—but passion has to be able to survive at least a twenty- minute conversation! I feel sorry for young people trying to find a true and lasting love in this age of the excruciatingly casual hook-up. I hoped that the Major and Mrs. Ali (and Grace) might be good examples for us all.

RHRC: On that note, what do you think could have possibly kept Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali from finding each other in the end?

HS: I think (and hope) the danger of losing each other was always very close and real. In real life, change is hard, inertia is easy, and it is all too possible to decide that new experiences and opportunities are not worth the trouble. I was always nervous about whether Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali would prevail.

RHRC: You once said in an interview that Mrs. Ali is the kind of woman all Englishwomen should aspire to be. Yet she is rejected and branded an outsider in her home country. What inspired you to explore this idea of otherness?

HS: With her Pakistani heritage, Mrs. Ali is easy to brand as “other,” but I believe many of us have felt like outsiders at one time or another. (Did we not all endure high school?) I am interested in how we define our communities by who does not belong, subjecting each and all of us to the misery of being excluded. At the same time, I hope that perhaps such experiences are the grit that makes a pearl in the oyster.

RHRC: Critics have commented that you use a level of satirical storytelling that creates an almost Austenian comedy of manners. How do you feel about such comparisons?

HS: Jane Austen was able to take the tiniest of villages and the most circumscribed of lives and create satire that reflected the whole world. I am honored by even the slightest comparison.

RHRC: Just as the Major has Kipling and his works, is there a particular author or book that you hold most dear?

HS: I am a huge fan of Edith Wharton, who wrote of the bitter side of social manners in a way that is also timeless. Her *The Custom of the Country* should be required reading for all those contemplating a career in reality television.

Courtesy Random House

Discussion Questions

1. In the outset of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, the Major is described as feeling the weight of his age, but on page 320, the morning after his romantic evening with Mrs. Ali at Colonel Preston's Lodge, Simonson writes that "a pleasant glow, deep in his gut, was all that remained of a night that seemed to have burned away the years from his back." Love is not only for the young and, as it did the Major, it has the capacity to revitalize. Discuss the agelessness of love, and how it can transform us at any point in our lives.
2. A crucial theme of *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* is that of obligation. What are the differences between the Pettigrews' familial expectations and those of the Alis'? What do different characters in the novel have to sacrifice in order to stay true to these obligations? What do they give up in diverging from them?
3. Major Pettigrew clings to the civility of a bygone era, and his discussions with Mrs. Ali over tea are a narrative engine of the book and play a central role in their burgeoning romance. In our digital world, how have interpersonal relationships changed? Do you think instant communication makes us more or less in touch with the people around us?
4. Much of the novel focuses on the notion of "otherness." Who is considered an outsider in Edgecombe St. Mary? How are the various village outsiders treated differently?
5. First impressions in *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* can be deceiving. Discuss the progressions of the characters you feel changed the most from the beginning of the book to the end.
6. The Major struggles to find footing in his relationship with his adult son, Roger. Discuss the trickiness of being a parent to an adult child, and alternatively, an adult child to an aging parent. How does the generation gap come to impact the relationship?
7. Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali connect emotionally in part because they share the experience of having lost a spouse, and in part because they delight in love having come around a second time. How do you think relationships formed in grief are different from those that are not?
8. For Major Pettigrew, the Churchills represent societal standing and achievement, as well as an important part of his family's history. However, as events unfold, the Major begins to question whether loyalty and honor are more important than material objects and social status. Discuss the evolving importance of the guns to the Major, as well as the challenge of passing down important objects, and values, to younger generations.

Courtesy Random House