

## Major Pettigrew's Last Stand

Welcome and thank you for visiting my web site. While it was often a struggle to write this first novel, it was never hard to spend time in the company of Major Pettigrew. From the first time he opened the door to his home, Rose Lodge, he has always seemed to live and be real - and my biggest challenge has been not to let him down by failing to tell his story. I hope you enjoy meeting him too.

Sincerely,  
Helen Simonson

## About Me

I have lived in America for over twenty years. I have been a long-time and proud resident of Brooklyn and have recently moved with my family to the Washington D.C. area. However, I was born in England, and when I was a teenager, my family achieved the English dream - to move to a house in the country.

East Sussex, with its sleepy villages, medieval smuggling towns, and unique pebble-bank shores is my vision of 'home.' My family lives near [Rye](#), a 14th Century smuggling port on a cobbled hill, from which the sea receded long ago. It is marooned in the eerie landscape once home to smugglers, yet clings to its designation as a member of the [South Downs National Park](#). Close by are the seaside towns of Hastings and Eastbourne and to the west, the Downs swell up into a ridge of grassy hills topped by the hundred mile trail known as the South Downs Way. It is literary country - Henry James at Lamb House, Rye; Kipling at Batemans, Burwash; Virginia Woolf at Monk's House, near Lewes - and this heritage was always a great inspiration to me.

As a young woman, I could not wait to go to college in London, or to move three thousand miles away from home to America. Yet I have always carried with me a longing for England that will not fade. I think this dichotomy - between the desire for home and the urge to leave - is of central interest to my life and my writing. —Helen Simonson

Author:

- Monday, March 15th, 2010

*Hello, Just starting to read your new novel that I picked for my book club to read in May. Will you be putting together a question guide for book clubs in the very near future? If so how would I find it online? Thank you very much and looking forward to reading your book. I read only wonderful reviews on it. Best of luck to you, P.*

Thanks for emailing me with your question. I have to confess I'm not a huge fan of reading guides, which remind me too much of school and homework. However, I've had to lead book club discussions myself and I know it's a big responsibility to put together good notes. I always found first person interviews with the author were useful (there are a couple posted here). Also, just for you, I tried to think about what themes interested me enough to include them. I came up with **inheritance** (an endless source of both comedy and tragedy), **parents and their adult**

children (King Lear having the ultimate in bad offspring), **defining community by exclusion of the 'other,'** and of course, **that comment your neighbor made last week that you didn't realize, until half an hour later, was a complete insult.** These themes and some good salty snacks should keep the conversation going. If all else fails, discuss whether **love is ageless.** Thank you so much for picking Major Pettigrew for your book club.

## **Interview**

BJ Nathan Hegedus interviews Helen Simonson about her first novel, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*

***Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* offers an enlightening view of the divide between provincial and cosmopolitan, traditional and contemporary. What made you want to write about this? Was there a Major Pettigrew or Mrs. Ali in your childhood village?**

Major Pettigrew may look, at first, to be the very image of the tradition-bound, English man who would live in a village like mine. Yet I wanted to show that none of us is our own stereotype – not even the English! The Major is an individual and he reflects the struggle we all face between daily life and ethics, between cherished traditions and the desire to be free. I wanted to show how humor, and some truth, lives in the gaps between our intentions and our actions in this regard.

Mrs. Ali fascinated me because she is everything an English woman like me would aspire to be. She is educated, cultured, gracious, open - and she lives in the country. Yet her Pakistani heritage brands her as a permanent outsider. I wondered how it must feel to have grown up in England, just as I did, but then to have fellow citizens deny you your place. Mrs. Ali's dignity, in the face of all the petty insults of provincial life, seemed a story worth telling.

**Which came to mind first: the story you wanted to tell or the characters with which to tell it?**

One day I sat down to write a story just for me; not written with regard to how it would be read by others. My thoughts went home to the countryside I miss and the Major simply showed up; opening the door of his home, Rose Lodge, to Mrs. Ali from the village shop.

There were many ideas stored in my mind: how inheritance corrupts families; the urge of communities to define themselves by excluding outsiders; what 'family' really means and what we might really be prepared to give up for our principles. I tried to set all these 'big' ideas firmly in the background and just let people walk about in the village of Edgcombe St, Mary. I always tried to follow the action, not dictate a particular story line. Of course, there came several moments where I had to sit the Major down and ask him, ever so politely, to please hurry up and decide what to do next!

**You say that Major Pettigrew first came to life as a short story. At what point did you realize that you had a full-length novel on your hands?**

I was very nervous to show this story to Clark Blaise, the short story writer with whom I was

studying at the time. Because it is so deliberately NOT a gritty, contemporary tale, I really thought he would hate it. Instead he met me with a huge smile and told me, very excitedly, that he thought I had found my novel. I showed it to a few other people and their happy response and eager questions about what the Major would do next, seemed to suggest that I was on to something. It seemed an alarming but wonderful responsibility.

**After a career in advertising along with raising a family, you're now publishing your first novel. What led you to pick up the pen at this juncture in your life?**

As a stay-at-home mother with two young children, I missed my busy advertising job and I wanted some intellectual or creative activity to balance my life. Ballroom dancing didn't do it for me, but when a young man from class mentioned taking his vacation to write a screenplay, it was a light bulb moment. I had always wanted to be a writer, but had been too practical to chase such an impossible dream. As the New York Lottery ads used to say, everyone has 'a dollar and a dream.' The very next day, I signed up for Beginner Fiction at New York's 92nd Street Y.

**Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali are such wonderful rich characters. How does it feel to leave them? Are there more of their stories to be told?**

I am horribly opposed to sequels of all kinds. I'm the kind of person who only likes the original Star Wars; also Narnia, Harry Potter, and The Godfather. I mean, what was Shakespeare thinking with that Henry IV Part II?

I also love Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali, and I hate to leave them. But in my mind, I have intruded quite enough on their private lives and will leave them alone to stroll the cliff tops of Sussex and sit down every Sunday to tea and books. I am on to snoop into other characters' lives.

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## Discussion Questions for *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* by Helen Simonson

(Some questions taken or adapted from [http://www.litlovers.com/guide\\_major\\_pettigrews\\_last.html](http://www.litlovers.com/guide_major_pettigrews_last.html))

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Did you find the characters believable? Which of the characters did you like the most? Which did you dislike? *Discuss how all of them changed!*
3. Did you find the dialog in the story realistic?
4. What did you think of the plot line development? How credible did the author make the plot? Did the plot take turns you did not expect, or did you find it predictable?
5. Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali have been acquainted with one another for some time. What is it about the moment when he opens the door to her at the beginning of the book that causes him to start to fall in love with her?
6. How would you describe Major Pettigrew? In what way do we see him as “typically English”?
7. Reading and a love of books play a defining role in how we are to perceive characters in this book. What did you observe about the reading habits of George, Roger, Mrs. Ali, and Mr. Pettigrew?
8. How does Helen Simonson portray Americans in this novel? Is it a fair depiction?
9. How are outsiders treated in this village? Who are considered outsiders?
10. Small mindedness is an underlying motif in this book. Who in the novel is small-minded? How does this parochialism lead to misunderstanding?
11. Has anyone had any experiences that relate to places or experiences in the book?
12. Any comments about the way the book ended?
13. Are there questions you would like to ask?



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A WORLDWIDE READING COMMUNITY

## Major Pettigrew's Last Stand (Simonson) - Discussion Questions

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### Discussion Questions

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)

Also consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*:

1. Major Pettigrew and Mrs. Ali have known one another for a time. What is it about this one moment, when he opens the door to her at the story's onset, that makes him fall in love with her?
2. How would you describe Major Pettigrew? In what way do we see him as "typically English"?
3. Reading and love of books play a defining role in how we are to perceive characters in this book. Talk about the differences in reading habits among Roger, Mrs. Ali, and Mr. Pettigrew.
4. How does Helen Simonson portray Americans in this novel? Is it a fair depiction...or over-drawn?
5. How are outsiders treated in this village...and who are considered outsiders?
6. Small mindedness is an underlying motif in this book. Who in the novel is small-minded? How does this parochialism lead to misunderstanding?
7. Talk about some of the book's humorous plot ingredients: the gun squabble, the aristocrat who loves to hunt, the golf club and its costume party tradition.
8. If you're a fan of English novels, especially the comedy of manners type, you will recognize Simonson's use of stock characters and set-up: a retired military man, a small quiet village, a local aristocrat, multiple misunderstandings. In what way does Simonson, while using these elements, create something deeper, more potent in *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*?

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A WELL-READ ONLINE COMMUNITY

## Major Pettigrew's Last Stand (Simonson) - Author Bio

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### Author Bio

- Birth—ca. 1964-65
- Where—England, UK
- Education—London School of Economics; M.F.A., State University of New York, at Stony Brook
- Currently—lives in Washington, DC,

### *Her own words:*

I have lived in America for over twenty years. I have been a long-time and proud resident of Brooklyn and have recently moved with my family to the Washington D.C. area. However, I was born in England, and when I was a teenager, my family achieved the English dream—to move to a house in the country.

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As a young woman, I could not wait to go to college in London, or to move three thousand miles away from home to America. Yet I have always carried with me a longing for England that will not fade. I think this dichotomy—between the desire for home and the urge to leave—is of central interest to my life and my writing." (From the author's website (<http://helensimonson.com/index.php>) .)

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1.

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?

2.

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?

3.

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?

4.

First impressions in

*Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*

can be deceiving. Discuss the progression of the characters you feel changed the most from the beginning of the book to the end.

5.

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?

For More Discussion Questions:

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