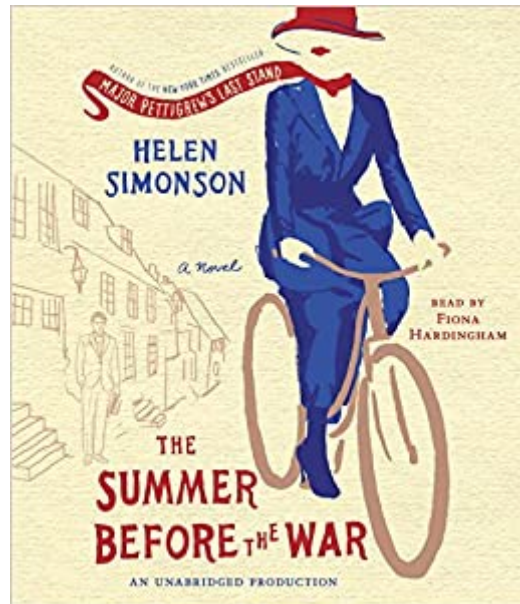




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# The Summer Before The War: A Novel



## Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER “A novel to cure your Downton Abbey withdrawal . . . a delightful story about nontraditional romantic relationships, class snobbery and the everybody-knows-everybody complications of living in a small community.” The Washington Post The bestselling author of *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand* returns with a breathtaking novel of love on the eve of World War I that reaches far beyond the small English town in which it is set. NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE WASHINGTON POST AND NPR East Sussex, 1914. It is the end of England’s brief Edwardian summer, and everyone agrees that the weather has never been so beautiful. Hugh Grange, down from his medical studies, is visiting his Aunt Agatha, who lives with her husband in the small, idyllic coastal town of Rye. Agatha’s husband works in the Foreign Office, and she is certain he will ensure that the recent saber rattling over the Balkans won’t come to anything. And Agatha has more immediate concerns; she has just risked her carefully built reputation by pushing for the appointment of a woman to replace the Latin master. When Beatrice Nash arrives with one trunk and several large crates of books, it is clear she is significantly more freethinking and attractive than anyone believes a Latin teacher should be. For her part, mourning the death of her beloved father, who has left her penniless, Beatrice simply wants to be left alone to pursue her teaching and writing. But just as Beatrice comes alive to the beauty of the Sussex landscape and the colorful characters who populate Rye, the perfect summer is about to end. For despite Agatha’s reassurances, the unimaginable is coming. Soon the limits of progress, and the old ways, will be tested as this small Sussex town and its inhabitants go to war. Praise for *The Summer Before the War* “What begins as a study of a small-town society becomes a compelling account of war and its aftermath.” *Woman’s Day* “This witty character study of how a small English town reacts to the 1914 arrival of its first female teacher offers gentle humor wrapped in a hauntingly detailed story.” *Good Housekeeping* “Perfect for readers in a post-Downton Abbey slump . . . The gently teasing banter between two kindred spirits edging slowly into love is as delicately crafted as a bone-china teacup. . . . More than a high-toned romantic reverie for Anglophiles though it serves the latter purpose, too.” *The Seattle Times* “[Helen Simonson’s] characters are so vivid, it’s as if a PBS series has come to life. There’s scandal, star-crossed love and fear, but at its heart, *The Summer Before the War* is about loyalty, love and family.” *AARP: The Magazine* “This luminous story of a family, a town, and a world in their final moments of innocence is as lingering and lovely as a long summer

sunset. • Annie Barrows, author of *The Truth According to Us* and co-author of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* “Simonson is like a Jane Austen for our day and age • she is that good • and *The Summer Before the War* is nothing short of a treasure. • Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife* and *Circling the Sun*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A novel to cure your *Downton Abbey* withdrawal . . . a delightful story about nontraditional romantic relationships, class snobbery and the everybody-knows-everybody complications of living in a small community.” • *The Washington Post* “What begins as a study of a small-town society becomes a compelling account of war and its aftermath.” • *Woman’s Day* “This witty character study of how a small English town reacts to the 1914 arrival of its first female teacher offers gentle humor wrapped in a hauntingly detailed story.” • *Good Housekeeping* “Perfect for readers in a post-*Downton Abbey* slump . . . The gently teasing banter between two kindred spirits edging slowly into love is as delicately crafted as a bone-china teacup. . . . More than a high-toned romantic reverie for Anglophiles • though it serves the latter purpose, too.” • *The Seattle Times* “[Helen Simonson’s] characters are so vivid, it’s as if a PBS series has come to life. There’s scandal, star-crossed love and fear, but at its heart, *The Summer Before the War* is about loyalty, love and family.” • *AARP: The Magazine* “At once haunting and effervescent, *The Summer Before the War* demonstrates the sure hand of a master. Helen Simonson’s

characters enchant us, her English countryside beguiles us, and her historical intelligence keeps us at the edge of our seats. This luminous story of a family, a town, and a world in their final moments of innocence is as lingering and lovely as a long summer sunset.

•Annie Barrows, author of *The Truth According to Us* and co-author of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* “Helen Simonson has outdone herself in this radiant follow-up to *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand*. The provincial town of Rye, East Sussex, in the days just before and after the Great War is so vividly drawn it fairly vibrates. The depth and sensitivity with which she weighs the steep costs and delicate bonds of wartime—and not just for the young men in the trenches, but for every changed life and heart—reveal the full mastery of her storytelling. Simonson is like a Jane Austen for our day and age—she is that good—and *The Summer Before the War* is nothing short of a treasure.

•Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife* and *Circling the Sun* “A bright confection of a book morphs into a story of dignity and backbone. . . . This book is beautifully plotted and morally astute.”

•Kirkus Reviews (starred review) “Simonson’s second novel paints a sensitive, witty, luminous portrait of England at the outbreak of World War I.”

•Shelf Awareness “This novel is just the ticket for fans of Simonson’s debut, *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand*, and for any reader who enjoys leisurely fiction steeped in the British past.”

•Booklist From the Hardcover edition.

HELEN SIMONSON was born in England and spent her teenage years in a small village in East Sussex. A graduate of the London School of Economics, she has spent the last three decades in the United States and currently lives in Brooklyn. She is married, with two grown sons, and is the author of the New York Times–bestselling debut novel, *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand*. This is her second novel.

If you love elegant writing executed by a skilled author; if you love novels incorporating a rich, wide-ranging vocabulary; and if you simply love a good story, then you will find “The Summer Before the War” delightful. Helen Simonson reminds readers of simpler times when garden parties and afternoon tea were social events. Nevertheless, she does not shy away from serious topics—women’s suffrage, the limited opportunities for England’s working class, and, finally, the effects of World War I on those who fought and those who stayed behind.

“The Summer Before the

War *The Summer Before the War* provides an excellent portrait of the manners, mannerisms, and social milieu of early twentieth century England. Beatrice Nash, an educated young woman, has been engaged to teach Latin in Rye's local grammar school. The daughter of a distinguished scholar, Beatrice is more educated than was common for a young woman during the period in which this novel takes place. When talking to her nephews and reflecting attitudes of the time, Agatha says of Beatrice's sponsor and the matriarch of the novel's primary family, "I may be progressive, but I would never hire a pretty teacher." Telling Beatrice that they must remain in the neighbor's good graces, "I'm afraid your independence, and my efforts in appointed office, both depend on our titled friend Hugh Grange, Agatha's nephew and an aspiring surgeon, and his cousin Daniel Bookham, who is slated to go into the Foreign Office, have decidedly different viewpoints of Beatrice. Nevertheless, both are attracted to Beatrice. When World War I breaks out, life for each of the characters changes in drastic, sometimes unforeseen ways. A surgeon on the front lines, Hugh longs for tranquility and a less chaotic world. "The dream of acclaim and fortune had been rendered insignificant and empty in the face of daily carnage." Both Hugh and Daniel begin to understand their personal rivalry is insignificant when compared to world events. "He thought it sad and strange that it would take a war to wipe away the cold formalities of life." "War makes our needs so much smaller." In ordinary life, I never understood how much pleasure it gives me to see you. Characters drive the action and the emotion of *The Summer Before the War*; while war scenes are violent, they are not gratuitously descriptive. Focusing on the psychological impact of battles and wartime deprivation make this novel more relatable. Helen Simonson captures individual differences and class distinctions while maintaining a respect for each one of the characters. Some will develop and mature, some will emerge as cruel and callous individuals, and some will rise above their station to perform extraordinary deeds. *The Summer Before the War* is a lengthy novel, but one that is worth your reading time. Language and situations are appropriate for between readers; the novel may provide some perspective on events surrounding World War I and British society during that era.

I loved this book. Written by the author of "Major Pettigrew" it takes place in Rye, a small town in East Sussex, in the summer of 1914 before the start of WWI. The sweet innocence of the times is brought to life when Beatrice Nash arrives to teach Latin to the students of Rye. Beatrice is a well educated woman who must make it on her own after the death of her academic father. She struggles against the strictures of her time to find a place. For some reason, a woman teaching Latin is relatively shocking. I am not sure why as there are two other women teachers but for some reason Latin is a no-no. The story of her appointment to the job is one of the funniest scenes I've read in a long time. Beatrice, also, to everyone's horror rides a bicycle and is fiercely independent and competent. She's taken under the wing of a town leader, Agatha Kent, who becomes one of my very characters ever. She is so diplomatic, loving and full of life. Agatha has also raised two nephews, Hugh and Daniel, both interesting characters. In fact the town is full of interesting characters including the idiotic wife of the mayor. The story is full of women trying to fly on their own wings and it is just 6 years later that American women got the right to vote. It is a time of great change and limits are being tested even in the small town of Rye. The town decides to help in the upcoming War effort by taking in Belgian refugees and are then horrified to discover families want to stay together and not be parceled out one at a time. The wry humor is delightful. There is also a group of gypsies involved who had color to the story. And as the year progresses, change comes slowly and painfully. Friendships are made and class barriers start to fall. Innocence is lost and things are never quite the same. It's a lovely, lovely story that so accurately describes the times (at least in my opinion) that it takes my breath away. It is a slow moving book in the way real life is. I loved every minute of it. I highly recommend it.

A most unusual book, but worth any necessary effort to read it. Subtle, very descriptive, often tender and philosophical review of life in a small English town at the beginning of World War I. I had anticipated this book based on my very enjoyable experience with the author's first book, "Major Pettigrew's Last Stand" and I was not disappointed. There is no plot connection between the two books, so there is no reason to read the one first, but I recommend them both wholeheartedly. Some reviewers have been critical of the author's attention to minute details, often slowing the progress of the plot, but I feel they are all worthy and the reader gets a full appreciation of the writer's skill by letting the plot unfold slowly. The book is long....it could have been shortened by leaving out some of those details, but I, for one, am glad they did not do that. Toward the end the plot gets into some of the less pleasant, often horrible aspects of the "Great War" and its impact on the common people, but that, also, helps to make the whole as good as it is. And, yes, the ending is

a bit predictable, as some have complained, but it is a pleasant journey getting there. It is a serious book, but well worth reading.

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