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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The Summer Before the War by Helen Simonson

Author:

- 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,

Helen Simonson is the author of two novels, *The Last Stand of Major Pettigrew* (2010) and *The Summer Before the War* (2016). Though living in America, Simonson was born and raised in England.

She grew up near Rye, a 14th century smuggling port from which the sea receded long ago. The town is now surrounded by marshland, the very place Charles Dickens' Pip, from *Great Expectations*, started off on his journey to manhood. Rye is situated in East Sussex, a county of medieval villages, seaside towns, and high grassy bluffs known as the South Downs. Simonson considers it her ideal of home.

But over the past three decades Simonson has lived in the U.S.—first, as a long-time and proud resident of Brooklyn, New York, and more recently in the Washington D.C. area.

As a young woman, Simonson was eager to head to London for college and, later, to move across the pond to America. Yet she has always carried with her a deep longing for home. "I think this dichotomy—between the desire for home and the urge to leave—is of central interest to my life and my writing," she has said.

(Adapted from the [author's website](#), retrieved from LitLovers, 2/13/2020)

Summary:

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.

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. (*From the publisher, retrieved from LitLovers 2/13/2020*)

Questions:

1. An important subject in *The Summer Before the War* is women's lives: their role and limits, and how women work within and against Edwardian strictures. Do you think we can take any modern lessons from these women's lives?
2. Beatrice and Celeste both idolize their fathers. However, are they both betrayed? Do all the characters place too much trust in father figures? Do you think this a useful metaphor for England as it goes to war?
3. Why do we love the Edwardian era so much? Is it the gentility and supposed innocence of the age? Does this attraction remain for you after reading *The Summer Before the War*?
4. The author presents two strong women in the characters of Beatrice Nash and Agatha Kent. How are they similar and different? Why do you think the author chose to present both voices?
5. Who is your favorite character and what draws you to him or her in particular? Whom do you dislike in the book, and does he or she have redeeming features?
6. The author has said she thinks the whole world can be explained in a small town. Did she succeed at that in this book? What do you think can or cannot be described and explained within such a setting?
7. Though *The Summer Before the War* is set in Edwardian England, did you recognize elements of your own town, city, or -social circle in this novel? Could the good ladies and gentlemen of Rye only exist in England, or are such characters found everywhere?
8. Why are books about war so compelling? Do you agree with Beatrice that no writer can ever write about war in a way that will prevent it? Is it a valuable topic anyway?
9. Did *The Summer Before the War* change what you knew or how you thought of the First World War? How so?
(*Questions issued by the publisher, retrieved from LitLovers 2/13/2020*).