



The Summer Before the War by Helen Simonson

About the author:

I was born and raised in England. 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 lived near Rye, a 14th Century port on a cobbled hill, from which the sea receded long ago. It is marooned in the Romney Marsh landscape once home to smugglers, and is a proud member of the ancient Cinque Ports. Close by are the seaside towns of Hastings and Eastbourne and to the west of them, the Sussex bluffs swell up into the Downs, a ridge of grassy chalk hills topped by the hundred mile trail known as the South Downs Way. To the East lie the ports of Folkestone and Dover, with its own white cliffs, and in between stretches all the rich farmland of the Sussex Weald. It is literary country: Henry James and then E. F. Benson at Lamb House, Rye; Radclyffe Hall in Rye; Kipling at Batemans, Burwash; Virginia Woolf at Monk's House, near Lewes. The list goes on- 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.

I have lived in America for three decades now. I am a long-time resident of a shabby old wooden house in Brooklyn, New York, though I also spent some years in the Washington DC area. I began my career in advertising and did not start writing fiction until I was a young mother, at home with two small children, and desperate for some intellectual escape from the diapers and the baby gym classes. "Beginner Fiction" at New York's 92nd Street Y seemed as good an excuse for a night off as anything! A writing career takes a long time – witness my older son is out of college and my younger will soon graduate – but as a woman who did not publish until the age of forty five, I hope I am living proof that it is never too late to follow your passion, or find a new vocation.

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Source: Author's website (<http://helensimonson.com/about.html>)

About this book:

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 beloved Aunt Agatha, who lives with her husband John in the small, idyllic coastal town of Rye. Agatha insists that the recent sabre rattling over the Balkans won't come to anything, and that the King, the Kaiser, the Russian Tsar and Uncle John will all be taking their scheduled summer holidays as usual. Meanwhile, she has more immediate concerns; as one of the first women allowed to be voted onto the local school's Board of Governors, Agatha has just risked her carefully built reputation by publicly pushing for the appointment of a female Latin teacher.

When Beatrice Nash arrives with one trunk and several large crates of books, it is clear she is significantly more free thinking – and prettier – than anyone believes a Latin teacher should be. For her part, Beatrice – whose father recently passed away leaving her without family or money – simply wants to be left alone to pursue her teaching and writing. Quickly taken under the formidable Agatha's wing, charmed by the beauty of the Sussex landscape, Beatrice soon finds herself questioning her original opinions on spinsterhood and small town life.

But this serene countryside summer is about to end, and despite Agatha's reassurances, an unimaginable war 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.

Source: Author's website (<http://www.helensimonsen.com/summer-before.html>)

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Discussion 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?

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9. Did *The Summer Before the War* change what you knew or how you thought of the First World War? How so?

Source: *Lit Lovers* (<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/10555-summer-before-war-simonson?start=3>)

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