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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?

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.
Reading Guide Questions

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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 Edgecombe 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.