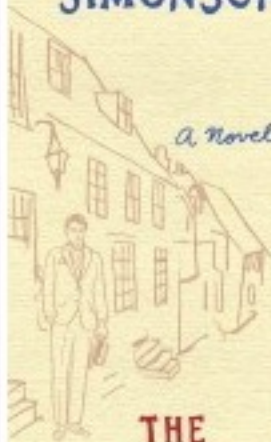


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER by the author of
MAJOR PETTIGREW'S LAST STAND

**HELEN
SIMONSON**

A Novel



**THE
SUMMER
BEFORE THE WAR**

The author of the breakout debut "Major Pettigrew's Last Stand" doubles down on success with this period tale of a life in a small English village on the brink of World War I. At the heart of the story is a young woman new to the town of Rye. Beatrice has been hired -- not without controversy -- to be the new Latin teacher at the local school. She faces a tough balancing act of proving her worth while claiming her independence but without proving too "modern" for even her supporters. Distracting her attention are the two nephews of Beatrice's patroness Agatha: Hugh is a sober young man studying to be a surgeon and Daniel is his impossibly handsome and infuriatingly blithe poet of a cousin. But don't imagine a love triangle. The novel soon opens up to encompass all the locals, ranging from a pesky landlady to a famed author proud as a peacock to a divorcee causing scandal to a small Romany lad with a gift for Latin and on and on, all with the storm clouds of war looming in the background. The elements of this book are so familiar it's easy to simply enjoy it as the engrossing page-turner Simonson has delivered. Indeed, I rushed through it with pleasure. Yet it's animated with a rare intelligence, sharp observation and humane outlook: even the "villains" are seen as complete people and not there merely for poking fun at. Our heroes are quietly complicated folk, filled with prejudices and assumptions; they surprise themselves as much as they surprise us while always remaining believable. Again and again I was struck by a telling detail, a subtle layering of character on top of characters who might have remained just "types." I wish Simonson had stuck more to the title and left war as slowly encroaching. Instead, we plunge into battle and discover the fates of one and all. The plot is tied up in a too-neat bow. It's a pretty bow and very satisfying on a basic level. Certainly the sentiment on display is earned but it's still sentiment. This deserves to be a big bestseller as well. I hope the next time around Simonson is brave rather than safe at the very end. This is intelligent, penetrating and great fun. Simonson should aim even higher. -- Michael Giltz