



## The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club

By Helen Simonson

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## Discussion Questions

1. Which character's journey resonated with you the most? Why?
2. "It was all very well and patriotic when we were freeing up men for the services," Iris says of women working. "But now we are just behaving oddly and diminishing our chances of snatching up one of the few available husbands." Discuss the situation in which the novel's working women find themselves --- having to give up their wartime jobs or accept lower pay when the men return. How do you think you would have reacted?
3. How are people of other nationalities, like Captain Pendra and Klaus the waiter; socioeconomic classes, like Constance and Jock; and races, like the de Champneys and Pendra, treated by other characters in the book?
4. How does author Helen Simonson characterize the members of the British elite? Are there differences amongst characters of that echelon? Contrast Lady Mercer's behavior, for instance, against that of Mrs. Wirrall.
5. What freedoms does the Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle (and later, Flying) club offer its members? In what ways are the women still limited?
6. How do characters treat Harris differently due to his disability? How did this make you think about how disabled people are treated today? Do you think much has changed?
7. How do Poppy and her Motorcycle Club help break Constance out of her shell?
8. What other themes are present in the book?
9. How does Helen Simonson show the lesser-seen casualties of war?
10. What did you think about the end of the novel? Did your favorite characters get what they wished for? Did your least favorite characters get their comeuppance?

## Author Interview

**ALLEN & UNWIN:** Welcome Helen. We're excited to hear more about The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club! Can you elaborate on the research you did for the book?

**HELEN SIMONSON:** My research was ongoing throughout the four years of writing this book. Historical research was made extra difficult by the pandemic lockdown. Thank goodness for the internet and online book ordering. And I had lots of books, and material left over from my second novel, *The Summer Before the War*, which took place in 1914.

I began this novel in 2019, the 100-year anniversary of the official Peace following signing of the World War One Treaty of Versailles. But the story started to really come together in 2020. I had already written about World War One, but the Covid pandemic highlighted that my previous book had skipped over the Spanish flu entirely – as most of history seemed to have done. The parallels were eerie and deepened the struggles of my characters. My mother survived Covid – alone in rural France – so you can imagine from where I drew the strength of my women characters. I still have English family near Rye, East Sussex which is a 14th Century town on a hill. It is close to Hastings and Eastbourne and Bexhill, all grand old seaside towns. I usually visit at least once a year and in 2021 the Bexhill Museum was a particularly helpful resource. Fun fact: I also interviewed a pilot from Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome, NY to learn how to fly a Sopwith Camel.

**A&U:** Do any of the main characters hold a special place in your heart? If so, why?

**HS:** Tilly Mulford is special to me. She is a mechanical and logistics whizz – and a librarian! But though she is close friends with the rest of the club, especially Poppy Wirrall, it is painfully obvious that she is not quite on the same social level. Even Constance Haverhill is (on her mother's side) from a more educated and affluent background. Tillie is the real working woman. To me she also represents all the early female engineers who struggled to be recognized and were kept out of work, and not allowed to join professional societies in this era. Her name is an homage to Beatrice "Tilly" Shilling, an engineer who almost was not allowed her career – which would have been a shame as she saved the British Spitfire program in World War Two.

**A&U:** If you had to describe Poppy Wirrall in three words, what would those three words be?

**HS:** Blithe, generous, sometimes a bit oblivious. I didn't realize, until I read the novel through, that Poppy occasionally behaves like Jane Austen's Emma!

**A&U:** Can you give us some insight into what makes the main protagonist, Constance Haverhill, tick?

**HS:** Constance's parents made a love match across social classes. Her mother was educated, from a prominent ecclesiastical family and bosom friends with Lady Mercer. Her father, though

wealthy enough to own his own farm, was not gentry. This places Constance on an interesting social knife edge. She is too intelligent to be content as a poor relation or to marry for convenience. But she is yet to understand what it really means to be a working woman. A teetering future in a world reeling from change. This is catnip to the writer!

**A&U:** What was the highlight of writing *The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club*?

**HS:** I lost my Dad to Covid in March 2020. He was a lifelong aviation enthusiast and loved Sopwith Camels (as well as Tiger Moths and Spitfires). All the aeroplanes in the book are for him and I was inspired to write a story he would love. At Rhinebeck Aerodrome, I overcame my fears and – thinking of my father – I flew in a 1927 open biplane to understand open cockpit flying. Writing about flying, and feeling close to my father, was the heart of my experience writing this novel.

**A&U:** What do you hope your readers take away from *The Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle and Flying Club*?

**HS:** I hope people take away the spark of love, the bedrock of family and friendship, and the vital importance of being resilient and true to yourself.

**A&U:** Finally, what would you say is your most interesting writing quirk?

**HS:** I have spent years trying to get up at dawn and put in my hours at the computer. Only to procrastinate and fail, and miss weeks at a time, which I blamed on life in general. But with this book I discovered a fascinating quirk about myself. I think I'm an afternoon writer! Instead of failing to get to my desk by noon and blowing off the whole day, I began to give myself permission to start at two o'clock in the afternoon. Or even three o'clock. And I found steady employment ensued. Who knew the dawn hours are - along with wet handkerchiefs across the forehead and visits from the toga-clad muse – only tropes of writing and not necessities.

## **Author Biography**

Helen Simonson was born in England and spent her teenage years in a small village in East Sussex. A dual UK/USA citizen, she is a graduate of the London School of Economics with an MFA from Stony Brook Southampton. Helen is married with two sons and lives in Brooklyn NY. Her debut novel, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, and her second novel *The Summer before The War* were NY Times and international bestsellers.

## Reviews

Simonson (*The Summer Before the War*) delivers a thoughtful and witty tale of British men and women adjusting to a new normal after WWI. Spunky and observant Constance Haverhill worked as an estate manager during the war. Now, she's reduced to serving temporarily as a lady's companion for Mrs. Fog, who is recuperating from influenza in a hotel in the seaside resort town of Hazelbourne. Here, Constance meets free-spirited spendthrift Poppy Wirrall and her attractive and morose brother, Harris, who lost his leg while flying a plane in the war. Constance, timid at first, gets involved with Poppy's effort to provide local women with jobs as motorcycle drivers for sidecar-riding passengers. Constance even tries her hand at flying Harris's Sopworth Camel biplane, which Poppy bought to jolt him out of his rut. While Constance's bumpy romantic adventures with Harris form the spine of the book, Simonson neatly interweaves multiple plotlines involving the chauvinistic and condescending local gentry, the travails of a German waiter scorned because of his nationality, and the bad behavior of visiting Americans. Readers are in for a treat.

From: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9781984801319>

Constance Haverhill is spending the summer at Hazelbourne-on-Sea on the English coast. But in the summer of 1919, things are not as joyous for her as they could be. While World War I has ended and everyone is happy to have the soldiers return home, it also means that much of her independence, and her work, will be taken from her so the men will have jobs when they come back. With her brother estranged and her mother's death still heavy in her thoughts, her summer at the sea is not what she expected.

While her older companion is resting, Constance stops by the hotel restaurant for lunch. In a fortuitous meeting, Poppy Wirrall unexpectedly livens up her summer. Poppy is the proprietor of the Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle Club (to which she plans to add flying lessons) and employs several local women as part of her taxi service. Constance, Poppy and the ladies of the club become fast friends, giving Constance something to think about other than her rather bleak future as a possible governess, which she is not interested in exploring as a career choice. Poppy, the daughter of a local baronet, continually flaunts convention, sometimes to the chagrin of her family and friends, but shows Constance a version of the future she didn't consider.

As summer rolls to a close, Constance's life changes in ways she never imagined. She becomes an honorary member of the Hazelbourne Ladies Motorcycle Club and helps her companion, Mrs. Fog, rekindle a long-lost romance. And even Constance begins to build her own future. The friendships she thought would be fleeting are turning out to be very real and even life-altering.

Just a few pages into the book, it felt like I knew these characters all my life. Helen Simonson has a way of welcoming in a reader, showing just enough so you're quickly invested in what

happens right from the start. Constance is quiet but strong, and while she might doubt her future, you never do.

THE HAZELBOURNE LADIES MOTORCYCLE AND FLYING CLUB is a wonderful read with some love stories intertwined alongside the friendships, and even a few sad moments that remind the reader that World War I was not far off for these people. This book is a perfect summer companion whether you're on the beach or sitting in the backyard. You'll fall in love with the characters and the setting, and you won't want to put it down until the last word is read.

From: <https://www.bookreporter.com/reviews/the-hazelbourne-ladies-motorcycle-and-flying-club>