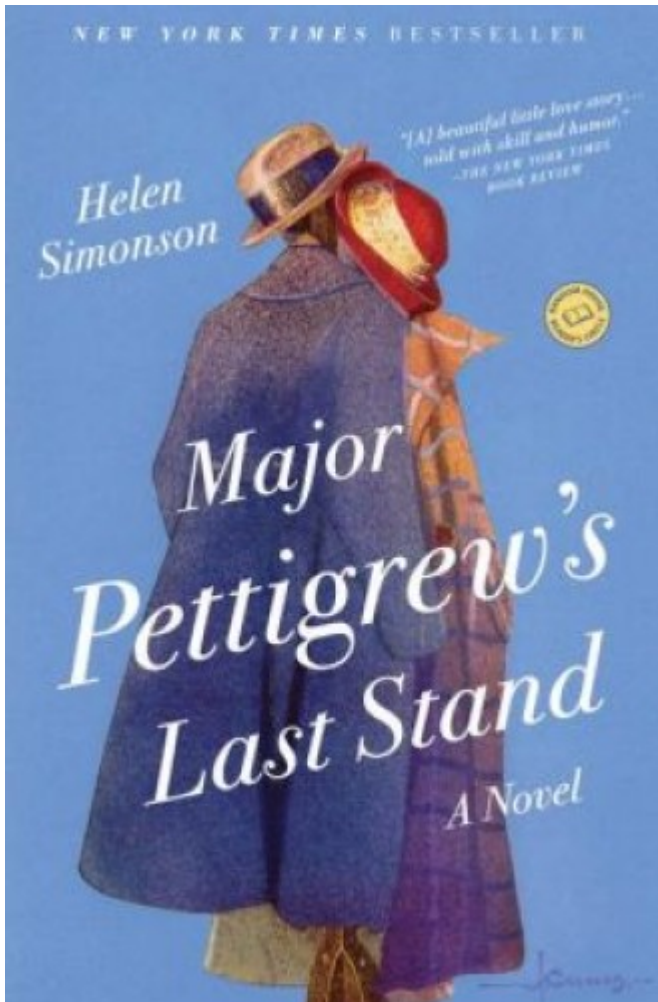


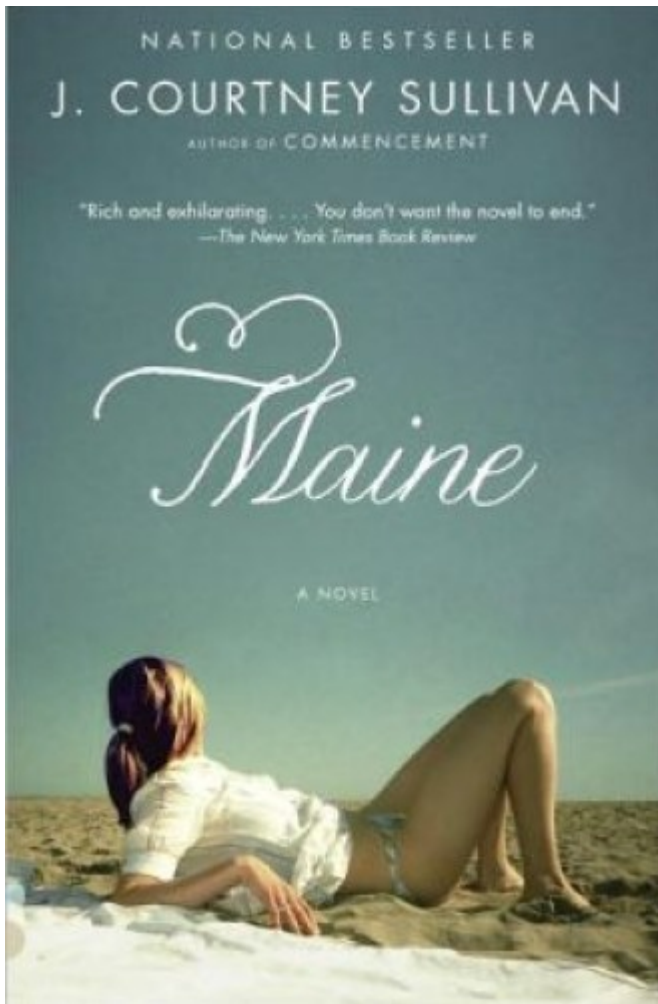
Major Pettigrew's Last Stand, by Helen Simonson, and *Maine*, by J. Courtney Sullivan
reviewed by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Major Pettigrew's Last Stand

By Helen Simonson
Random House



Maine

By J. Courtney Sullivan

Vintage

Helen Simonson's enchanting debut novel, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, invites us into a quaint English seaside village, where we meet the retired military man of the title, a widower whose brother has just died unexpectedly. In his grief, Major Pettigrew comes to look at his life in a new way.

Now 68 years old, the major realizes how lonely he has been since his wife's death years before. When he turns to his grown son, Roger, he finds a self-centered materialistic young man whose only interest is his own social advancement. As he considers the quaint customs of his friends in the village, the major longs for something more than superficial chit chat at the golf club.

Suddenly, with eyes made sharp with grief and the knowledge that life is short, he sees anew a woman he has known for years—the shopkeeper Jasmina Ali, a Muslim widow from a Pakistani family who runs a convenience store at the center of the village. And he develops a mighty crush. So begins a touching and hilarious, wonderful and unlikely cross-cultural love story in an unlikely setting at an unlikely time of life.

Like any good love story, it is not without its complications. Mrs. Ali is being pressured to leave the store and the village and live with her controlling brother-in-law, who does not want to see her playing any role other than that of grieving widow, even long after her husband has died.

Then there are Major Pettigrew's fancy friends, who cannot imagine that the woman who runs the shop where they pick up cream and tea could possibly have a personality, let alone be a person one would fall in love with.

And there are the cross-cultural barriers. Major Pettigrew's military background extends back through generations to the colonial presence in India, where an ancestor received a valuable pair of rifles from the maharaja. Mrs. Ali is a Muslim raised in England who loves to read Western classics. The intellectual and educated shopkeeper misses none of the insults and assumptions of her privileged and parochial neighbors. Yet together the major and Mrs. Ali discover a shared love of the works of Rudyard Kipling and begin to have assignations at the park to discuss his writings.

At the climax of the courtship, the major takes Mrs. Ali as his date to the annual costumed dance at the village golf club, where frumpy ladies wear ill-fitting saris and boozed-up men in British colonial military uniforms reenact the last days of the British Empire in India. The chief planner of this bizarre event is the unbearable minister's wife, who carries all the town's snobberies to the extreme. The minister is also flawed, but in this novel the church just gets to be the church, an organization of human beings trying but failing to get it right. The author does not take potshots at the church, and the figure of the pastor is nuanced and believable.

The connection between the major and Mrs. Ali is not the most complicated one in the story. That honor goes to the relationship between Major Pettigrew and his adult son. It is painful to read the major's scathing reports of his son and his son's generation. Roger shows up to see his father only when he wants something, and

when he tries to be generous to his father, he doesn't seem to understand what sort of gift his father would want. He has no awareness of his father's loneliness, and he dismisses his father's lifelong military service as a dead end.

From the major's point of view, Roger belongs to a generation that spends more than it earns, texts more than it talks, aspires to more than it deserves, and sees itself as constantly entitled to care and attention but is far too busy to offer the same to the older generation that gave it life.

The same generational themes are mined in J. Courtney Sullivan's *Maine*. In her first novel, *Commencement*, Sullivan followed the lives of four Smith College friends through their college years and beyond. In *Maine*, she follows women who are all members of a large extended Boston family who come together every summer on the coast of Maine.

We encounter the Kelleher family through the eyes of 80-year-old Alice, the elegant family matriarch. A widow for ten years, Alice fills her Maine summers volunteering at her beloved Catholic church there. Beautiful, well-dressed and a pillar of the summer community, Alice presides over the comings and goings of four generations at a stunning cottage on the beach. It sounds perfect.

But Alice is tormented by guilty secrets from her young adulthood. She believes that she was responsible for her sister's death in a fire. When she is not occupied with visitors and volunteering or attending mass, she smokes and drinks alone and worries that her church will be shut down by the diocese.

When the church budget gets tight, Alice makes a secret decision to change her will so the seafront cottage, now worth a fortune, will go to the congregation after her death. Her young family members take the family cottage for granted and have no idea that it will not someday be theirs.

The only person Alice can confide in is the young parish priest, and it is to him that she signs over the cottage--the only place of connection in a disconnected family. The priest, who never asked for such a thing, is torn between hope for his parish and concern that Alice has not told her family the truth.

Alice's family may love her, but this kind young cleric seems to be the only young person who likes her. It is refreshing to encounter a fictional Catholic priest who is not caricatured or portrayed as a predator but is presented as a decent human

being. This priest is not perfect, but he is compassionate, wise and ethical. I'd want to save his church myself.

Maine, like *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, is a tale of generational misunderstanding in which the elder's voice has the last word, and it is not a pretty one. Alice's reflections on her children and grandchildren's self-focused lives are as harsh as the major's, though not as funny. Unlike the major, who desires a connection with his son and with others, Alice has closed in on herself. Isolated, guilty and bitter, she pretends to be something she is not: a sweet little church lady. She pulls that off by attending mass and volunteering every morning, not out of joy but out of guilt.

Her family members do not buy her church lady persona, but having had enough of the family's dysfunction, they do not attempt to dig deeper. They think they have Alice figured out, and they are busy with their own lives. They take her for granted as much as they do the cottage. All of these women, stewing in their own troubles, are unable to connect with one another or to have the honest conversations they need to have.

I am reminded of the story of Solomon after the death of his father, King David, when God visited him in a dream. Told to ask for anything at all, he requested wisdom. Perhaps he was asking for the wisdom to rule well, but maybe he was seeking wisdom about his own strange and twisted family tree. How would he, as a young man, close the generational gap and lead?

I often wish that God had left us more instructions on how to get along across the generations. God just left us one commandment about honoring our mothers and fathers and a bunch of stories about families. I suspect that those stories were passed along with the hope that we would read them thousands of years later and realize that our problems are not unique to our present age. Since creation, human beings have talked past one another, ignored each other, snubbed each other and hurt each other's feelings. But we have also always cared about each other. So much so that we wrote down the stories of our troubles, memorized them, fought for their survival and passed them down to the next generation. Today we are still searching for wisdom, and it is this search that makes these two novels such excruciating but compelling reading. It is in stories that we find the most wisdom, and we recognize these fictional families as much like our own.

Remarkably, both of these books were written by relatively young authors. I was surprised to discover that the creator of Major Pettigrew is not a wise and elderly Brit but a Brooklyn stay-at-home mom in her forties. And after spending a few weeks with Alice in *Maine*, I forgot that the writer of that story is a young single woman in her thirties whose previous book was about college, and the one before that about dating.

Perhaps the greatest hope for communication between the generations is that two gifted writers such as these are immersing themselves in trying to bridge the gap, and in the oldest way possible—by telling a good story.