

## Author Spotlight

# AMOR TOWLES



Born and raised in the Boston area, Amor Towles graduated from Yale College and received an MA in English from Stanford University. His first novel, *Rules of Civility*, published in 2011, was a *New York Times* bestseller and was named by *The Wall Street Journal* as one of the best books of 2011. His second novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, published in 2016, was also a *New York Times* bestseller and was named as one of the best books of 2016 by the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and NPR. Both novels have been translated into over fifteen languages. Having worked as an investment professional for over twenty years, Mr. Towles now devotes himself full time to writing in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two children.

*A Gentleman in Moscow* tells the story of a Russian aristocrat living under house arrest in a luxury hotel for more than thirty years. The novel immerses the reader in an elegantly drawn era with the story of Count Alexander Rostov. When, in 1922, he is deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a Bolshevik tribunal, the count is sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin. Rostov, an indomitable man of erudition and wit, has never worked a day in his life, and must now live in an attic room while some of the most tumultuous decades in Russian history are unfolding outside the hotel's doors. Unexpectedly, his reduced circumstances provide him a doorway into a much larger world of emotional discovery.

The author's repeated travel for business to a Geneva hotel and seeing the same people every year in the lobby— as if they never left the hotel—sparked the idea for the novel. Towles began playing with the idea of a man being stuck in a grand hotel. Towles decided the character should be there by force and not by choice. He instantly thought of the existence of house arrest in Russia since the time of Tsars. The novel springs from his imagination and a love for Russian literature, culture and history. After the first draft, Towles fine-tuned the details with some applied research.

Brimming with humor, a glittering cast of characters, and one beautifully rendered scene after another, this singular novel casts a spell as it relates the count's endeavor to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a man of purpose.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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## Discussion Questions for *A Gentleman in Moscow*

1) In the transcript at the opening of *A Gentleman in Moscow*, the head of the tribunal and Count Rostov have the following exchange:

“Secretary Ignatov: I have no doubt, Count Rostov, that some in the galley are surprised to find you charming; but I am not surprised to find you so. History has shown charm to be the last ambition of the leisure class. What I do find surprising is that the author of the poem in question could have become a man so obviously without purpose.

Rostov: I have lived under the impression that a man’s purpose is known only to God.

Secretary Ignatov: Indeed. How convenient that must have been for you.”

To what extent is *A Gentleman in Moscow* a novel of purpose? How does the Count’s sense of purpose manifest itself initially, and how does it evolve as the story unfolds?

2) Over the course of Book Two, why does the Count decide to throw himself from the roof of the Metropol? On the verge of doing so, why does the encounter with the old handyman lead him to change his plans?

3) The Count’s life under house arrest is greatly influenced by his relationship with four women: Nina, Marina, Anna, and Sofia. What is the nature of the Count’s relationship with each of these women? How do those relationships differ from his relationship with the members of the Triumvirate—Andrey and Emile?

4) The majority of *A Gentleman in Moscow* is told in the third person from the Count’s point of view. There is, however, an overarching narrator with a perspective different from the Count’s. Initially, this narrator appears in footnotes, then in the “Addendums,” then in the historical introductions of “1930,” “1938,” and “1946.” How would you characterize this narrator? How does he differ from the Count in terms of his point of view and tone of voice? What is his role in the narrative?

5) In the “1946” chapter, Mishka, Osip, and Richard each share with the Count his perspective on the meaning of the revolutionary era. What are these three perspectives? Are you inclined to agree with one of them; or do you find there is some merit to each?

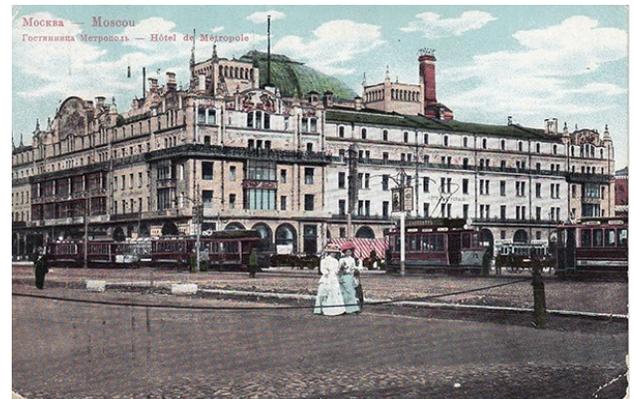
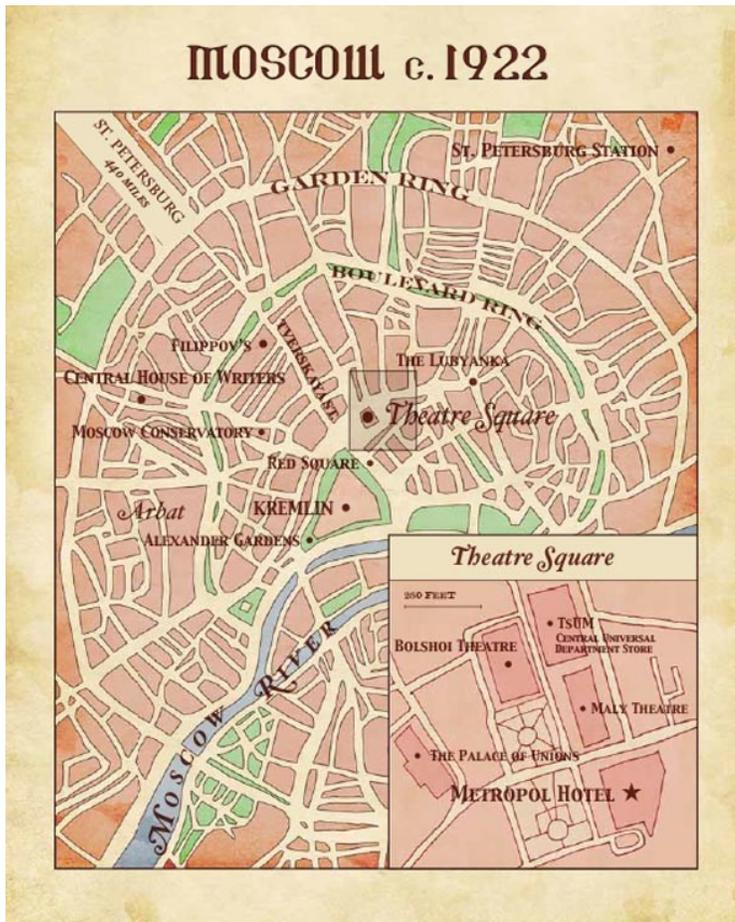
6) One of the pleasures of writing fiction is discovering upon completion of a project that some thread of imagery has run through the work without your complete awareness—forming, in essence, an unintentional motif. While I was very conscious of the recurrence of tolling bells, keys, and concentric circles in the book, here are a few motifs that I only recognized after the fact: Packages wrapped in brown paper, such as the Maltese Falcon, Mishka’s book of quotations, the Russian nesting dolls discovered in the Italians’ closet, and the Count’s copy of Montaigne (in Paris). The likeness of stars, such as the freckles on Anna’s back and the beacon on the top of the Shukhov radio tower. Sailors (often in peril), such as Robinson Crusoe, Odysseus, Admiral Makarov, and Arion in the myth of Delphinus. What role do any of these motifs play in the thematic composition of the book? And if you see me in an airport, can you explain them to me?

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## Discussion Questions continued

- 7) How does the narrative incorporate the passage of time, and does it do so effectively? Thematically speaking, how does the Count's experience of Time change over the course of the novel and how does it relate to his father's views as embodied by the twice-tolling clock? What does the novel suggest about the influence of individuals on history and vice versa?
- 8) At the opening of Book Five, the Count has already decided to get Sofia out of Russia. What occurs over the course of Book Four to lead him to this decision? Why does he choose to remain behind?
- 9) Near the novel's conclusion, what is the significance of the toppled cocktail glass in *Casablanca*?
- 10) This is a novel with a somewhat fantastical premise set half a century ago in a country very different from our own. Nonetheless, do you think the book is relevant today? If so, in what way?
- 11) **Bonus Question:** Who in the novel also appears in *Rules of Civility*?



Metropol Hotel

## Recommendations by Amor Towles

### Food and Drink

For those interested in cooking something for their book group, I highly recommend the Latvian stew that the Count enjoys in the Piazza during the *Advent* chapter. As to the wine, you needn't hunt down a Russian vintage—any good table wine will do.

#### PORK STEW WITH DRIED APRICOTS AND PRUNES

SERVES 6 — 8

As the apricots and prunes cook, some of them will fall apart and thicken the sauce. Serve this stew accompanied by boiled potatoes, buttered and garnished with chopped parsley, if you like.

3 lbs. boneless pork shoulder, trimmed and cut into 1" pieces

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

6 tbsp. vegetable oil

6 carrots, peeled, trimmed, and sliced crosswise

4 tbsp. tomato paste

1 cup dried apricots

1 lb. white boiling onions, peeled, each cut into 6 wedges

1 cup pitted prunes

Season pork with salt and pepper. Heat 3 tbsp. of the oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot over medium high heat. Add pork and cook, stirring occasionally, until meat releases its juices and is no longer pink all over, about 5 minutes. Add carrots and cook until slightly tender, about 5 minutes. Stir in tomato paste and 5 cups of water, then add apricots. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and gently simmer, uncovered, for 45 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat remaining oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add onions and cook, stirring often, until deep golden brown, about 15 minutes. Set onions aside.

Add onions and prunes to stew and continue to simmer over medium-low heat until pork is tender and sauce has thickened, about 30 minutes more. Adjust seasonings.

### Literature

If *A Gentleman in Moscow* stirs or renews your interest in Russian literature, I recommend the translations of Pevear & Volokhonsky. Over the course of the last twenty years, this husband and wife team has been systematically translating the works of Russia's golden age including those by Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov. They also have translated *The Master & Margarita*, Bulgakov's masterpiece penned in the Soviet era.

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## Music

The following playlist includes five classical pieces referenced in *A Gentleman in Moscow* listed below in the order in which they appear in the novel:

### **Pyotr Tchaikovsky: *The Nutcracker, Act One* (1892)**

Though *The Nutcracker*, its spirit, and its various characters (especially Drosselmeyer) are referenced throughout the novel, Act One is featured at the end of the 1926 Chapter in the Count's list of three important contributions by Russia to the West.

### **Pyotr Tchaikovsky: *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor* (1892)**

It is a recording of Vladimir Horowitz playing this concerto at Carnegie Hall that the Count listens to alone in his room at the end of the 1946 Chapter (thanks to Richard Vanderwhile), and which becomes a symbol for him of “the Former” over “the Latter” in the 1952 Chapter. Horowitz, who defected from the Soviet Union in 1925, had his debut in the United States at Carnegie Hall in 1929 playing this piece.

### **Frederic Chopin: *Nocturnes, Op 9 No. 1-3* (1832)**

It is the second of the three Nocturnes that Sofia plays for the Count in the 1954 Chapter, the day he discovers that she has been studying piano in secret.

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Piano Sonata No. 1 in C Major* (1774)**

This is the “delightful composition” that Sofia plays to win the student competition at the Moscow Conservatory (despite the Count's concerns that it might be *too* delightful).

### **Sergei Rachmaninov: *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor* (1901)**

It is this concerto that Sofia plays in the 1954 Chapter with the orchestra of the Moscow Conservatory at the Salle Pleyel in Paris.

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