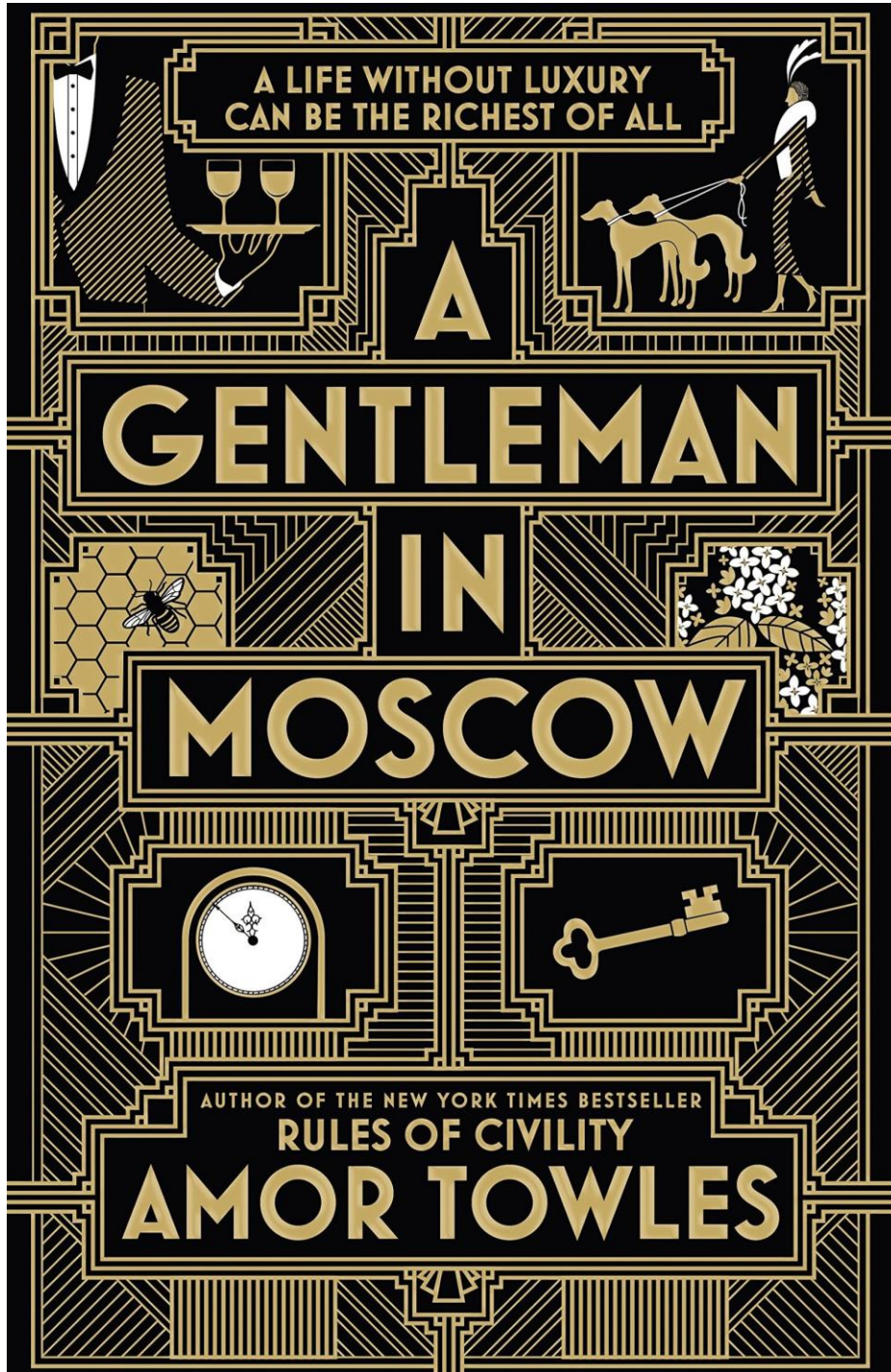


A Gentleman in Moscow

by Amor Towles



Book Summary:

from Penguin Random House

In 1922, Count Alexander Rostov is deemed an unrepentant aristocrat by a Bolshevik tribunal, and 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 entry into a much larger world of emotional discovery.

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.

Author Biography:

from Penguin Random House

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.

Review #1: *New York Times*

[“A Count Becomes a Waiter in a Novel of Soviet Supremacy,”](#) by Craig Taylor, Sept. 23, 2016
(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov — a member of the Jockey Club, Master of the Hunt — was already ensconced in luxury in Suite 317 when he was sentenced to house arrest in a 1922 trial, condemned for writing a poem. Saved from a bullet to the head or exile in Siberia because he was deemed a hero of the pre-revolutionary cause, he has been forcefully installed on a new floor. But Rostov is an optimist: The cramped room will at the very least keep him away from the Bolsheviks below, clacking out directives on their typewriters. He bounces on the bedsprings and observes that they're creaking in G sharp. When he bangs his head on the slope of the low ceiling, he announces: “Just so.”

Rostov is an aesthete, an intellectual who will maintain his resolve by committing to the business of practicalities. Yet even with this aim, the walls begin to close in. As he climbs the 110 steps to his room, he can't wait to descend them again; he has begun, early on in his confinement, to be “threatened by a sense of ennui — that dreaded mire of the human emotions.”

What is a cultured man to do? Suicide is an obvious choice. (Just so!) But the Metropol won't let him simply drop and splatter from its roof. Towles has an educational scheme for his protagonist: If the hotel contains the world, Towles assiduously offers pleasures and lessons, room by room, as a reborn Rostov bears witness to his era.

Review #2: *Washington Post*

[“A Gentleman in Moscow' is a charming reminder of what it means to be classy,”](#) by Ron Charles, Sept. 19, 2016
(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

As prison sentences go, life in the Hotel Metropol sounds a lot harder on the novelist than on the count. After all, Alexander Rostov might be able to pretend that his little attic room can

“provide the satisfactions of traveling by train,” but for the writer, the task of describing decades in a single building sounds frighteningly cramped. And yet, remarkably, in Towles’s hands, it’s a wonderfully spacious setting. As he creates it, the Hotel Metropol is transfixing, full of colorful characters: some transitory, others permanent; mostly fictional, some historical. Yes, the novel offers more high tea than high adventure, but this is a story designed to make you relax, to appreciate your surroundings, to be a person on whom nothing is lost.

From Amor Towles: Q&A

From the Author’s Website (Click for Link)

Excerpt:

What was the biggest challenge in writing the book?

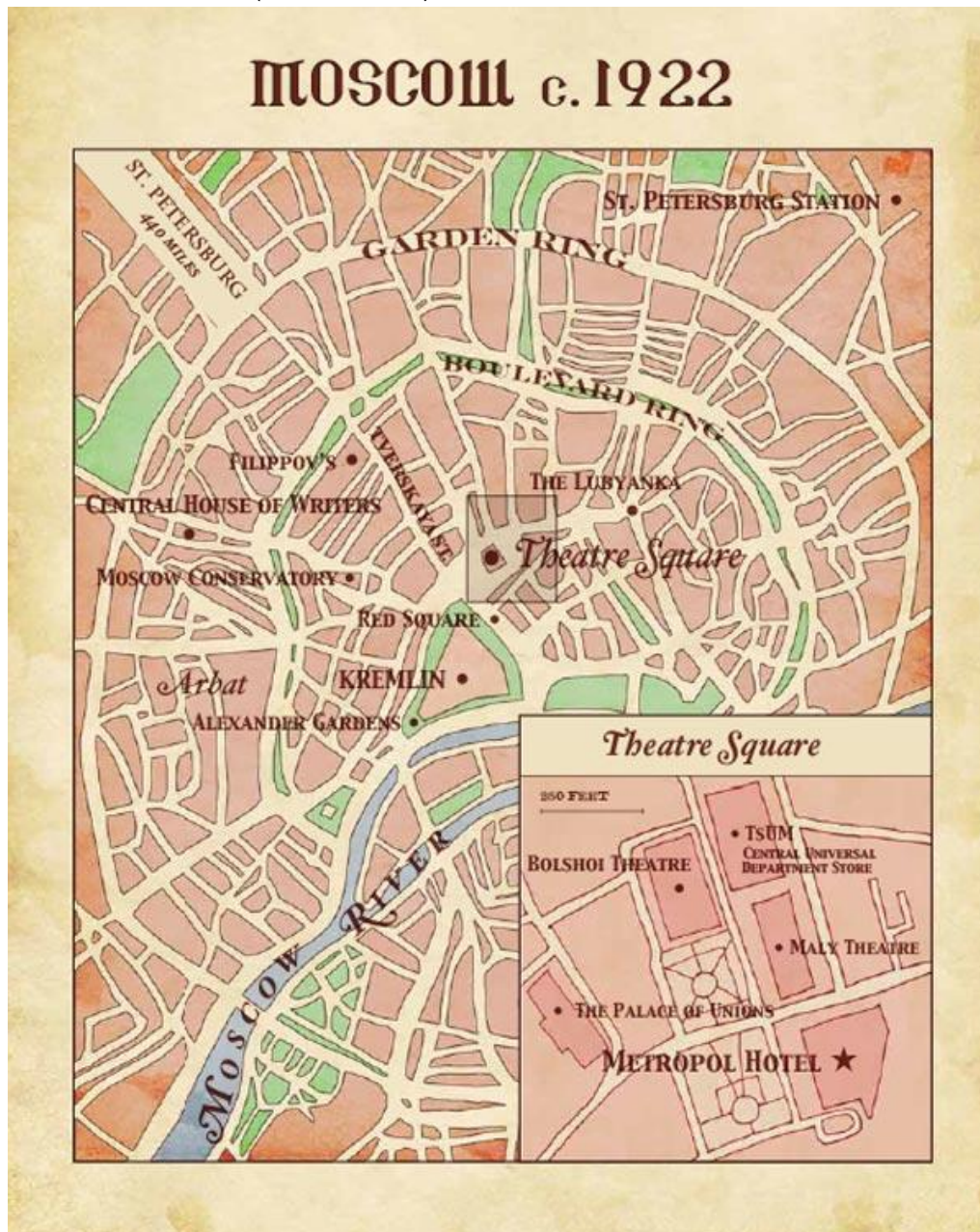
Initially, I imagined that the central challenge posed by the book was that I was trapping myself, my hero, and my readers in a single building for thirty-two years. But my experience of writing the novel ended up being similar to that of the Count’s experience of house arrest: the hotel kept opening up in front of me to reveal more and more aspects of life.

In the end, a much greater challenge sprang from the novel’s geometry. Essentially, A Gentleman in Moscow takes the shape of a diamond on its side. From the moment the Count passes through the hotel’s revolving doors, the narrative begins opening steadily outward. Over the next two hundred pages detailed descriptions accumulate of people, rooms, objects, memories, and minor events, many of which seem almost incidental. But then, as the book shifts into its second half, the narrative begins to narrow and all of the disparate elements from the first half converge. Bit characters, passing remarks, incidental objects come swirling together and play essential roles in bringing the narrative to its sharply pointed conclusion.

When effective, a book like this can provide a lot of unexpected satisfactions to the reader. The problem is that the plethora of elements in the first half can bog readers down making them so frustrated or bored that they abandon the book. So, my challenge was to craft the story, the point of view, and the language in such a way that readers enjoy the first half and feel compelled to continue despite their uncertainty of where things are headed. Whether or not I succeeded in doing so is up to you.

Non-Fiction Materials: History of The Metropol

From the Author's website (Click for Link)



Map of Moscow 1922 from the book.

Supplementary Work: *Condé Nast Traveler*

[“Channel a More Romantic Era of Transatlantic Travel.”](#) by Amor Towles, Sept. 7, 2016
(Click for Full Link)

Excerpt:

Given that my great-great-grandfather had a piece of luggage just for hats, I imagined him arriving at the gangplank of a transatlantic steamer with five suitcases and a pair of trunks in tow. How did I know he was traveling to Europe by ocean liner? From the labels on the side of the case. From one I could tell that, having spent time in England, he crossed the Channel by way of Newcastle upon Tyne, making landfall in Norway. A second label told me that he stopped over at the Hotel Kongen of Denmark and a third that he ended up at the Grand Hotel du Quirinal in Rome. Whichever hotel he visited, I could easily picture him coming through the door, his top hat firmly on his head, and approaching the captain at the front desk, who greeted him by name. Having assured my great-great-grandfather that his usual rooms were ready, the captain would ring for the bellhop and hand him his key along with his mail, which would no doubt include confirmation of a meeting with a local banker, several invitations to dinner, and tickets for the theater. How could I have been sure of the meeting, invitations, and theater outings? Why else would he have traveled with all the hats?! At any rate, such were the daydreams of a wistful suburban adolescent.

Discussion Questions:

Developed by Jack Saari for Portland Public Library

1. With the main character being confined to a single location, "A Gentleman in Moscow" is often about the Count's relationships within the hotel. There are the many women of his life - Nina, Marina, Anna, and Sophia - as well as the boys club of a triumvirate - Andrey and Emile. Which relationship was your favorite? Which relationship was most significant to the plot?
2. Time plays an important role in this novel. In fact the novel is structured using a doubling principle. As Towles writes, "From the day of the Count's house arrest, the chapters advance by a doubling principal: one day after arrest, two days after, five days, ten days, three weeks, six weeks, three months, six months, one year, two years, four years, eight years, and sixteen years after arrest. At this midpoint, a halving principle is initiated with the narrative leaping to eight years until the Count's escape, four years until, two years, one year, six months, three months, six weeks, three weeks, ten days, five days, two days, one day." Did you notice this structure? How do you think this structure enhances or detracts from the book?
3. While on the subject of time, what did you think of the twice-tolling clock? How do the Count's views on time change over the course of the novel? How does it contrast with The Count's father's views as represented by the twice-tolling clock? Do you think people's perspective on time changed from the 19th century to the 20th century?
4. In Book Five, the Count has already decided to help Sophia escape. What happened to spur this decision? Do you think it was a hard decision for the Count?
5. Hospitality looms large in the novel, but not just because it's set in a hotel and restaurant. Where else does hospitality show up in the novel? Does Mishka's project have to do with hospitality? Would you call Soviet Russia hospitable? How does that contrast with the Count's own stories of his childhood in Tsarist Russia?
6. Did you notice any recurring motifs in the novel? Reviewers have noted that the Count makes frequent references to the stars and navigation? What do you think the significance of that is? Bread also plays a large role in the count's life, at one point saving his life. What do you think the bread represents?
7. One review describes the Count as "a suavely charming dinner companion that you are a little relieved to escape at the end of the meal." If you were hosting a dinner party would you like the Count to attend? Is there another character in the novel you'd rather invite?

8. Has anyone traveled to an exclusive hotel like The Metropol? Did you find the service charming, like the Count's, or was it more like that of the Bishop? Do you enjoy the pomp and circumstance of fancy hotel and restaurants or would you prefer more homely hospitality like the type Mishka would offer?
9. The Count makes the best out of a difficult situation, whether it's the house arrest or being moved to the attic. Have you ever had a difficult situation you've needed to turn around? What was the situation? How did you get stuck there? In the end, was it an enjoyable situation? Would you say the Count has enjoyed his time at the Metropol?
10. Do you think Amor Towles does an accurate job portraying the sometimes horrors of Soviet Russia? Do you think an author has a duty to portray situations with historical accuracy? Sometimes Amor Towles makes life in Soviet Russia seem almost charming; do you think that's amoral, or even immoral, of him?