

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Born and raised in the Boston area, Amor Towles graduated from Yale College and received an MA in English from Stanford University. 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.

Mr. Towles's first novel, *Rules of Civility*, which was 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. The book has been translated into over 20 languages, its French translation receiving the 2012 Prix Fitzgerald.

Mr. Towles's second novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, which was published in 2016, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over a year in hardcover and was named one of the best books of 2016 by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and NPR. The book has been translated into over thirty-five languages including Russian. In the summer of 2017, the novel was optioned by EOne and the British director Tom Harper to be made into a 16 hour miniseries starring Kenneth Branagh.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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 different perspective than 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 their 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. 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?
7. 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?
8. Near the novel's conclusion, what is the significance of the toppled cocktail glass in *Casablanca*?
9. 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?
10. Start with the Count. How would you describe him? Do you find him an appealing, even memorable character?
11. In what way does his gilded cage, his "prison" for decades, transform Count Rostov? How do you see him changing during the course of the novel? What incidents have the most profound effect on him? Consider the incident with the beehive and the honey.
12. The Metropol serves literally and symbolically as a window on the world. What picture does Amor Towles paint of the Soviet Union—the brutality, its Kafka-esque bureaucracy, and the fear it inspires among its citizens? What are the pressures, for instance, faced by those who both live in and visit the Metropol? Does Towles's dark portrait overwhelm the story's narrative?
13. Talk about Nina, who even Towles considers the Eloise of the Metropol. Nina helps the Count unlock the hotel (again, literally and symbolically), revealing a much richer place than it first seemed. What do we, along with the Count, discover?
14. What might *Casablanca* be the Count's favorite film? What does it suggest about his situation?
15. Talk about the other characters, aside from Nina, who play an important part in this novel the handyman, the actress, his friend Mishka, and even Osip Glebnikov. Consider the incident with the honey.
16. The Count was imprisoned for writing the poem, "where is it now?" which questioned the purpose of the new Soviet Union. Care to make any comparisons now with Russia under Putin, 70-some years later?

- <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/311564/a-gentleman-in-moscow-by-amor-towles/9780670026197/readers-guide/>
- <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/10666-gentleman-in-moscow-towles?start=3>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

In his remarkable first novel, the best-selling *Rules of Civility* (2011), Towles etched 1930s New York in crystalline relief. Though set a world away in Moscow over the course of three decades, his latest polished literary foray into a bygone era is just as impressive. Sentenced as an incorrigible aristocrat in 1922 by the Bolsheviks to a life of house arrest in a grand Moscow hotel, Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov is spared the firing squad on the basis of a revolutionary poem he penned as an idealistic youth. Condemned, instead, to live his life confined to the indoor parameters of Metropol Hotel, he eschews bitterness in favor of “committing himself to practicalities.” As he carves out a new existence for himself in his shabby attic room and within the magnificent walls of the hotel-at-large, his conduct, his resolve, and his commitment to his home and to the hotel guests and staff together form a triumph of the human spirit. As Moscow undergoes vast political changes and countless social upheavals, Rostov remains, implacably and unceasingly, a gentleman. Towles presents an imaginative and unforgettable historical portrait. Copyright 2014 Booklist Reviews.

Publisher’s Weekly

House arrest has never been so charming as in Towles’s second novel (following *Rules of Civility*), an engaging 30-year saga set almost entirely inside the Metropol, Moscow’s most luxurious hotel. To Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, the Metropol becomes both home and jail in 1922, when the Bolsheviks spare his life (on the strength of a revolutionary poem written in 1913, when the count was at university). Forbidden to venture out, Rostov explores the intricacies of the grand structure and befriends its other denizens: precocious nine-year-old Nina Kulikova, a bureaucrat’s daughter who demands instruction on how to be a princess; Emile, virtuosic chef of the Boyarsky, “the finest restaurant in Moscow”; Andrey, the Boyarsky’s French expatriate maître d’; and the beautiful actress Anna Urbanova, who becomes the count’s regular visitor and paramour. Standing in for the increasingly despotic Soviet government is the Bishop, a villainous waiter who experiences gradual professional ascent—he becomes headwaiter of the Boyarsky, finally putting his seating-chart and wine-pairing talents to use. But when the adult Nina returns to ask Rostov for a favor, his unique, precariously well-appointed life must change once more. Episodic, empathetic, and entertaining, Count Rostov’s long transformation occurs against a lightly sketched background of upheaval, repression, and war. Gently but dauntlessly, like his protagonist, Towles is determined to chart the course of the individual. (Sept.)

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Library Journal

Having chronicled upper-crust 1938 New York in his elegant debut, *Rules of Civility*, Towles grandly unfolds the life of Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov in Soviet-era Moscow. The count is condemned by his past to permanent house arrest at the sumptuous Metropole Hotel, where he inhabits a tiny attic he’s turned into a reflection of his rich interior life. Having expected to idle away his hours at his country estate, the count is initially at loose ends, his very values challenged. But he befriends little Nina, who teaches him the secrets of the Metropole and leaves him with a wonderful gift, and after a moment of despair launches on a whole new course. The count becomes head waiter at the Boyarsky, the hotel’s fabled restaurant, forming a Triumvirate with Chef Emile and maître d’ Andrey as he purveys taste, discretion, and culture in a bloodily upturned world. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union’s many tragedies touch him (and readers) at a distance, communicating a sense of life ever haunted and ever resilient. VERDICT As urbane, cultured, and honey-smooth as the count himself, even as his situation inevitably creates suspense, this enthralling work is highly recommended even for those unfamiliar with Soviet history. [See

Prepub Alert, 3/21/16.]—Barbara Hoffert, Library Journal. [Page 89]. (c) Copyright 2016 Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

Kirkus Reviews

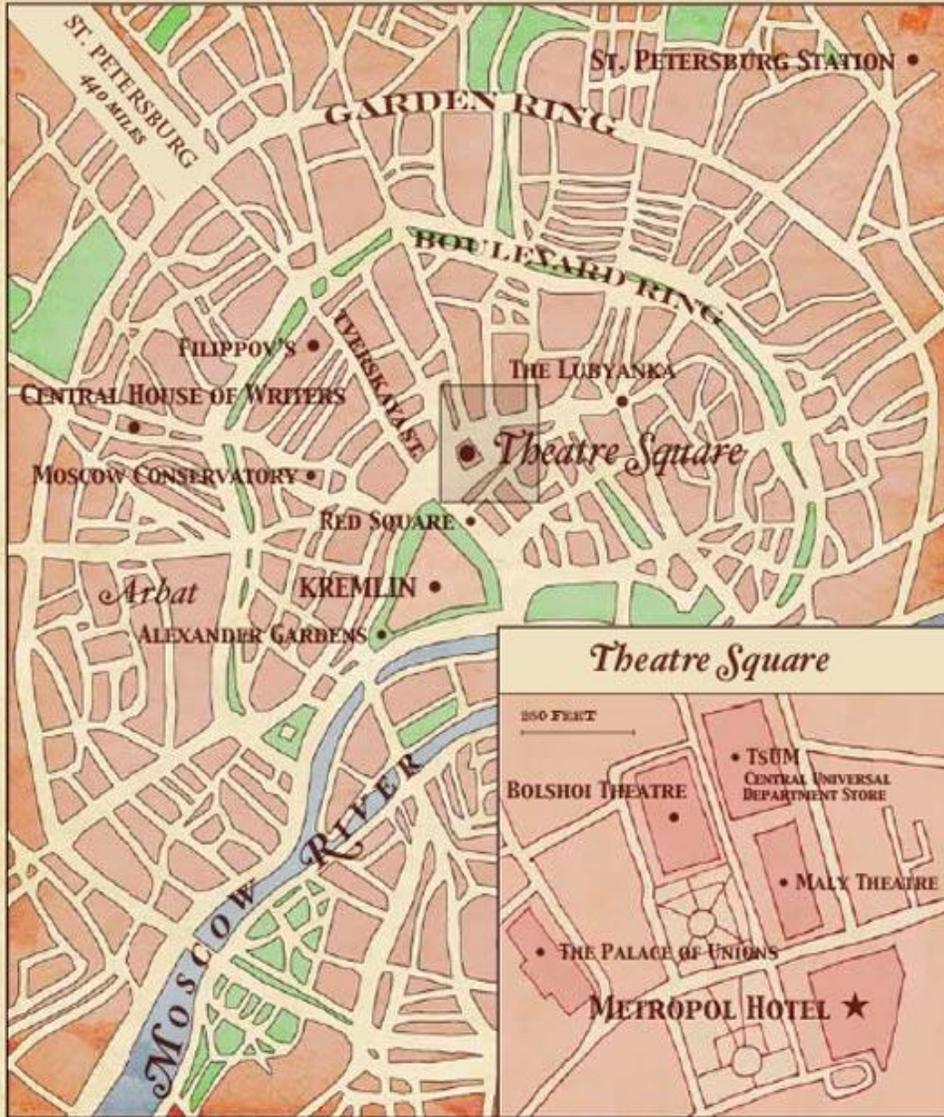
Sentenced to house arrest in Moscow's Metropol Hotel by a Bolshevik tribunal for writing a poem deemed to encourage revolt, Count Alexander Rostov nonetheless lives the fullest of lives, discovering the depths of his humanity. Inside the elegant Metropol, located near the Kremlin and the Bolshoi, the Count slowly adjusts to circumstances as a "Former Person." He makes do with the attic room, to which he is banished after residing for years in a posh third-floor suite. A man of refined taste in wine, food, and literature, he strives to maintain a daily routine, exploring the nooks and crannies of the hotel, bonding with staff, accepting the advances of attractive women, and forming what proves to be a deeply meaningful relationship with a spirited young girl, Nina. "We are bound to find comfort from the notion that it takes generations for a way of life to fade," says the companionable narrator. For the Count, that way of life ultimately becomes less about aristocratic airs and privilege than generosity and devotion. Spread across four decades, this is in all ways a great novel, a nonstop pleasure brimming with charm, personal wisdom, and philosophic insight. Though Stalin and Khrushchev make their presences felt, Towles largely treats politics as a dark, distant shadow. The chill of the political events occurring outside the Metropol is certainly felt, but for the Count and his friends, the passage of time is "like the turn of a kaleidoscope." Not for nothing is Casablanca his favorite film. This is a book in which the cruelties of the age can't begin to erase the glories of real human connection and the memories it leaves behind. A masterly encapsulation of modern Russian history, this book more than fulfills the promise of Towles' stylish debut, *Rules of Civility* (2011). Copyright Kirkus 2016 Kirkus/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.

OTHER MATERIALS



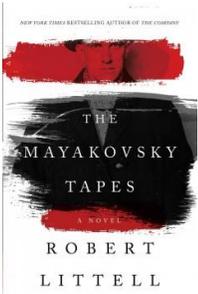
To left: The Metropol Hotel, circa 1910

MOSCOW c. 1922



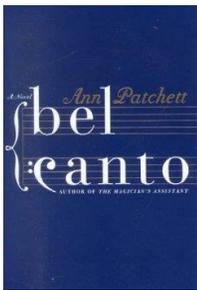
To left:
Map of Moscow
1922 from the
book. Reproduced
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READALIKES



***The Mayakovsky Tapes* by Robert Littell**

A tale inspired by the life of 20th-century Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky is told from the perspectives of four women who loved him and share with each other memories of pivotal moments in his life, from his early years as a Futurist leader, to his work as a Revolution propagandist, to the censorship battles that turned him against the State.



***Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett**

When terrorists seize hostages at an embassy party, an unlikely assortment of people is thrown together, including American opera star Roxanne Coss, and Mr. Hosokawa—a Japanese CEO and her biggest fan.



***The Secrets We Kept* by Lara Prescott**

A tale of spycraft, love and sacrifice inspired by the true story of Doctor Zhivago follows the efforts of two CIA agents to help publish Boris Pasternak's censored masterpiece against a backdrop of Cold War politics in Moscow.