

A Gentleman in Moscow Reader's Guide

By Amor Towles

Questions for Your Consideration:

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?

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?

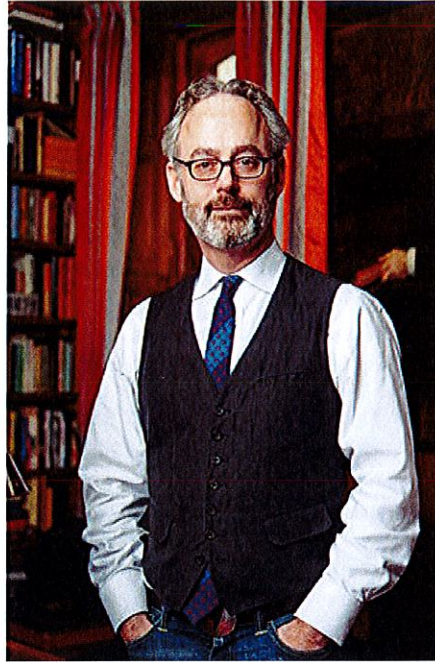
8) At the opening of Book Five, the Count has already decided to get Sofia out of Russia. What occurs over the course of Book Four to lead him to this decision? Why does he choose to remain behind?

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*?

Amor Towles



About the Author

Born and raised in the Boston area, **Amor Towles** graduated from Yale University 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. His work has been translated into more than thirty-five languages. Having worked as an investment professional for more than 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' Is A Grand Hotel Adventure

by Amor Towles

Count Alexander Rostov — recipient of the Order of Saint Andrew, member of the Jockey Club,

Master of the Hunt — is a "Former Person." Russia's new Soviet masters have sentenced him, improbably enough, to house arrest in Moscow's luxurious Metropol hotel, where he lives out his days decorating the dining room with his bon mots and dashing around like Eloise, if *Eloise* were set in a twee version of Stalinist Russia.

"The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n," Milton's charismatic Satan tells us — although the finest hotel in Moscow, with its restaurants and barber and elegant clientele, is a bit of a stretch for the fiery pits of damnation (or the snowdrifts of Siberia, for that matter). Anyways, thus confined, Rostov passes the decades making a whole world out of a hotel and the people in it — a precocious 9-year-old, a moody chef, the French maître d', and so on. He is not the king of infinite space, exactly, but he does live a full and rich life according to the principle that, "If one did not master one's circumstances, one was bound to be mastered by them."

Article continues after sponsor message

A Gentleman in Moscow is a novel that aims to charm, not be the axe for the frozen sea within us. And the result is a winning, stylish novel that keeps things easy. Flair is always the goal — Towles never lets anyone merely say goodbye when they could *bid adieu*, never puts a period where an exclamation point or dramatic ellipsis could stand. In his narratorial guise, he likes to drop in from the sky in dramatic asides, rhetorical questions, and cute self-referential footnotes.

'A Gentleman in Moscow' is a novel that aims to charm, not be the axe for the frozen sea within us.

Annalisa Quinn

And then there are the digressive flights. When a sinister hotel waiter (and Bolshevik stooge) suggests the wrong wine to accompany Latvian stew, the Count thinks, "The Rioja? Now there was a wine that would clash with the stew as Achilles clashed with Hector. It would slay the dish with a blow to the head and drag it behind its chariot until it tested the fortitude of every man in Troy ..." and so on.

Russia and all of its sufferings seems incidental to the plot — the book could have taken place in a grand hotel in Paris or London or New York just as easily. When the outside world makes itself felt, it's usually as an excuse for a charming caper of some kind: One episode has the Count, the chef, and the maitre d' conspire to scrounge the ingredients for a perfect bouillabaisse from war-depleted Moscow. After three years of plotting, they pull it off, and "with the very first spoonful one finds oneself transported to the port of Marseille — where the streets teem with sailors, thieves, and Madonnas, with sunlight and summer, with languages and life."

All of the verbal excess, the gently funny mock-epic digressions, the small capers and cast of colorful characters, add up to something undeniably mannered but also undeniably pleasant. *A Gentleman in Moscow* is like a quipping, suavely charming dinner companion that you are also a little relieved to escape at the end of the meal.

Annalisa Quinn