

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles

About the Author

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 in Manhattan for over twenty years, he now devotes himself fulltime to writing. His first novel, *Rules of Civility*, published in 2011, was a New York Times bestseller in both hardcover and paperback and was ranked by the Wall Street Journal as one of the best books of 2011. The book was optioned by Lionsgate to be made into a feature film and its French translation received the 2012 Prix Fitzgerald. His second novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, published in 2016, was also a New York Times bestseller and was ranked as one of the best books of 2016 by the Chicago Tribune, the Miami Herald, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the St. Louis Dispatch, and NPR. Both novels have been translated into over fifteen languages.

Mr. Towles, who lives in Manhattan with his wife and two children, is an ardent fan of early 20th century painting, 1950's jazz, 1970's cop shows, rock & roll on vinyl, obsolete accessories, manifestoes, breakfast pastries, pasta, liquor, snow-days, Tuscany, Provence, Disneyland, Hollywood, the cast of *Casablanca*, *007*, Captain Kirk, Bob Dylan (early, mid, and late phases), the wee hours, card games, cafés, and the cookies made by both of his grandmothers.

From [Goodreads.com/author/show/4536964.Amor_Towles](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4536964.Amor_Towles)

About the Book

A Gentleman in Moscow immerses us in another 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.

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.

From [Goodreads.com/book/show/29430012-a-gentleman-in-moscow](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29430012-a-gentleman-in-moscow)

Discussion Questions

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. 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?
3. Why do you think the Count was ordered to house arrest rather than a more severe punishment?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
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. 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?
10. 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?

About the Metropol

The Hotel Metropol Moscow is a historical hotel in the center of Moscow, Russia, built in 1899–1907 in Art Nouveau style. It is notable as the largest extant Moscow hotel built before the Russian Revolution of 1917, and for the unique collaboration of architects (William Walcot, Lev Kekushev, Vladimir Shukhov) and artists (Mikhail Vrubel, Alexander Golovin, Nikolai Andreev).

In 1898, Savva Mamontov and Petersburg Insurance consolidated a large lot of land around the former Chelyshev Hotel. Mamontov, manager and sponsor of Private Opera, intended to redevelop the area into a large cultural center built around an opera hall. In 1898, professional jury of an open contest awarded the job to Lev Kekushev, however, Mamontov intervened and assigned it to English architect William Walcot, who proposed a refined Art Nouveau draft codenamed A Lady's Head (implying the female head ornament repeating in keystones over arched windows). Mamontov eventually hired Kekushev as a construction manager. Soon, Savva Mamontov was jailed for fraud and the project was taken over by Petersburg Insurance, omitting the original plans for opera hall.

In 1901, the topped-out shell burnt down and had to be rebuilt from scratch in reinforced concrete. Kekushev and Walcot hired a constellation of first-rate artists, notably Mikhail Vrubel for Princess of Dreams mosaic panel, Alexander Golovin for smaller ceramic panels and sculptor Nikolay Andreyev for plaster friezes. The hotel was completed in 1907. However, it is nowhere near Walcot's original design

A notable feature of Metropol is "its lack of any reference to the orders of architecture ... a structural mass shaped without reference to illusionistic systems of support". Rectangular bulk of Metropol is self-sufficient, it needs no supporting columns. Instead, "Texture and material played a dominant expressive role, exemplified at the Metropole by the progression from an arcade with stone facing on the ground floor to inset windows without decorative frames on the upper floors".

In 1918, the hotel was nationalized by Bolshevik administration, renamed Second House of Soviets and housed living quarters and offices of growing Soviet bureaucracy. Eventually, in 1930s it was converted to its original hotel function and went through a major restoration in 1986-1991 by Finnish companies as part of Soviet-Finnish bilateral trade. Today, Metropol has 365 rooms, and each is different in shape or decoration.

From [Wikipedia.org/wiki/Hotel_Metropol_Moscow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hotel_Metropol_Moscow)

About the Russian Revolution of 1917

The Russian Revolution was a pair of revolutions in Russia in 1917 which dismantled the Tsarist autocracy and led to the rise of the Soviet Union. The Russian Empire collapsed with the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II and the old regime was replaced by a provisional government during the first revolution of February 1917. Alongside it arose grassroots community assemblies (called 'soviets') which contended for authority. In the second revolution that October, the Provisional Government was toppled and all power was given to the soviets.

The February Revolution was a revolution focused around Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg), the capital of Russia at that time. In the chaos, members of the Imperial parliament (the Duma) assumed control of the country, forming the Russian Provisional Government which was heavily dominated by the interests of large capitalists and the noble aristocracy. The army leadership felt they did not have the means to suppress the revolution, resulting in Nicholas's abdication. The soviets, which were dominated by soldiers and the urban industrial working class, initially permitted the Provisional Government to rule, but insisted on a prerogative to influence the government and control various militias. The February Revolution took

place in the context of heavy military setbacks during the First World War (1914–18), which left much of the Russian Army in a state of mutiny.

A period of dual power ensued, during which the Provisional Government held state power while the national network of soviets, led by socialists, had the allegiance of the lower classes and, increasingly, the left-leaning urban middle class. During this chaotic period there were frequent mutinies, protests and many strikes. Many socialist political organizations were engaged in daily struggle and vied for influence within the Duma and the soviets, central among which were the Bolsheviks ("Ones of the Majority") led by Vladimir Lenin who campaigned for an immediate end to the war, land to the peasants, and bread to the workers. When the Provisional Government chose to continue fighting the war with Germany, the Bolsheviks and other socialist factions were able to exploit virtually universal disdain towards the war effort as justification to advance the revolution further. The Bolsheviks turned workers' militias under their control into the Red Guards (later the Red Army) over which they exerted substantial control.

In the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks led an armed insurrection by workers and soldiers in Petrograd that successfully overthrew the Provisional Government, transferring all its authority to the soviets with the capital being relocated to Moscow shortly thereafter. The Bolsheviks had secured a strong base of support within the soviets and, as the now supreme governing party, established a federal government dedicated to reorganizing the former empire into the world's first socialist republic, practicing soviet democracy on a national and international scale. The promise to end Russia's participation in the First World War was honored promptly with the Bolshevik leaders signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany in March 1918. To further secure the new state, the Cheka was established which functioned as a revolutionary security service that sought to weed out and punish those considered to be "enemies of the people" in campaigns consciously modeled on similar events during the French Revolution.

Soon after, civil war erupted among the "Reds" (Bolsheviks), the "Whites" (counter-revolutionaries), the independence movements and the non-Bolshevik socialists. It continued for several years, during which the Bolsheviks defeated both the Whites and all rival socialists and thereafter reconstituted themselves as the Communist Party. In this way, the Revolution paved the way for the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922.

From [Wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Revolution)