

## AMOR TOWLES ANSWERS QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS NEW NOVEL

***A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW*** tells the story of a Russian aristocrat living under house arrest in a luxury hotel for more than thirty years. What was the origin of the idea?

Over the two decades that I was in the investment business, I travelled a good deal for my firm. Every year, I would spend weeks at a time in the hotels of distant cities meeting with clients and prospects. In 2009, while spending a week at a hotel in Geneva, I noticed the same well-dressed and weary people in the lobby every day—and I found myself wondering what life would be like if I had to live there. Upstairs in my room, I began to play with the idea of a novel in which a man is stuck in a grand hotel. Thinking that he should be there by force, rather than by choice, my mind immediately leapt to Russia—where house arrest has existed as a practice since the time of the Tsars. The following week, I sketched out the story for *A Gentleman in Moscow*. Then in 2013, I retired from my day job and began writing.

***What is the nature of your fascination with Russia?***

I am hardly a Russologist. I don't speak the language, I didn't study the history in school, and I have only been to the country a few times. But in my twenties, I fell in love with Russian literature ranging from Tolstoy and Dostoevsky to Mayakovsky and Solzhenitsyn. But I also fell in love with the wild, inventive, and self-assured writing styles of the dancer Nijinsky, the painter Malevich, and the filmmaker Eisenstein. Going through those works, it began to seem to me like every accomplished artist in Russia had his own manifesto. And the deeper I delved into the country's idiosyncratic psychology, the more fascinated I became.

Kazan Cathedral is a perfect symbol of Russia's mystique for me. Built in 1636 on Red Square to commemorate both the liberation of Moscow from interlopers and the beginning of the Romanov dynasty, Kazan was among Russia's oldest and most revered cathedrals. In 1936, the Bolsheviks celebrated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its consecration by razing it to the ground. In part, they leveled the cathedral to clear Red Square for military parades, but also to punctuate the end of Christianity in Russia. But Peter Baranovsky, the architect who was directed to oversee the dismantling, secretly drafted detailed drawings of the cathedral and hid them away. More than fifty years later, when Communist rule came to its end, the Russians used Baranovsky's drawings to rebuild the church stone for stone.

I find every aspect of this history enthralling. The cathedral itself is a reminder of Russia's heritage—ancient, proud, and devout. Through the holy landmark's

destruction we get a glimpse of how ruthless and unsentimental the Russian people can be. While through the construction of its exact replica, we see their almost quixotic belief that through careful restoration, the actions of the past can effectively be erased. But most importantly, at the heart of this history is a lone individual who at great personal risk carefully documented what he was destroying in the unlikely chance that it might some day be rebuilt. Russian history abounds with sweeping moments of cultural change and with the stoic heroes who work in isolation towards some brighter future.

***This is your second novel set in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Can you talk about your interest in the period?***

My interest in writing about the early twentieth century is neither a reflection of a love of history, nor a nostalgia for a bygone era. What has attracted me to the period is that it has a proximate distance to the present. It is near enough in time that it seems familiar to most readers, but far enough away that they have no firsthand knowledge of what actually happened. This provides me with the liberty to explore the narrow border between the unbelievably actual and the convincingly imagined.

I generally like to mix glimpses of history with flights of fancy until the reader isn't exactly sure of what's real and what isn't. In terms of *A Gentleman in Moscow*, for instance, the launch of the world's first nuclear power plant in Russia in 1954 is an historical fact, but the assembly of Party leaders to observe the blacking-out of Moscow is an invention. Similarly, the little copper plates on the bottom of antiques designating them as property of the People are a fact, while the wine bottles stripped of their labels are a fiction.

***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.

***Does the book have a central theme?***

I certainly hope not. In crafting a novel, I do not have an essential message I am trying to communicate. Rather, I hope to create a work of art that, while being satisfyingly cohesive, contains such a richness of images, ideas, and personalities that it can prompt varied responses from reader to reader, and from reading to reading.

In essence, I want to gather together a pile of brightly colored shards of glass. But rather than assemble these shards into a mosaic with a fixed image, I want to drop them into the bottom of a kaleidoscope where, thanks to a glint of sunlight and the interplay of mirrors, they render an intricate beauty which the reader can reconfigure by the slightest turn of the wrist.

***Can you comment on the structure of the book?***

As you may have noted, the book has a somewhat unusual structure. 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 principal 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 and finally, the turn of the revolving door.

While odd, this accordion structure seems to suit the story well, as we get a very granular description of the early days of confinement; then we leap across time through eras defined by career, parenthood, and changes in the political landscape; and finally, we get a reversion to urgent granularity as we approach the denouement. As an aside, I think this is very true to life, in that we remember so many events of a single year in our early adulthood, but then suddenly remember an entire decade as a phase of our career or of our lives as parents.

***Do you use an outline?***

For both *Rules of Civility* and *A Gentleman in Moscow* I worked with an outline that details settings, events, interactions, and the psychological progress of characters chapter by chapter. That said, when the writing is going well it provides me with plenty of surprises. I was in the middle of writing the bouillabaisse scene, for instance, when I discovered that Andrey was a juggler. I was in the middle of drafting Sofia's fitting, when I discovered (alongside the Count) that Marina had designed a dressless dress. And I was well into writing the culminating scene about *Casablanca*, when I noticed for the first time the moment in the movie when Rick sets upright the toppled cocktail glass.

***How do you think of A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW in relation to RULES OF CIVILITY?***

When I was deciding what to do after *Rules*, I picked *A Gentleman* from among a handful of projects I had been considering. In retrospect, I see that my choice was probably influenced by an unconscious desire for change, because the two novels are a study in contrasts. Where the former takes place over a single year, the latter spans thirty-two. Where the former roves across a city, the latter takes place in one building. Where the former is from the perspective of a young working class woman on the rise, the latter is from the perspective of an aging gentleman who has lost everything. And where the former is virtually free of children and parents, the latter is very much concerned with generational relationships. One last difference is that *A Gentleman in Moscow* is much longer than *Rules of Civility*, but it has the same cover price, so you get 50% more words for your money!

***Can you tell us a little about the Metropol Hotel?***

For some historical information and a chronology of first hand accounts of life in the Metropol, please visit [The Metropol](#) section of this web site.

# MOSCOW c. 1922



Map of Moscow 1922 from the book. Reproduced with kind permission from Alex Coulter.  
***Are any of the characters in the novel based on real people?***

None of the novel's central characters are based on historical figures, or on people that I have known. That said, I have pick-pocketed my own life for loose change to include in the book:

The thimble game that the Count plays with Sofia was from my childhood. My great grandmother was a Boston aristocrat and lived until she was a hundred

in a stately house. When my cousins and I visited her (in our little blue blazers), she would welcome us into her sitting room. After the appropriate amount of polite conversation, she would inform us that she had hidden several thimbles in the room and that whoever found one would receive a dollar—prompting a good deal of scurrying about.

When I was a boy of ten, I threw a bottle with a note into the Atlantic Ocean at summer's end. When we got home a few weeks later there was a letter waiting for me on *New York Times* stationery. It turned out that my bottle had been found by Harrison Salisbury, a managing editor of the *Times* and the creator of its Op-Ed page. He and I ended up corresponding for many years, and I eventually met him on my first visit to New York when I was seventeen. But it so happens that Salisbury was also the Moscow bureau chief for the *Times* from 1949 to 1954. A few colorful details in *A Gentleman in Moscow* spring from his memoirs; but he also makes a cameo late in the novel, and it is his fedora and trench coat that the Count steals to mask his escape.

Finally, the scene in which the tempestuous Anna Urbanova refuses to pick up her clothes, throws them out the window, and then sneaks out into the street to retrieve them in the middle of the night, was a scene that played out between my parents shortly after their marriage. Although, it was my mother who wouldn't pick up her clothes, and my father who threw them out the window. I'll leave it to you to guess who went out in the middle of the night to pick them back up.

***Is this novel related to that other Russian book you were working on...?***

Close readers of the background info on *Rules of Civility* may recall that before writing that novel, I spent seven years writing a book set in rural Russia and then put the manuscript in a drawer. The only part of that book that ever saw the light of day was a two-page description of exotic birds loose in a train station that was included in the first drafts of *A Gentleman in Moscow*. The passage was cut in the final draft. If you're interested, it now resides forlornly on the *Other Writings* section of this web site.

Amor Towles

New York City

May 2016