## Amor Towles Expands His Portfolio With ‘A Gentleman in Moscow’

**The Wall Street director of research turned best-selling author is about to release his second novel, chronicling a Russian aristocrat forced to live out his days in Moscow’s Metropol Hotel**

Fantastic publicity on the Amor Towles front. 200,000 copies is really something. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/amor-towles-expands-his-portfolio-with-a-gentleman-in-moscow-1472743341>

Amor Towles, author of the bestseller "The Rules of Civility," discusses his latest book, "A Gentleman in Moscow," with WSJ's Lucy Feldman.

By

Lucy Feldman

Sept. 1, 2016 11:22 a.m. ET

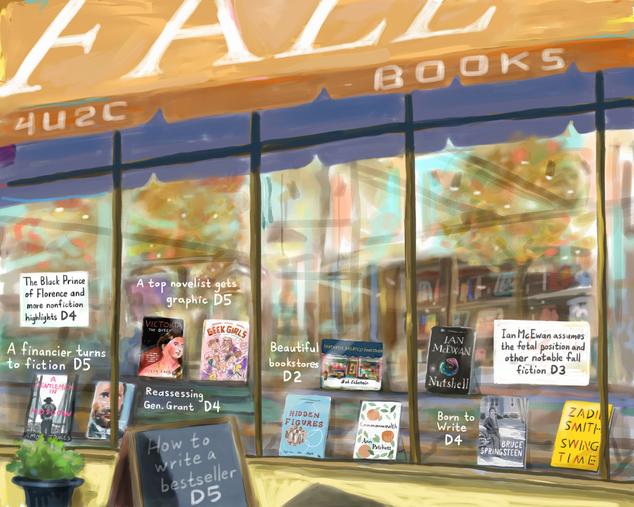
For two decades, Amor Towles helped build Select Equity Group into a firm that now manages over $18 billion in assets. But all the while, he dreamt of writing. Now, the former Wall Street director of research is a best-selling author about to release his second novel, “A Gentleman in Moscow,” with an announced first printing of 200,000 copies, and has two more under contract.

Mr. Towles always wanted to be a novelist—he studied English at Yale and Stanford, writing for his master’s thesis a collection of five related short stories that appeared in the Paris Review in 1989. A Boston-area native, he moved to New York that year and soon fell into finance. A decade into his career, Mr. Towles finally sat down outside of work to draft a novel set in the Russian countryside in 1938. After seven years of toiling, he came to the painful realization that he didn’t like the book. He scrapped the manuscript.

“I was an analyst, so I went back and reviewed what were the strengths and weaknesses of my process, such that the outcome after all that time was: failed,” says Mr. Towles, now 51.

There were paragraphs he’d written at the start and still loved, but also whole chapters he’d wrestled with for years and hated. Next time, he would start with an outline and stick to a rigid one-year schedule to capture the freshness of those early drafts and avoid another time sink. That first attempt had followed five points of view—so many that he had to constantly reacquaint himself with his progress—so he would also narrow the perspective down to a single character.

**[Fall Books 2016](http://graphics.wsj.com/image-grid/fall-books-preview-2016/)**

[](http://graphics.wsj.com/image-grid/fall-books-preview-2016/)

Bob Eckstein

Beginning on the first day of 2006 and ending that New Year’s Eve, Mr. Towles dedicated exactly two weeks to writing and editing each chapter of [a story about a young woman reinventing herself in 1938 New York](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304450604576416341653417546). That novel, “[Rules of Civility,” became a sleeper hit](http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/08/11/how-to-write-a-debut-bestseller/) when published in 2011. Translated into 17 languages and [featured on the Journal’s list of the best books that year](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203518404577097062969878778), it has sold almost 300,000 print copies in the U.S. After 21 years in finance, Mr. Towles retired in 2013 to devote himself to writing full time.

The author has his first career to thank for the idea that sprouted his second novel. “A Gentleman in Moscow,” coming Sept. 6 from Viking, chronicles 32 years in the life of a Russian aristocrat forced to live out his days in Moscow’s Metropol Hotel. On a business trip in 2009, Mr. Towles found himself observing some of the same people he’d seen over the years during his stays at Geneva’s Le Richemond, musing on the idea of a character trapped inside a hotel. Russia—a country and culture that has long fascinated the author, and a place where house arrest has existed since the time of the czars—was the obvious setting, he says.

The novel opens in 1922, when Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov is called before a Bolshevik tribunal. He is deemed an “unrepentant aristocrat,” marched across Red Square to the Metropol and warned that if he ever sets foot outside again, he’ll be shot. Over the decades, the count finds new ways to adjust to his situation, discovering hidden corners of the bustling hotel and creating lasting bonds with both its employees and guests, including 9-year-old Nina, a sort of Eloise of Moscow, inspired in part by Mr. Towles’s own daughter.



Amor Towles in New York City in August Photo: Ericka Burchett/The Wall Street Journal

“He definitely likes to mix glimpses of history with flights of fancy,” says Paul Slovak, executive editor at Viking. Mr. Slovak edited “A Gentleman in Moscow,” as well as “Rules of Civility,” and plans to work with Mr. Towles on his next two novels, the first of which will follow three teen boys in early 1950s America.

‘There are some artists who have strong imaginative function, some have strong analytical function, some have both.’

—Amor Towles

The author discusses his craft in precise terms. “There are some artists who have strong imaginative function, some have strong analytical function, some have both,” he says. A “doubling principle” underlies the structure of his latest novel: The story begins on June 21, 1922, with each subsequent chapter jumping forward by one day, two days, five days, 10 days, three weeks, six weeks and so on until the 16-year midpoint. The second half of the book reverses the structure.

Mr. Towles kept his first note for the story, which shows him working out the math to determine which ranges of dates would work best. It’s written on Le Richemond hotel stationery.

This man tells a story as well as anyone writing fiction today in America.  He writes books for readers:  he writes very well, with great craft and imagination, but first and foremost for his readers.  After slogging through or trying to slog through so many tomes written lately by authors for themselves and (seemingly) other authors and a few critics, it is such a joy to read his work.  I am looking forward to the release date of this latest book.

## Soviet-era high jinks in Amor Towles' new novel

Amor Towles explores Russia in the years after World War I in his new novel, "A Genttleman in Moscow." (Viking)

[**Bill Daley**](http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/chinews-bill-daley-20130507-staff.html#nt=byline)[**Contact Reporter**](mailto:wdaley@chicagotribune.com?subject=Regarding:%20%22Soviet-era%20high%20jinks%20in%20Amor%20Towles%27%20new%20novel%22)Chicago Tribune

Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov should have been shot by the Bolsheviks in 1922 but, thanks to a certain pre-revolutionary poem, is condemned to life imprisonment inside Moscow's Hotel Metropol — and in a servant's garret room, no less, not his accustomed luxury suite with its views of Theatre Square. What happens next is the subject of Amor Towles' delightful new novel, "A Gentleman in Moscow."

Fans of Towles' first book, the 2011 best-seller "Rules of Civility" (and I am proudly one of them), will enjoy this book. Whereas "Rules" was set mostly in 1938 New York City and charted the course of Katey Kontent, a plucky young woman from Brooklyn looking to find her way in the Big Apple, this new book spans 32 years and is confined largely to the rooms, hallways, service stairs, restaurants and storage areas of the Metropol, which is an actual hotel in the heart of Moscow. Yet, a hotel is a city of sorts if you think about it and, as with Miss Kontent, Count Rostov is a memorable character you come to care about and root for.

Asked to state his name by a prosecutor for the Emergency Committee of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Rostov does so in full, noting he is also a "recipient of the Order of Saint Andrew, member of the [Jockey Club](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/business/the-jockey-club-incorporated-ORCRP008467-topic.html), Master of the Hunt." Now, the Order of Saint Andrew the First-Called was (and is again) the highest order in Russia, so clearly here is a man of some achievement — or excellent connections — even if he chooses to keep it carefully wrapped in a charming insouciance that annoys the communist prosecutor and, apparently, the late Tsarina.

Towles introduces his character slowly, offering glimpses of the man and his past as the story proceeds. But from the start, Rostov is quite the Renaissance man. He can taste the nettles tucked under the Ukrainian ham of a saltimbocca "fashioned from necessity"; seat a banquet's worth of Soviet bigwigs with a diplomat's dexterity; memorably bed an actress; befriend practically everyone; and quietly outwit dogmatic apparatchiks.

Still, prison is prison. Living in a proverbial gilded cage like the Metropol has an impact on Count Rostov. And while he vows to commit himself to the "business of practicalities" , confinement tries his soul. But it also hones his wits, bolsters his courage, deepens him in the many ways that large and small trials can temper one's character. Not for him, long bouts of Proustian depression.

Lest the reader find hotel living claustrophobic, Towles does manage to escape the Metropol when the story requires it. He moves fluidly backward and forward in time to explain a character's motivation, set up the scene we're about to enter, or explain what happened to someone who crossed the wrong commissar, say, unbeknownst to the others. In so doing, Towles manages to outline the murderous brutality, fear and bureaucratic banality of the Soviet era without letting it overwhelm his narrative.

As with "Rules," I appreciate the little details Towles sprinkles through the novel. That he names his hero Rostov is surely no accident. The Rostovs were one of the families featured in Leo Tolstoy's epic novel, "War and Peace." At one point, the Count picks up a book and begins to read. Towles doesn't say what it is but gives the first line: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." That's ["Anna Karenina,"](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/entertainment/movies/anna-karenina-%28movie%29-ENMV0002407-topic.html) also by Tolstoy.

"Marvelous," the Count says.

Agreed. And "marvelous" is a word I'd use for this book. Finishing "A Gentleman in Moscow" left me with conflicting emotions. I was happy for a good, engaging read. And I was sad that it was over and I had to bid Count Rostov adieu.

Or maybe not.

Maybe — just maybe — Towles could be talked into a sequel or prequel to this book. He did that, after all, with his short e-book, "Eve in Hollywood," which followed a "Rules" character, Eve Ross, who was supposed to take the train to Chicago but didn't get off. And — who knows? — maybe Hollywood will pay a call (as it did with "Rules"). Count Rostov is a character to the movies born; lucky the leading man gets to play him.

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**A Gentleman in Moscow**

By Amor Towles, Viking, 480 pages, $27

## AMOR TOWLES – An outsized life in a Russian hotel

*BookPage interview by Alden Mudge* – September 2016

Entering a hotel in Geneva, Switzerland, for an annual investment conference some years ago, Amor Towles suddenly envisioned the premise for his inventive, entertaining and richly textured second novel, **A Gentleman in Moscow**.

“It came to me in a flash,” Towles says during a call that reaches him in his study—“a 19th-century library” with windows overlooking the street, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a fireplace—in the townhouse near Gramercy Park in Manhattan that he shares with his wife and their children, ages 14 and 11. “I was looking at the people in the hotel lobby and having this eerie sense that I had seen them before. And I thought, what would it be like to live in a hotel like this for the rest of your life?”

Towles rushed upstairs to outline the book. Within the first hour, he knew that his character would not be in the hotel voluntarily; he would be held by force. “And I thought if a guy has to be in a hotel by force, Russia is the perfect place.”

So the story of Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov—a Russian aristocrat arrested by the Bolsheviks during the Revolution, saved from execution because he had written an influential revolutionary poem in his youth, and then sentenced in 1922 to permanent house arrest in the servants’ quarters of Moscow’s grand Hotel Metropol—began to take shape.

But it would be a number of years before Towles actually sat down to write the novel. Now 52, the author says he’s been writing since he was a kid. At Yale, his mentor was Peter Matthiessen, with whom he remained friends until Matthiessen’s death in 2014. And during his graduate writing fellowship at Stanford, he was close to novelist Gilbert Sorrentino. But when he moved to New York City at the age of 25, he found that he “wasn’t ready to be alone in my apartment writing all day.” Nor did he find the bartending, table-waiting and fact-checking jobs of his artistic contemporaries appealing. So he joined a friend who was starting Select Equity, an investment-advising firm, and for the next decade he worked to build a successful business. In his late 30s he began writing again, and in 2011, he published his first novel, the bestseller [Rules of Civility](http://bookpage.com/reviews/7018-amor-towles-rules-civility#.V7NjK5MrKV4). Its success allowed him to retire and devote himself to fiction writing. In 2013, he began to work in earnest on **A Gentleman in Moscow**.

The action of the novel unfolds over the course of roughly 35 years. A central question the book explores is how we adapt to difficult circumstances over which we have little or no control. Towles’ Count Rostov becomes a kind of model of how to live well within very constrained circumstances. He is an educated, affable, kind man who has a passion for food, music, literature and love that seems to grow out of Towles’ own sensibilities. Towles’ evocative descriptions of food, for example, will definitely make a reader’s mouth water. “I don’t mind using the novel to sweep in many things that I enjoy,” Towles says, laughing. “That was part of the fun of it for me.”

A parallel challenge here is how a novelist makes such a confined life interesting over the course of many decades. In this regard, Towles is remarkably inventive. The Count develops surprisingly deep relationships with guests in the hotel, has an ongoing romance with a beautiful, aging actress, eventually becomes a head waiter because of his expertise in organizing social occasions, and finally becomes a loving, overly protective adoptive father to a musically talented girl whose parents disappear in the Russian Gulag. All of this happens within the confines of the hotel. And through all these changes, the seemingly narrow life of the Count lives large in our imaginations.

In addition, the location of the Count’s soft-cuffed imprisonment, the Hotel Metropol, becomes a fascinating character in and of itself. It makes an interviewer wonder, could such a place actually exist in the early years of the Soviet Union?

“The short answer is yes,” Towles says. “It was seized by the Bolsheviks because they needed office space for the government. Moscow, after all, had not been the seat of government for centuries. But when European nations recognized the Soviet government at the end of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks realized pretty quickly that the first thing foreign diplomats and businessmen would see when checking in was a crappy hotel, a signal that the revolution was failing. So they restored the hotel to its former grandeur and it became the place, not only for foreigners, but for all of Russia, who dreamed of dining and dancing there.”

Towles’ knowledge of Russian history and literature is deep, which adds a pleasing and provocative texture to the novel. But he says adamantly, “I am not a research-oriented writer. A premise gets brighter and sharper the more it’s tied to an area of existing fascination for me. That happened here. I love Russia. I’ve read all the Russian writers and admire them. I think Russian history is fascinating.”

Instead of facts and research, Towles says he thinks of his writing in musical terms. “I think the closest cousin to the novel in the art realm is the symphony. A novel has movements and leitmotifs. It has moments of crescendo and diminuendo. You feel a growing emotional force and then it backs off for reflection. A work must feel cohesive and organic and the beginning and end inform each other in a way that we can hold in our head.”

It’s an apt observation. Towles’ **A Gentleman in Moscow** often reads like it has a song in its heart.

This article was originally published in the [*September 2016*](http://bookpage.com/print-edition/251-september-2016) issue of BookPage. Download the entire issue for the [*Kindle*](http://www.amazon.com/BookPage/dp/B00ATRKG30) or *[Nook](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/bookpage-bookpage/1108179846?ean=2940043956934%94)*.