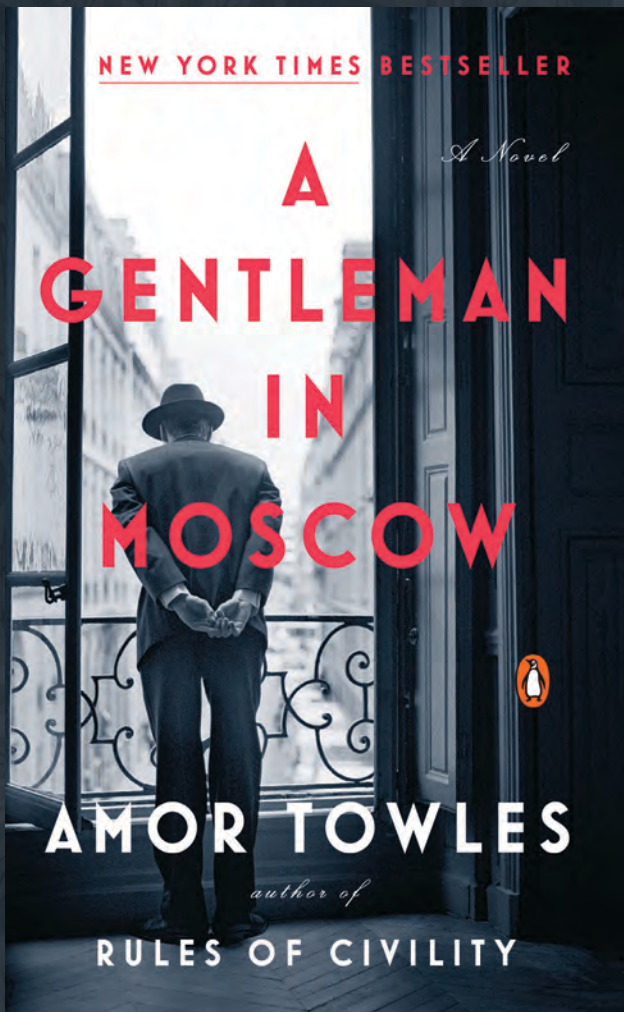


# Book Discussion Kit



2020  
Community  
Reading  
Selection



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# Tips for Book Discussions

*from Washington Center for the Book at Seattle Public Library*

## Reading Critically

Books that make excellent choices for discussion groups have a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style. These books usually present the author's view of an important truth and not infrequently send a message to the reader. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time we learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion—whether you are the leader or simply a participant—differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, “Is this significant?” or “Why does the author include this?” Making notes as you go slows down your reading but gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don't know the answer yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, “what if ... ” questions.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue for authenticity. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author's style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience: They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself into the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

## The Discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You'll often find that the questions you've prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don't be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the "It just didn't appeal to me" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing, and world view. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim. It's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences ... if that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that it's not a book discussion.

## "A Gentleman in Moscow" by Amor Towles

### About the Book

"A Gentleman in Moscow" is a grand adventure that takes place within the walls of a single luxury hotel.

In 1922, a Bolshevik tribunal sentences Count Alexander Rostov to house arrest in the luxurious Hotel Metropol. For the next 30 years, the Count experiences his country's upheaval and transformation from the confines of his attic room, the building's grand public spaces and the behind-the-scenes domains of hotel employees-turned-friends. While Rostov cannot go out into the world, the world comes to him in the form of Nina, a bureaucrat's precocious daughter; the film actress Anna Urbanova; American intelligence officer Richard Vanderwhile; and even political leaders like Nikita Khrushchev. This novel is a lightly drawn, episodic portrait of Russia's 20th century political history, as well as a charming tale of one man's dedication to family, memory and home.

### 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 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' 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' 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 35 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.

*Biographical information courtesy of [amortowles.com](http://amortowles.com)*

## A Reader's Guide, by Amor Towles

From [www.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)

### 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?

## "A Gentleman in Moscow" by Amor Towles

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"?