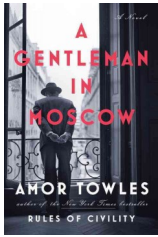


A Gentleman in Moscow



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During the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of Russians suffered fates much worse than life-long imprisonment. Joseph Stalin sent many artists, writers, and politicians to the Gulag or killed them outright.

This is the fictional story of Count Rostov, an educated aristocrat devoted to the literary arts, who found after the first Russian Revolution that being a count was not only illegal, but dangerous. The Count traveled to Paris, and unlike many of his contemporaries visiting abroad, decided to return home. But in the 1920s, under Stalin's Article 58 banning counterrevolution, Rostov stood before a tribunal, and was sentenced to permanent imprisonment at the luxury Metropol Hotel for writing a poem that he never wrote.

For the rest of the book we're transplanted to this grand hotel. At first, the Count lives in a spacious set of rooms with wonderful views, before being exiled to the attic and a tiny space, which he eventually expands by annexing a secret room. He props his tiny bed up with a copy of Montaigne's essays, occasionally replacing it with *Anna Karenina*. A beautiful actress, Anna, swirls through the hotel and begins a romance with the Count, some of which takes place in the lovely apartment from which Rostov has recently been evicted.

And before long Rostov finds himself befriended by lovely Nina, a ten-year old whose manners are so lacking she interrupts his lunch to stare wistfully at his food. Soon they become good friends, however, and Nina takes him on several behind-the-scenes tours of the hotel. She also insists that he join her in observing the new Soviet collectives that meet in the ballroom, where everyone, men and women alike, responds to the greeting *Comrade*. As the Count's stay stretches into decades, he becomes the surrogate parent of Nina as well as her daughter Sofia, who has the bizarre habit of racing Rostov up and down stairs, always without getting winded.

Unable to leave the hotel, Rostov does feel despair at one point, but throughout most of the narrative he manages to live a cultured life full of adventure. The Count's friend, Mishka, visits to discuss great Russian authors and the fate of poetry under Stalin, and the Count meets and shares time with other smart, literate friends including one of his "minders" with whom he shares a deep knowledge of America through films and books. This official, who tries to keep tabs on the Count's thoughts, observes that "Hollywood is the single most dangerous force in the history of class struggle."

In this delightful literary adventure, the Count pays homage to the best parts of Russian culture: fine food, vodka, literary discussions, and a deep caring for ideas and art. In the process, Rostov realizes Blake's famous aspiration "to see the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower?"

Posted by Dory L. on July 19, 2017

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