

BOOK REVIEW

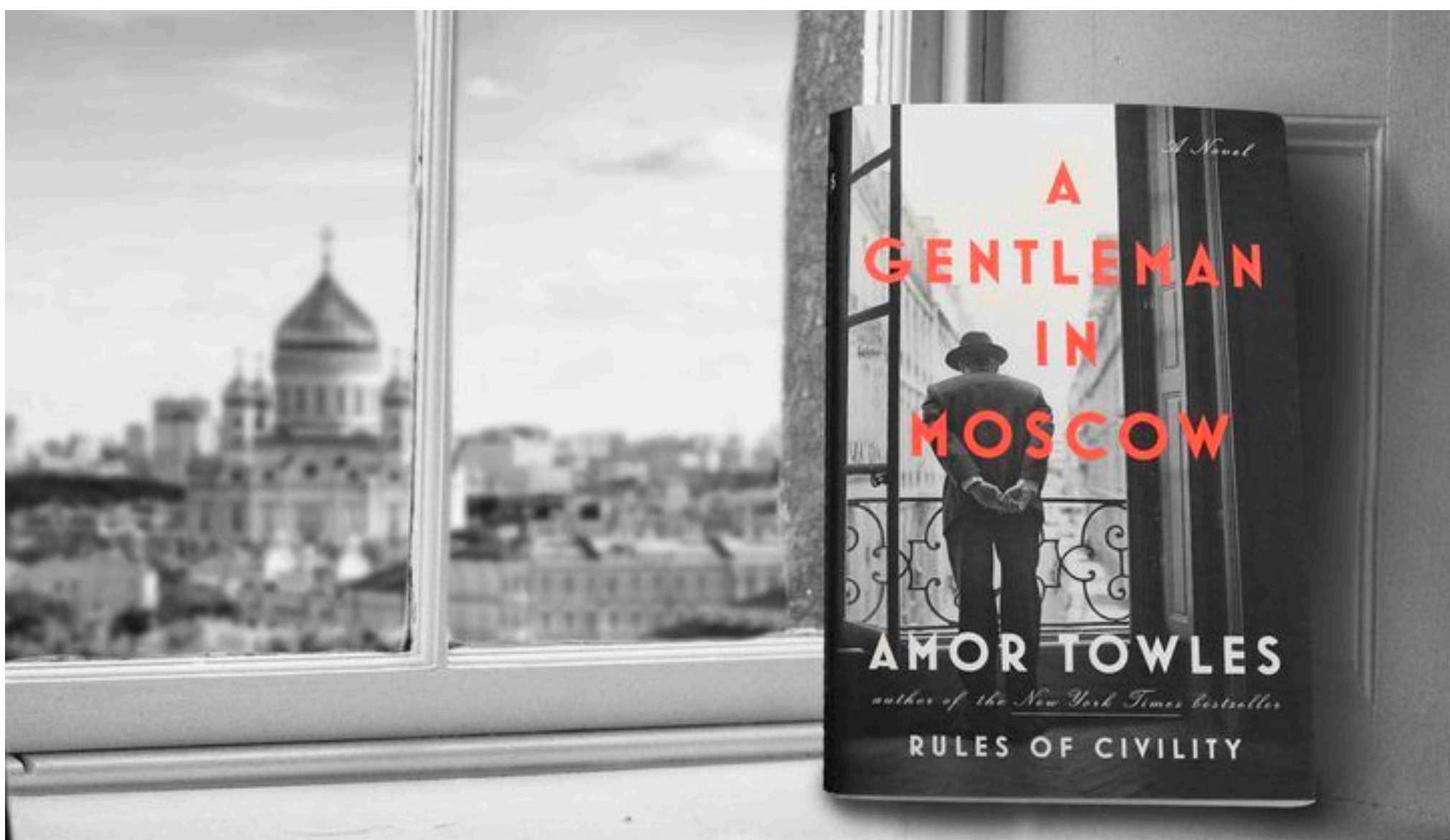
A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles

By Donna Sievers

A *Gentleman in Moscow* is a fabulous read. I especially loved it since I once studied Russian history and literature, and the book is filled to the brim with both. On the first page, we learn that Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov is being tried in 1922 Moscow by the Bolshevik regime for being from the aristocracy. He is saved from being shot, but is sentenced to be imprisoned for life in the grand Metropol Hotel where he had been living. Now referred to as a “former person,” the Count is led to his new room in the Hotel. However, it is not his beautifully appointment suite but something quite different. And he is still grieving for his dead sister.

While Moscow, Napoleon, Galileo, Gogol, Pushkin, the Bolshoi, and Gorky are sprinkled throughout the book, the real story is the relationships the Count has with his city, his government, his old friends, and the wonderful people he meets in the Metropol. You will meet his young friend, Nina, Yaroslav the barber, Marina the seamstress, Mishka his dear friend and Chekov scholar, Anna the movie star, Andrey the concierge, the Bishop, Abram the handyman, chef Emile Zhukosvsky, Stanislav the sous chef, and the Colonel. Then there is Sophia. What a cast of unique characters.

For all you wine lovers, the Metropol Hotel was well known for the grandeur of the ambiance, for the exquisite food, and especially for the well-appointed wine cellar. Under the rule of the Bishop (nicknamed thus because he looked like the Bishop chess piece) and the lunacy of Bolshevism, the Bishop orders all of the wine labels removed from the vast wine cellar. From then on, the only choice was either a red or a white wine. One night at dinner, the “Count’s



bottle of white (which he was fairly certain was a Chardonnay from Burgundy and best served at 55 degrees) sat sweating on the table.” For shame.

For food lovers, the difficulty that the Count, the chef, and the sous chef go to acquire the ingredients for bouillabaisse is impressive. When food was scarce, someone managed to acquire haddock, celery, fennel, tomatoes, mussels, oranges (from Spain), saffron, and absinthe. The three each had a bottle of wine, bread, and the long-awaited bowl of soup. Bon appetit!

The relationships that develop in the book are profoundly common...in a good way. The Count enjoys the company of the barber and the handyman, as well as his dear friend and former roommate. The discussions of history and Chekov over dinner or teaching the Colonel the nuances of American culture will enlighten the reader. After you finish the book, you will surely want to watch the movie *Casablanca* again.

I have no idea what a gold Catherine coin is or was worth, but you will find out that they helped save this good Count and provided for the safety of his daughter, Sophia. The relationship with his friends and his love for his country, its authors, and history endear Count Rostov to the reader. You applaud his adventures and in the end you will find out what saved his life on that fateful day in 1922.

Donna Sievers was raised in Long Beach and taught at Stanford Junior High, Bolsa Grande High, Pacifica High and CSULB before leaving the classroom for administrator duties in Garden Grove USD. She and her husband live in Bluff Heights, where their retirement activities include volunteering for the Joyful Child Foundation in Memory of Samantha Runnion, gardening at the Bembridge House, bike riding, walking to the ocean and maintaining a 107-year-old house and garden.