

# The Arc of History: An Interview for The King's English *Inkslinger*

by Betsy Burton

I called Amor Towles to talk to him about *A Gentleman in Moscow*, but before we started with questions he wondered who I was and whether we hadn't met before at some book dinner or other. Knowing how often he speaks in public, I was surprised he remembered. We had met, I said. Had sat next to one another at a breakfast—an American Booksellers event at which he was the keynote speaker a couple of years ago. I thought so, he said. After chatting for a few minutes, I asked my first question which was, admittedly, longwinded.



**BB:** The incarceration of a person as pampered as Count Rostov in a small room in the hotel in which he had previously lived in luxury would be—despite the relief at being alive—the ultimate in humiliation. I loved the aplomb with which he copes—immediately determined to deal with life's practicalities by turning them into routines and rituals in order to bestow dignity on their dailiness. But even this display of discipline and creativity doesn't stave off boredom. Physical torture would be far more grim of course, but isn't terminal boredom the worst sort of mental torture?



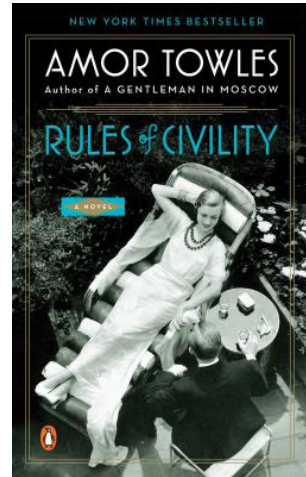
**AT:** Sounds like an excellent answer [laughs].

**BB:** [laughing too] It is long, but I was trying to set the book up in the first question for those who hadn't yet read it.

**AT:** You did a great job. I'm not sure what I can add to what you said, so I'll riff on it: In choosing this story to tell I knew that I was taking on a challenge—the challenge of telling a story inside a confined space without boring myself or the reader. Not a unique challenge; other novels have taken it on in different ways, accepting similar restraints to their advantage. *Moby-Dick*, for instance. The crew is small and once they get on the boat after the first hundred pages or so, they don't get off again. So it's a small group in a small space for hundreds and hundreds of pages. In taking on such confines, the way to make the story interesting is to bring the world inside. To them. Through literary illusions, through a discussion of commerce and of science—biology and marine life, the stars—of Shakespeare. By bringing the world in, making it a rich experience inside the small space.

This is a different version of that of course. You're right. I'm taking a sophisticated person, used to luxury and freedom, and putting him in a small space in a time of a harsh reality. That adds different components. He's ultimately successful in his battle with confinement, and this adds to the story because by taking away the luxuries he's used to, he begins searching for purpose. It becomes a novel of purpose; he reinvents himself.

**BB:** Like his reading, the game of Zut the Count plays with Sofia is not only a mechanism for avoiding silence and livening up dinner—a strategy to avoid boredom—it is also a wonderful way of broadening the horizons of both players. Because I see this novel as not only good-humored but in many ways profound, might the dangers of boredom and the importance of forestalling those dangers in whatever way one can involve avoiding the danger of becoming a bore? Of allowing the confines of one's existence to narrow one's mind and point of view? I guess that's the converse of what we were just talking about.



**AT:** Interesting question. No one's put it quite like that. Nicely put. This book is different from *Rules of Civility*, a novel that takes place over one year in the life of a 25-year-old woman of working class background who is climbing up the socioeconomic ladder. When I finished the first draft of this book, I realized that one of the reasons I had chosen to write it was that it is the inverse of my first novel in that everything is opposite: a young woman and an older man; a woman who is at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and a man at the top of that ladder; a story over one year and

one that takes place over a 32-year period. It is also unlike *Rules of Civility* in that my first novel was about one woman surrounded by people her own age—if one came to New York City say, or Los Angeles or Salt Lake City, one would find people of the same age, 25 in that case, living their lives together—while *A Gentleman in Moscow* is about people across generations. About generational relationships: The Count, Nina and Sofia, the Count's grandmother, his godfather... relationships over a lifetime.

In the scene you mentioned, Zut is a way of moving through time. The Count, who is 32 when the book starts is now over 60 and moving towards the end of his life—a 60-year-old man taking care of an 18-year-old girl....the movement is generational rather than among people in a single generation. One of the things I like in that scene, as in the hide-the-thimble scene earlier in the book, is that in both the Count has a good adversary. On the one hand he plays a game to relate to someone of a young age, but on the other he ends up underestimating them. They surprise us. As Sofia does in the games of Zut.

Also it is an instance in which the simplest things can have such resonance. The route along the way to taking a child from 5 to 20 is a constant dynamic of having the rug pulled out from under us. [laughs] It's about parenting. But at the same time it's about the daily patterns of life. Small habits. The dailiness of life can become the richness of life regardless of circumstances. I'm interested in investigating



how the simplest things can resonate in terms of personal purpose. In terms of the foundation for serious relationships.

**BB:** In the end, the Count creates a framework for his existence that seems to not only fill and ease his days but also to allow or even encourage him to go deeper into his own past—into his relationship with his sister and with the land where he grew up. Turns out this is a perfect way to plumb the depths of character. Did this back and forth between memory and the present just come as you wrote or was it done purposefully as a way of examining character?

**AT:** I'm an outliner. I work with a very detailed outline so that by the time I start chapter one I have designed everything in the chapter—the setting, the backgrounds of the characters, the imagery—in outline form. As a part of that, I create a backstory I don't intend to use. But there are few novels in which you don't have to look back if you're painting a character in midlife. It's natural to draw on those elements. To start with where they were born...It becomes an issue of craft to do it artfully. In terms of craft, it's important to know how to reference just enough to give readers what they must know but not enough to bog them down with hundreds of pages of what happened before the age of 25. Craft in terms of economy. Knowing how much and also when to introduce it, when and how to deliver the information. I could have opened *A Gentleman in Moscow* with a chapter on all that had happened before the action starts, but it's often better not to do that. It's more pleasurable to have things pop up. That's part of the challenge of the design.

**BB:** One of the hallmarks of a not-wonderful writer is exactly when they introduce a character's history in a longwinded way; frontloading facts can seem amateurish.

**AT:** Yes! I've been writing since I was a kid, but in *Rules*, in the first draft of what was to become my first published novel, a character does exactly that. When Katy introduces herself she gives us a line that tells the readers about her past—that she was an immigrant. And that scene drove me crazy. It also felt out of character with Katy, who kept her cards close to herself; you had to do your best to keep up with her. I decided to strike that early line out when she went to a Russian speakeasy, because when she was leaving the owner spoke to her in Russian and she responded in Russian. Her knowing Russian was a surprise. It gave the reader what was needed. It worked so much better that way, which reinforced my conviction to avoid weighing down the beginning of a book.

**BB:** There is a growing awareness, in the action and in references to works of literature, that the personal is all-important—even to a character who is balanced, literally, on the razor's edge of history. This is evident in the Count's relationship with his sister and with the two

children, Nina and Sofia. Can you talk about this?

**AT:** Can you explain the notion of the personal as you mean it?

**BB:** I guess the question stems from the fact that the book is set in Stalinist Russia and the notion that in the West it's all about the individual and in this Russia that is new to the Count it's about the collective. That there's this dichotomy. It's almost as if they're opposed.



**AT:** Before we get into Communism and the Soviet era, let's talk about this nuanced notion of yours outside of the realm of politics. The notion of the personal outside of politics, outside of history was certainly of great interest in the 19th century novel which centers around the question of a single person's position—Madam Bovary in the context of an emerging commercial middle class, or Dickens characters who were individuals but among vast numbers of the poor. And *War and Peace*. Its central philosophical investigation is what the role

of the individual is in terms of politics. Of war. Of historical change. Is it Napoleon who is responsible or is it a waitress or serf at home, or the will of 10,000 or a soldier in the field? Are they as important to the movement of history and western philosophy as Napoleon? There's a long history in Western literature and philosophy of asking the question, Where does the individual begin and end? How does he or she relate to family, to history, to commerce, to society in ever-widening circles? Tolstoy would say both. The novel helps us explore the ambiguities and contradictions where characters are central but where there is the sweep of time and people as backdrop. In the end it all matters. But the exploration of the ideas in terms of individual characters is central.

The Soviet Era is a very serious political backdrop, you're right, moving to the political. That transition [to Communism] is full of good and bad. If you look at the American vision of the Soviet Union, our generation saw things in stark terms of shortages, political repression, artistic repression, spies. This was so simplistic. People did get married. They had children, celebrated holidays. They related to classical music and to literature. The ballet, chess. Life as we knew it was going on there too.

Russia is both. The challenge of writing of the Soviet era is knowing how to balance both—the dangers and the worst aspects of that era along with the good. Our view was very much a Cold War interpretation which has not helped us to understand Russia in the postwar era. I wanted the book to bring to the surface the contradictions. Because when the Soviets came to power there were millions of illiterate peasants who didn't want to go back to serfdom. The revolution sprang from a genuine impulse to make changes for the good. Ten years down the road those who had been serfs didn't want to go back to serfdom. Also, Czarist Russia had been a powerful nation until weakened by World War I. The Soviets vaulted them back to the forefront of global events. By WWII they were again one of the world's powerful nations.

Depicting the variety of viewpoints of those involved in that transition meant creating characters who help us see the different ways history is unfolding, different ways to view it. Like Mishka, who believed in the revolution while it was happening, wanted it to hap-





pen, but later became disillusioned, and Nina, who was a believer in the revolution as she came of age but who became disillusioned, and Jozef who came from a rough background and fought in the war as a communist and thought they were doing valuable things which they were—vaulting Russia into the future.

**BB:** Which they did with women...

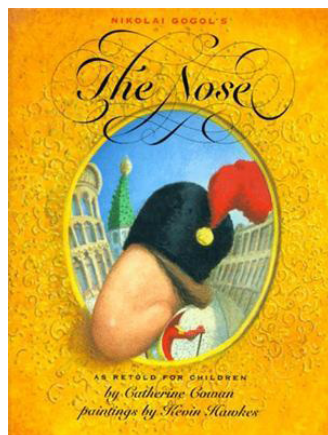
**AT:** Yes. That happened the day after the revolution. They were way ahead of America with women. And in a secular sense. In some ways they were way ahead of the curve. Individuals help us see the ways history is unfolding and what it might mean to different individuals in terms of their time. And the Count comes from a very specific time. But all of the characters are central to understanding their time in different ways.

**BB:** The miracle of the reappearing bees on the rooftop seemed the one place in the novel imbued quite literally with magic. Because it was of a piece with the Count's memories of home, it gave them, too, a nearly supernatural aura, one that put me in mind of *And Quiet Flows the Don*. Or, again, *War and Peace*. This seemed, at least for me, to somehow be the heart of the book. Did you mean it to be?

**AT:** There are at least 10, 20, 30 instances like that, and there need to be, in order to be all things to all readers. Different things resonate with different people due to differences in their own lives, or in what matters to them in terms of their backgrounds, or whether they're old or young, rich or poor...

**BB:** So it says more about me than the scene... [laughs]

**AT:** It may, but you're right, that is an important scene. The bees change the Count's life and launch his exploration of purpose. He's ready to throw in the towel. What the beekeeper explains is that the bees bring the pollen, the flavor, into the honey, and the honey holds it. Reminding the count, who believes he's been erased and no longer matters—maybe for good reason, he acknowledges—of this. When the Count thinks, My time has come and gone, the honey is a reminder that things can persist in strange ways. The taste from an apple orchard 500 miles away can be brought to mind by the taste of honey. It exists in an altered form but is still of value. Someone has to be that hidden existence of the past lingering around under the assumption that it is [still] valuable for this good thing to persist in this small and simple way. So yes, it is a moment of magic.

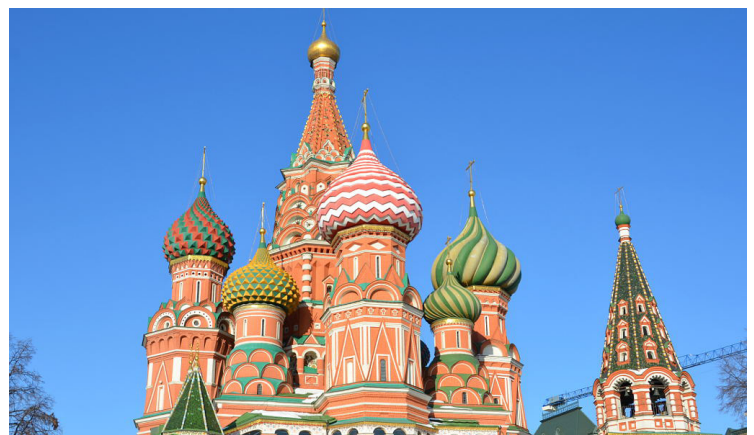


That was not the only magical moment, either. In a critical moment the ghost of the one-eyed cat appears when the Count returns home. Both scenes seem natural in terms of the story and in the way they are told. They are also in harmony to some degree with the magical in Russian literature. In Gogol and much later with Bulgakov. It is in keeping with Gogol, in the stories "The Overcoat" or "The Nose." He used magic in an iconic way to profile the shortcomings of Russian society. He had to be careful in Czarist Russia so he used both magic and satire. As does Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita* when the devil comes to Moscow. The Metropol Hotel is there too. But that [demonic] black cat wandering around Moscow... Bringing in a little magic creates harmony with a thread of Russian literature.

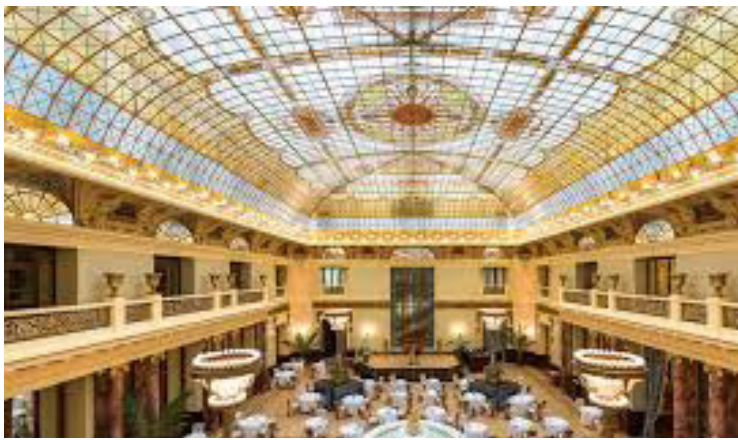
**BB:** You use the wonderful treasures which were once part of the Count's life and which furnish the hotel (or are hidden away in the storeroom, to be brought out when the proper occasion arises) to symbolically detail the arc of history. The basement in particular is a kind of archeological dig which showcases not just a bygone era, but also the way the past is secretly valued in the present. Could you say something about the old and beautiful—its value and, conversely, perhaps, whether there is any harm in glorifying it? You've talked about this but this might hit a different angle.

**AT:** The answer is in your question again here. I'll hand you the mic. [laughs] Your questions are better answers. The book is clearly populated with an array of objects that play a role in representing time, looking back to the past, and there's been a major change in the landscape of the nation as a whole, multiple before and afters. Objects help us understand the transitions. It's natural to human life to value objects, as the Count says. He takes better and better care of his possessions as they're winnowed down until he only has a handful. They're all he has left to help him remember the past.

On the other hand, as you pointed out, there's also the broader story of objects like those in the basement of the hotel. They were locked up during the revolution but serve the pomp and circumstance in this time too. So they are central. But remember when he recounts the tale of the bells? They are removed from the cathedral and turned into cannons. But they had originally been forged from cannons. The arc of history as seen in its objects. Cannons to bells and bells to cannons. A way of investigating life in Russia.







**BB:** The Count's new position in the hotel where he had lived in such luxury is an ideal situation in which to examine social status in an upstairs/downstairs kind of way, with a comrade or two thrown in. Seems in this instance that although the mighty no longer rise to the top because of inherited wealth, they do so by scaling the bureaucratic ladder—not at all the same thing as success through merit. Witness Bishop. Could you comment on this in terms of the way you might evaluate the system under Stalin?

**AT:** Under Stalinism membership in the party became a form of privilege. It brought you better apartments, better food, better housing, more authority, and also more opportunities for your children, to grow up and be in the communist party and live that same life. It mirrored or duplicated aristocracy, no question. But other equalities survived. A middle class of a kind. But nonetheless there was a privileged class, no question. The hotel was a means of examining that.

I read in *The New York Times* today that upward mobility is diminishing here. If you are born in the bottom 10% economically, where 100 years ago there was 25% or 30% chance to move up or down, you now have a 5% chance of not remaining there. Ten percent at most. And if you are born in the top 10% you likewise have a 90% chance of staying there with access to education, to health care, better child care and child development. And the ability to pass on wealth is growing as well. This is the reality here in America in real time. Our more struggling states look at one another with suspicion. It is a reality both here and there. It's also an aspect in *Rules of Civility*. And an ongoing interest of mine.

**BB:** This is a big, sweeping, romantic, if ironic novel, more along the lines of *War and Peace* (with a touch of Laurence Sterne or Henry Fielding thrown in) than *Anna Karenina*, and, like *War and Peace*, it is populated by a large and fascinating cast of characters from all walks of life—which, given the small confines of the Hotel Metropol, makes it a miraculous achievement. So, a two-part question: did you intend this to be such a complex and compendious (although utterly entertaining I hasten to add) novel or did it grow naturally into its vibrant and lively self? And did you know as much as you seem to about Russian history when you began writing *A Gentleman in Moscow* or did you learn along the way?

**AT:** I'll go backwards. I don't pick a topic and then research it and then write a book. That's not how I work. I write a book about a subject I've long been interested in. Like *Rules of Civility*. I'd been a fan of the '20s and '30s since a kid. Read the novels, seen the movies, listened to the music, studied the art movements. I used that familiarity as a basis to start the book. It was a similar dynamic with *A Gentleman in Moscow*. It started long ago with an interest in Russian literature and then the avant-garde and then the soviets...So I had

over 20 years of ongoing interest in Russia by the time I sat down to write. Twenty years of familiarity as a foundation for the story.

As I mentioned, I am an outliner. I write a draft from an outline and no one reads it. Then it is revised from beginning to end at least two more times. In the third draft, the smaller characters, who were all in the outline and the first draft, come closer and closer to the surface. They're impatient, their point of view is more important, they're almost demanding their time on the stage. If I look at Anna and Mishka, the page count for each increases significantly from draft one to the final draft. They become more and more important to the novel as their personalities begin to express themselves in contrast to the main characters.

I know one challenge of presenting all the different points of view in Russian life through the characters is that the novel becomes more and more crowded with these characters, these points of view of the privileged class, aristocrats, the foreigners who come and go, the people who work in the hotel...It becomes kind of Marx Brothers-esque. It makes the room more and more crowded in a slapstick kind of way. Becomes kind of a joke. Like the geese in the hall and all the guests popping out of their doors. Or the celebration after the piano competition. Obviously the Count, Anna and Sofia had to be there but then the Chef and Andrey would insist on coming and then there's a knock on the door—the concierge comes in to tell him someone is waiting, and then the Bishops shows up. It can be sort of spontaneous. This would never play out with just the three characters. They [the others] demand their time on the stage.

**BB:** The humor adds, too. And reduces the risk of sentimentality.

**AT:** That kind of scene can be scary or moving or comic. But in this case it starts out comic and does end on a sober note. Yes.

**BB:** Thank you so much. For answering all my questions. It was really interesting. And thank you for writing this miraculous book. Congratulations on its publication in paperback!

**AT:** Nice to meet you again, and I hope I see you when I'm there!

**BB:** Wouldn't miss it for the world.

