

Amor Towles is standing in the lobby of the Yale Club. He's wearing a gray, trimly fitted suit that complements his gray, trimly clipped beard—the respectable sort found on older professional men who've earned the leisure of kempt scruff. His handshake has the svelte just-so firmness of a veteran businessman, which is exactly what Towles is—or was—for 20 years.

Towles' second career began in 2011, when at 47, he published his debut novel, *Rules of Civility*, which garnered critical applause and climbed the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Rules of Civility* captures 1930s New York through the eyes of a young woman from Brooklyn as she navigates the glamorous minefield of Manhattan society. As we settle into armchairs, I think the Yale Club seems quite the appropriate setting to discuss Towles' second novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, which like its predecessor wades with a gimlet eye through the unavoidable quagmire of social decorum.

A Gentleman in Moscow tells the story of Count Alexander Rostov, an aristocrat who, after the Russian Revolution, is sentenced to house arrest in a grand Moscow hotel. The book spans decades as Rostov builds an existence within his new confines, finding love and friendship in unexpected places and watching his beloved country change radically outside (and inside) the walls of the hotel. The count took his duties as a gentleman very seriously, but after the revolution, everything he exemplified is reviled, and he must consider his worth in this new society.

"Yes, we are back in the world of manners," Towles says. "It intrigues me that by definition, with civility or etiquette or social class, there's always a thin line—with all kinds of behavior on either side. You bring different ways of living, different priorities and different privileges into

relief the minute you start setting a table."

This conflict over priority and privilege is the intellectual backbone of Rostov's struggle to accept the Bolshevik ideology. In one particularly poignant passage, Towles writes, "As we age, we find comfort from the notion that it takes generations for a way of life to fade... But under certain circumstances, this process can occur in the comparative blink of an eye. Popular upheaval, political turmoil, industrial progress—any combination of these can cause the evolution of a society to leapfrog generations... [And] those with newfound power are men who distrust any form of hesitation or nuance, and who prize self-assurance above all."

I tell him that I felt a surge of sad recognition when I read this passage, because it holds such a mirror to our own time. Towles nods vigorously. "But," he says, "I try not to dwell too closely on contemporary parallels. I try to create an environment in which universal truths are at play. I'm interested in writing something that is timeless." ■



Master of Manners

Amor Towles returns with his second novel, an unusual story of captivity *Written by Frances Dodds*

WEST IN SHOW

Trailers for a new sitcom set in a tony Connecticut enclave get under some of the locals' skin

American Housewife, an upcoming ABC sitcom rescued from its less savory pilot title (*The Second Fattest Housewife in Westport*), depicts the tragicomic trials and tribulations of a grounded, plus-size mother not exactly at ease around the pressed juice-drinking, yoga pants-wearing housewives of her new town. The satirical show's extended trailer paints Westport, Connecticut, the country's fifth highest-earning city, as a sterile place dotted with Stepford-style housewives and husbands. Actual residents wasted no time running to the Internet to voice their bemusement. Here's a peek at some of the comments. —ANDRÉ WHEELER

JILL TURNER ODICE

Will there be a laugh track to tell you when you are supposed to laugh? (06880)

LYN HOGAN

Thinking this show might be about me!! It actually looks pretty funny, stereotypes or not! (06880)

RACHEL HALPERIN

That's absolutely hysterical! Sure sounds like it's Fairfield County, but this Westport is like any mirage. Looks real, but the reality is just an illusion (of perfect people and perfect children). (06880)

BILL BOYD

No surprise that the self-absorbed ... many of whom populate my old home town ... would want to immortalize themselves in a flutent sitcom. (06880)

ATHORNTON436

You hate us cause you ain't us. (Reddit)

IMALOSERNOFRIENDS

Hey no press is bad press let's go Westport! (Reddit)

COLLETTEMN

I'm leaning towards the idea that this one might not be too far from the truth. (Reddit)

PUTIN ON THE RITZ

This season, New York stages are facing a Russian invasion—and they're better for it

IN JUNE, PLAYWRIGHT Stephen Karam took home a Tony Award for his Pulitzer Prize–nominated original play *The Humans*. This fall, however, when his work lands back on the Broadway stage, it'll take the form of a more familiar story. Karam has adapted Anton Chekhov's 1904 classic *The Cherry Orchard* for a Roundabout Theater Company production starring Diane Lane as Madame Ranevskaya, a faded aristocrat whose once-proud family (and valuable land) is facing ruin. And he isn't the only one looking to Russian works this Broadway season.

Come October, *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*—an adaptation of a section of *War & Peace*—starring Josh Groban and Denée Benton will land at the Imperial Theater. The musical follows a love triangle during the 19th-century French invasion of Russia and features traditional Russian music blended with more modern sounds as well as lyrics lifted directly from Leo Tolstoy's 1869 novel.

Meanwhile, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Mikhail Baryshnikov will appear in a dramatic role as the Ukrainian-born Vaslav Nijinsky in *Letter to a Man*, director Robert Wilson's staged production of the famed dancer's diaries, beginning with the onset of his schizophrenia. The show, scored with songs by Henry Mancini and Tom Waits, among others, is performed in both English and Russian.



Cate Blanchett makes her Broadway debut alongside Richard Roxburgh, bringing the Sydney Theatre Company's production of *The Present*—adapted from Chekhov's first play, *Platonov*, by Blanchett's husband Andrew Upton—to the Barrymore Theatre for a limited run in December. The play, a look at two childhood friends reunited later (and much more damaged) in life, was a hit in Australia, where one review noted the “parties, pills, guns... and bottle after bottle of vodka.”—ADAM RATHE



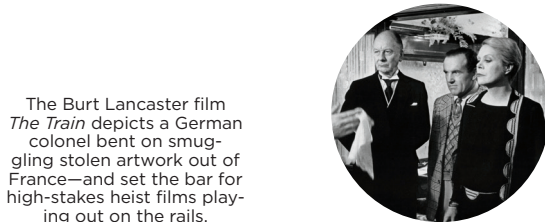
TRAIN OF TERROR

The Girl on the Train is one of fall's most anticipated films, and the latest in a long line of thrillers to spill blood on the tracks



1938

In Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, one woman (Margaret Lockwood) grapples with the disappearance of an elderly traveling companion—as well as every other passenger's memory of her existence.



1964



The Burt Lancaster film *The Train* depicts a German colonel bent on smuggling stolen artwork out of France—and set the bar for high-stakes heist films playing out on the rails.

1974

Murder on the Orient Express follows detective Hercule Poirot as he attempts to solve the mystery surrounding the on-board death of a businessman amid suspects played by the likes of Lauren Bacall, Sean Connery and Vanessa Redgrave.



1985

In *Runaway Train*, two escaped convicts (Jon Voigt and Eric Roberts) board a train with no idea that its brakes are shot and it's speeding toward a deadly collision.



2013

In *Snowpiercer*, starring Chris Evans and Jamie Bell, the last humans survive a new Ice Age on a train making its way endlessly around the world. When the people living in the slums at the back of the train revolt, the fate of mankind rests precariously on a speeding locomotive.