

Room to Read Book Group Report by Ruth Lapworth

The book we discussed this month was **A gentleman in Moscow** by Amor Towles. The novel begins in the 1920's, spans several decades of Russian history and is set in the (real) Metropol Hotel in Moscow. The hotel is a microcosm of society and acts as a meeting place for people of influence from whichever regime is in power at any particular time.

Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov (an aristocrat born in 1889) is under 'house arrest' in the hotel following his conviction by a Bolshevik tribunal. He is assigned to move from his luxury suite to cramped quarters in the hotel attic. Although not allowed outside he has access to all parts of the hotel. This includes a weekly visit to the barbers and dining in the hotel's smartest restaurant. A stash of gold he has hidden in the legs of his desk enables him to continue to live in the style he has been accustomed to.

Rostov becomes friends with a 9 year old Ukrainian girl, Nina staying in the hotel and also has a relationship with a film star/actress. Over the years he develops a close friendship with a number of hotel staff including the chef, maître d'hotel (an ex circus juggler) and seamstress. Ironically, the Count becomes an asset to the hotel management, working as the chief waiter producing diplomatic seating plans for dinners organised by the Communist Party.

His daily routine is shattered when Nina flees Moscow to follow her husband to Siberia, leaving her 5-year-old daughter, Sofia, in the Count's care. Rostov raises Sofia as his daughter, and she grows up with him in the hotel. Sofia is able to leave the confines of the hotel and becomes a brilliant pianist. She is invited to play on an official trip to Paris with her music academy. This spurs the Count into action and he devises a plan for their escape!

We all agreed the book is long. This was not a problem for those that loved it. Half of us thoroughly enjoyed the story, found it humorous/whimsical and liked way the Count adapted to his change in circumstances. Some disliked the unbelievable nature of the story and the depiction of Russian history by an American author. However, we agreed it was a very good book for discussion and rated it 4.5 with a score of 4 for recommendation to a friend.