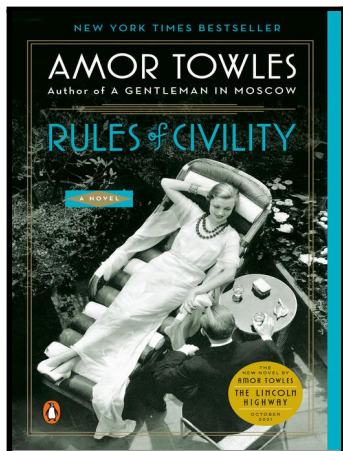




BOOK BUZZ

Rules of Civility Reader's Guide



Rules of Civility

By Amor Towles

Viking Press

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[A Penguin Random House Reading Group Guide](#)

Introduction

Five years ago, three friends and I set out to read some of the “great books”—or those works of literature that would merit rereading several times over the course of our lives. Meeting once a month, we started with Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and have since worked through the works of Twain and Faulkner, Cervantes and García Marquez, Tolstoy and Nabokov—dwelling over dinner on our favorite passages, on themes and ambiguities, sharing our perspectives.

As someone who has written quietly for twenty years, the notion that a group might gather to discuss a book of mine seems something so fantastic it must be a mirage. So, if you’ve come this far, I owe you my heartfelt thanks.

What follows are some questions for discussion that might have surfaced in my reading group. If you are interested, there is additional content regarding *Rules of Civility* at amortowles.com including brief essays on Walker Evans and jazz, a 1930s time capsule, etcetera. You may also submit your thoughts or questions there. And if your reading group is



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meeting for dinner in New York somewhere between Canal and 34th streets, please let me know. If my schedule allows, I will try to stop by.

Amor Towles

New York, New York, 2011

About Amor Towles

Amor Towles was born and raised just outside Boston, Massachusetts. He graduated from Yale University and received an MA in English from Stanford University, where he was a Scowcroft Fellow. He is a principal at an investment firm in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two children. This is his first novel.

A Conversation with Amor Towles

Q. Why did you decide to write a book set in the late 1930s, and how did you research the period?

I've always had a great interest in the period between 1900 and 1940—because it was a time of such incredible creative combustion.

In retrospect, the pace of change in the arts and industry in the nineteenth century seems pretty glacial. Painting, music, the novel, architecture were all evolving, but at a pretty observable pace. Then in the span of a few decades you have James Joyce, Cubism, Surrealism, jazz, Nijinsky, Henry Ford, the skyscraper, Sigmund Freud, the Russian Revolution, movies, airplanes, and the general upending of received forms in almost every area of human endeavor.

Over the years, I listened to the music, saw the movies, read the novels and manifestos, lingered in front of the paintings. So I really didn't do any applied research for the book. Rather, I tried to rely on my secondhand familiarity with the period to orient my imagination.

Q. Why did you decide to write a book from the perspective of a young woman?

Some writers such as John Cheever and Raymond Carver, seem to draw artistic energy from analyzing the realm of their own experiences—their social circles and memories and mores. I'm one of those who draw creative energy from the opposite. I prefer to put myself in an environment that's further afield and look through the eyes of someone who differs from me in



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age, ethnicity, gender, and/or social class. I think a little displacement makes me a sharper observer. It's that challenge of trying to imagine what's on top of the—the small thing that's always there on the periphery that somehow brings events into focus.

Q. Were there any personal influences from the 1930s that informed the book?

None of the characters in the book are based on anyone in particular. But three of my grandparents and a great-grandmother lived into their late 90s or early 100s. My maternal grandparents lived across the street from me in the summers and I'd see them every day. Over lunch when I was in my twenties, it was great fun to talk with them about their lives between the wars—when they were young adults. My grandmother, who was simultaneously a woman of manners and verve, fended off marriage proposals until she was thirty because she was having too much fun to settle down. Like the book's narrator, she pushed a rival in furs to drink before ultimately accepting my grandfather's proposal.

To some degree, these conversations (with my grandmother in particular) solidified my view that her generation was less Victorian than my parents' generation. I think the 1920s and 1930s had a certain openness that was countered by the conformity of the 1950s.

Q. Talk about the role of chance encounters in the book.

One of the central themes in the book is how chance meetings and offhand decisions in one's twenties can define one's life for decades to come. I think there is something universal about this dynamic; but it was certainly my experience.

In 1989, I had a fellowship to teach for Yale in China for two years. I came back from California to New Haven to spend the summer learning Chinese, but because of Tiananmen Square, Yale cancelled the program. They gave us each a few thousand dollars and sent us on our way. I had all my belongings in my car and had no idea what to do with myself. As it turned out, an old friend needed a roommate in New York to split the rent, so I moved here.

My first night in the city, I got invited to a party at the home of an acquaintance. There, I met a few people who ultimately became close friends. In retrospect, a number of careers and marriages sprang from the intersection of social circles at that party—but we certainly didn't realize the importance of the encounters at the time. We were just meeting for drinks, making haphazard alliances and cursory decisions, shaping our futures unwittingly.



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Q. Do you think Katey’s story could have occurred somewhere other than New York?

I certainly hope so. I think the book’s themes of self-invention, aspiration, love and loss, are recognizable in any corner of America. But one interesting aspect of New York is that it is a leading capital for advertising, art, broadcasting, fashion, finance, food, journalism, music, publishing, theater, and so on. This means that every year, young people from all over the world with very different backgrounds, interests, and ambitions descend on the city. They are all looking to establish connections (in the E. M. Forster sense as well as the Dale Carnegie sense). This just increases the odds that the person you sit next to at a diner could change your life in very unexpected ways.

Q. Tell us about George Washington and his Rules of Civility.

I’m very interested in periods where there is a density of creative invention: Like the early Renaissance in Tuscany (with Massacio, della Francesca, Botticelli and Donatello), or jazz in the late 50s in New York (with Davis and Coltrane and Monk and Gillespie); or crime drama on TV in the 70s (with Kojak, Rockford, McGarrett, and Columbo). Throughout history there seem to be these brief periods when a group of varied talents come together and advance a whole art form by leaps and bounds. In some semi-competitive or cooperative dialogue, the players bring out the best in each other by spurring inspiration and risk taking, while defining new forms and frontiers. When I find a period like this I like to delve.

One of those periods for me is the revolutionary period in America. Jefferson, Adams, Washington, Hamilton, Madison, Franklin were all men of such sweeping talent and character. In an incredibly short period, they formulated a system of ideals and practical applications, which has served us well for centuries.

Initially, I imagined Tinker as an avid student of the period. But once into the book, I happened to pull a collection of Washington’s writings off my shelf, which led off with his “Rules of Civility”—and I knew right away that the “Rules” should be the primary thing that Tinker had studied. My book investigates social stratification & manners, character & appearance, ideals & compromise—and Washington’s youthful list somehow seems at the heart of the whole crazy matter.



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Q. The book investigates the nuances of social strata in the 1930s. Do you think the influence of class is the same in today's America?

I'm not a sociologist, but it seems to me that the composition of America's social strata has changed in meaningful ways since the first half of the century. The Second World War and the GI Bill were great leveling influences, in which many working class individuals migrated from their ethnic communities toward a more homogenous middle class. At the same time, the aristocratic families of the 1920s began to abandon the outward pomp of cotillions and tails. Wonder Bread, Budweiser and Chock Full o'Nuts found their place in pantries high and low (with consistency and low price being attained at the expense of differentiation and flavor). This convergence has had weird byproducts: The vast majority of Americans, spanning a wide array of economics (from the statistically rich to the statistically poor), now identify themselves as "middle class." And where in the first half of the century the struggling youth would have aspired to the narrow circles of aristocracy, in recent decades the affluent youth have aspired to the fashion and cadences of the inner city.

But having made these rough generalizations about transformation, I'd say that many aspects of the 1930s social behavior still prevail. We clearly still live in an aspirational society. We have just exited half a decade when virtually every tier of the American economy has borrowed money in order to buy bigger cars and bigger houses with better fixtures. And we still have American youth in pursuit of mobility, though mobility today may mean getting to wear sneakers at a start-up, rather than being accepted to a country club.

Q. Could you describe how the book was written?

In my late thirties and early forties, I wrote a novel set in the farmlands of Stalinist Russia, which I ultimately stuck in a drawer. It's pretty depressing to work on something for seven years and dislike the outcome.

That book had five points of view and a series of complex events that had been roughly outlined. As an investment professional with two young children, this structure proved hellish. Every time I sat down to work on the book, I needed two hours just to figure out where I was. Worst of all, in rereading later drafts, I often found that the material from the first year was the best.

So in launching a new book, I decided it would be a distinctive first person narrative; all events and characters would be carefully imagined in advance; and it would be written in one year. After a few weeks of preparation, I started *Rules of Civility* on January 1, 2006, and



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wrapped it up 365 days later. The book was designed with twenty-six chapters, because there are fifty-two weeks in the year and I allotted myself two weeks to draft, revise and bank each chapter.

I revised the book thoroughly three times over the next three years (mostly making it shorter); but the original constraint of a twelve-month draft proved a much more effective artistic process for me than an open-ended one. Not coincidentally, the book opens on New Year's Eve and ends a year later.

Q. What have you been reading?

Around the time I turned forty, in reading *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found*, Harold Bloom's tribute to reading literature for wisdom, I was struck by how little time I had left to read seriously. I figured I was lucky if I could read one book deeply per month. If I lived to 80, that was 480 more books. With that shocking consideration as a backdrop, three friends and I formed a group to read extraordinary works of literature.

The acid test for books of inclusion has been that they have been proven by history to merit multiple readings in a lifetime. We started with *Remembrance of Things Past* and then read works of Twain, Whitman, Dickinson, and Thoreau as a precursor to reading works of Faulkner. Then we did Cervantes and Borges before reading García Marquez. Last year we read through Nabokov's American period and we have now moved on to Tolstoy.

Questions For Your Consideration

1. At the outset, *Rules of Civility* appears to be about the interrelationship between Katey, Tinker, and Eve; but then events quickly lead Eve and Tinker offstage. Are Dicky Vanderwhile, Wallace Wolcott, Bitsy, Peaches, Hank, and Anne Grandyn as essential to Katey's "story" as Tinker and Eve? If so, what role do you think each plays in fashioning the Katey of the future?
2. Katey observes at one point that Agatha Christie "doles out her little surprises at the carefully calibrated pace of a nanny dispensing sweets to the children in her care." Something similar could be said of how Katey doles out information about herself. What sort of things is Katey slow to reveal, and what drives her reticence?
3. After seeing Tinker at Chinoiserie, Katey indicts George Washington's "Rules of Civility" as "A do-it yourself charm school. A sort of How to Win Friends and Influence People 150



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years ahead of its time.” But Dicky sees some nobility in Tinker’s aspiration to follow Washington’s rules. Where does your judgment fall on Tinker? Is Katey wholly innocent of Tinker’s crime? Where does simulation end and character begin? Which of Washington’s rules do you aspire to?

4. A central theme in the book is that a chance encounter or cursory decision in one’s twenties can shape one’s course for decades to come. Do you think this is true to life? Were there casual encounters or decisions that you made, which in retrospect were watershed events?

5. When I told my seven-year-old son that I had written a book that was going to be published, he said: *That’s great! But who is going to do the pictures?* While the Walker Evans portraits in the book may not meet my son’s standards of illustration, they are somewhat central to the narrative. In addition, there are the family photographs that line Wallace Wolcott’s wall (including the school picture in which Tinker appears twice); there are the photographs of celebrities that Mason Tate reviews with Katey at Condé Nast; there are the pictures that end up on Katey and Valentine’s wall. Why is the medium of photography a fitting motif for the book? How do the various photographs serve its themes?

6. One of the pleasures of writing fiction is discovering upon completion of a project that some thread of imagery has run through the work without your being aware—forming, in essence, an unintentional motif. While I was very conscious of photography as a motif in the book, and the imagery of fairy tales, here are two motifs that I only recognized after the fact: navigation (expressed through references to the *Odyssey*; to the shipwrecks of the Titanic, Endurance, and Robinson Crusoe; and through Thoreau’s reckoning and pole star metaphors); and the blessed and the damned (expressed through scattered references to churches, paradise, the inferno, doomsday, redemption day, the pietà and the language of the Gospels). What role do these motifs play in the thematic composition of the book? And if you see me in an airport, can you please explain them to me?

7. Upon completion of this book, one of my guilty pleasures has been imagining how Eve was doing in Hollywood. When Eve says, “I like it just fine on this side of the windshield,” what does she mean? And why is the life Tinker offers her so contrary to the new life she intends to pursue? If you register at my Web site, on the first of the year I will send you a short story on Eve’s progress.



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8. When Tinker sets out on his new life, why does he intend to start his days saying Katey's name? What does he mean when he describes Katey as someone of "such poise and purpose"? Is the book improved by the four sections from Tinker's point of view, or hindered by them?

9. T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is referenced in the book's preface and its epilogue. Why is that poem somehow central to Katey's 1969 reflections on her 1938 experiences?

10. Please don't answer this last question until the wine bottles are empty and the servers are waiting impatiently to clear your table: In the epilogue, Katey observes that "Right choices are the means by which life crystallizes loss." What is a right choice that you have made and what did you leave behind as a result?



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