

The Rules of Civility by Amor Towles: A Review

In this time of social distancing and grim reality, perhaps some delightful diversion would be welcome. Amor Towles, whose *A Gentleman from Moscow* entranced many of us, provides us a wonderfully entertaining and witty experience with this, his first novel.

Katey Kontent—twenty-four, attractive, smart as can be, a second generation working class Russian Jew—narrates her life in Manhattan in 1938. On New Year's Eve 1937, at a Greenwich Village bistro, Katey and similarly gifted roommate Eve, meet suave, handsome young banker Tinker Grey. Mutual attraction ensues. Katey's narrative of her life in 1938 is the novel. The mutual attraction is derailed by an auto accident involving all three, but in which Eve is seriously injured. Guilt and noblesse oblige cause Tinker to insist that Eve recuperate in his upscale, beautifully appointed apartment. Through Tinker, Katey is swept into the WASP old money world of New York society.

All is surface charm and ease with underlying flawed reality. Katey learns that Tinker's apparent wealth and position derive from Anne, grand dame of society and social mentor to Katey. He is Anne's kept man.

The Rules of Civility? It's a booklet that Tinker's mother gave him years before. It's a set of self-improvement rules of conduct written for himself by teenaged George Washington. It's appended to the novel. One example: "59th Never express anything unbecoming, nor Act agst the Rules Moral before your inferiours." In a treasure of a Reading Guide (found on the Web) written by the author himself, he turns the tables on us by asking "Which of Washington's rules do you aspire to?"

It's the writing itself, of course, that most impresses me. "And Tinker, he had a smile on his face that could have lit every lamp at the North Pole." "His accent was purely aristocratic—part prep school, part Brit, part prude." "That's how quickly New York City comes about—like a weather vane—or the head of a cobra, Time tells which." That's Katey. Ultimately, she finds her place in this new life. Read the novel. It's a delight.

Bob McDonnell