Amor Towles on writing A Gentleman in Moscow

My new novel, A Gentleman in Moscow, opens at the Kremlin in 1922 where a thirty-year-old Russian aristocrat is being interviewed by a Bolshevik tribunal. In the course of this brief interview it becomes clear that because the Count wrote a poem as a young man that was popular with the revolutionary generation, he has some fans in the upper ranks of the Party. But it is also clear that he is an unrepentant aristocrat. So, in something of a compromise, the tribunal decides that he can go back to the hotel where he has been staying, but if he ever comes out again, he will be shot. With the snap of the gavel, the Count is marched out of the Kremlin, across Red Square and through the doors of the historic Metropol Hotel—where he spends the next thirty-two years.

What was the origin of this odd premise? While I have been writing fiction since I was a child, I also spent two decades working in the investment field. In my capacity as the primary client contact for my firm, every year I would spend weeks on the road. In 2009, while arriving at my hotel in Geneva (for the eighth year in a row), I recognized some of the people lingering in the lobby from the year before. It was as if they had never left. Upstairs in my room, I began playing with the notion of a novel in which a man is stuck in a grand hotel. Thinking that he should be there by force, rather than by choice, my mind immediately leapt to Russia—where house arrest has existed since the time of the Tsars. In the next few days, I sketched out most of the key events for the story that would become A Gentleman in Moscow.

In a way, however, the spark for the book was struck much further back—in the late 1980s when I was a graduate student Stanford University. At the time, I had the good fortune of getting a job as the assistant to the curator of English and American Literature at the Stanford library.

One afternoon—when I was probably supposed to be doing something else—I was in the stacks turning through the pages of Anton Chekhov’s collected letters. Towards the back of the volume was a letter the author had written to his sister in 1904—from Berlin—where he was recuperating from a serious illness. In it, he tells her that the trip has been a great success. He says that he has enjoyed the city, that his hotel is excellent and the food delicious. In fact, he says the bread is so amazing that Russians who have never travelled to Berlin have no idea of how good bread can be. Chekhov concludes by assuring his sister that his strength has returned and he is on his way to a full recovery. A month later, he died.

At the end of this poignant bit of literary history, there were six footnotes. One of them explained that during the Soviet era—when Chekhov’s letters were first collected into an authoritative edition—the sentence in which the author celebrated the bread of Berlin was expurgated. My long-standing fascination with the Soviet era began with that footnote. On the one hand it provided me with a glimpse of a government apparatus so grand in scale, so intricate, and so obsessive that it could ferret out an offending sentence in the middle of the 200th letter on the 500th page in one of the tens of thousands of books that were to be published that year! The thought of it was chilling; but it also filled me with a strange sense of
Amor Towles on writing A Gentleman in Moscow

elation. Because what this footnote also showed was how absolutely convinced the Russian people were of the power of the written word—the Soviet censors donned their spectacles, sharpened their pencils and read every manuscript with care because they believed that a single sentence could put their entire government at risk. So, I Xeroxed the letter and stuck it in my files.

Twenty-five years later, the letter weaseled its way into my work. For A Gentleman in Moscow, it is the Count’s oldest friend, Mishka—a devout member of the Party and dutiful editor of literature—who is instructed to expunge the offending sentence from the collection of Chekhov’s letters. And like so many of his countrymen, he finds himself having to decide on the spot whether to compromise his integrity in this little way, or refuse to do so on principal and face the consequences.

What most librarians would appreciate instinctively about this little anecdote is that when I went into the Stanford stacks that day back in 1988, I actually wasn’t looking for Chekhov’s letters at all. I was looking for a collection of his short stories. But the beauty of a library is that when you’re winding through the labyrinth of the bookshelves and getting closer to your prey, as you begin running your fingers along the bindings, you are just bound to stumble upon something unexpected that piques your interest.

Many would define a library as a place you go to get a book that you want; but that isn’t quite right. A library is the place you go to get the book that you don’t know you want. It’s that book that happens to be there on the shelf just to the left of the one you thought you were looking for and it promises you an instance of unanticipated illumination.