

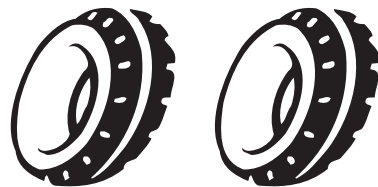
# DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Rules of Civility*

by Amor Towles

BOOK GROUP

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

*Reprinted from publisher.*

Born and raised in the Boston area, Amor Towles graduated from Yale College and received an MA in English from Stanford University. His thesis at Stanford, a short story cycle called “The Temptations of Pleasure”, was published in 1989 in *Paris Review* 112.

Mr. Towles’s first novel, *Rules of Civility*, which was published in 2011, was a *New York Times* bestseller and was named by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the best books of 2011. The book has been translated into over 15 languages, its French translation receiving the 2012 Prix Fitzgerald. In the fall of 2012, the novel was optioned by Lionsgate to be made into a feature film.

Mr. Towles’s second novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, which was published in 2016, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over forty weeks in hardcover and was named one of the best books of 2016 by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and NPR. The book is being translated into over twenty languages including Russian. In the summer of 2017, the novel was optioned by EOne and the British director, Tom Harper, to be made into a 6-8 hour miniseries.

Having worked as an investment professional for over twenty years, Mr. Towles now devotes himself full time to writing in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two children.

## BOOK SUMMARY

*Reprinted from publisher.*

This sophisticated and entertaining first novel presents the story of a young woman whose life is on the brink of transformation. On the last night of 1937, twenty-five-year-old Katey Kontent is in a second-rate Greenwich Village jazz bar when Tinker Grey, a handsome banker, happens to sit down at the neighboring table. This chance encounter and its startling consequences propel Katey on a year-long journey into the upper echelons of New York society—where she will have little to rely upon other than a bracing wit and her own brand of cool nerve. With its sparkling depiction of New York’s social strata, its intricate imagery and themes, and its immensely appealing characters, *Rules of Civility* won the hearts of readers and critics alike.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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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 off stage. 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 years ahead of its

time.” But Dicky sees some nobility in Tinker’s aspiration to 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. But, 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 Pieta 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? After *Rules of Civility* was published, I wrote a series of six interlinked short stories called *Eve in Hollywood*, which follow her to Tinseltown in 1938. These stories were available for awhile as an ebook; but in 2016, I removed them from distribution having decided to turn them into a novel.
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 glasses are empty and the waiters 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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