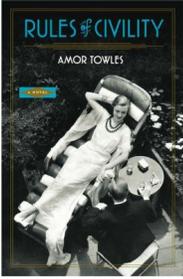


Books by the Stack



Rules of Civility by Amor Towles

A chance encounter with a handsome banker in a jazz bar on New Year's Eve 1938 catapults Wall Street secretary Katey Kontent into the upper echelons of New York society, where she befriends a shy multi-millionaire, an Upper East Side ne'er-do-well, and a single-minded widow.

Why you'll like it: *Historical fiction. Witty. Strong sense of place.*

About the Author: Amor Towles grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. He graduated from Yale College and received an M.A. in English from Stanford University where he was a Scowcroft Fellow. His novel, "Rules of Civility" reached the bestseller lists of The New York Times, the Boston Globe and Los Angeles Times. The book was rated by The Wall Street Journal as one of the ten best works of fiction in 2011. The book has been published in 15 languages. In the fall of 2012, the novel was optioned to be made into a feature film. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. At the outset, *Rules of Civility* appears to be about the interrelationship between Katey, Tinker, and Eve; but then events quickly lead Tinker and Eve 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? Which of Washington's rules to you aspire to? Where does simulation end and character begin?
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 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 Woldcott's wall (including the school picture in which Tinker appears twice); there are the photographs of celebrities that Mason Tate reviews with Katey at Conde 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 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, and Pieta and the language of the Gospels.) What role do these motifs play in the thematic composition of the book?
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?
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. 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?

(Questions provided by the author)



www.grpl.org/BookClub