



One Great Book: Volume 1, Episode 4 *Rules of Civility* by Amor Towles

[Show Notes](#)

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One Great Book Volume 1, Book 4: *Rules of Civility*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it.

[MUSIC]

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[1:14]

Oscar Wilde once quipped, “If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use in reading it at all.” Well. *I’m* sympathetic to his point of view, and can definitely say that today’s book *Rules of Civility* has—by Wilde’s standard—been well worth *my* reading time. I’ve read it three times cover to cover, and am likely to return again, because, each time I do, I notice something different, something new that I hadn’t spotted before, something that made me glad I picked it up again.

Rules of Civility is the debut novel from Amor Towles, and while it was well-received, it’s gotten a *sliver* of the attention that’s been showered on his follow-up, *A Gentleman in Moscow*. *Gentleman* is a fine book, a bestseller worthy of the hype. And yet, it’s *Rules* I keep coming back to, and I don’t want you to miss it, because it’s one. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

Rules hooked me from the get-go. No surprise, I wouldn’t want to RE-read it if I didn’t love it the first time. The action takes place almost entirely in 1938, but the story *begins* that is on an October evening in 1966, at an art show. A REAL art show: it’s photographer Walker Evans’ exhibit *Many Are Called*, at the Museum of Modern Art. This is a historically accurate art show.

Over the course of three years, Walker Evans took photos of ordinary people on the New York subway, using a camera hidden in his jacket so they didn’t know they were being photographed. He did this so he could capture them... as they really were, as he said it. The photos were taken between 1938 and 1941, but Evans didn’t display them until 1966 because, even though they were taken in a public place, he was concerned about his subjects’ privacy. And I think I see what he means here.

So Towles uses this historical art show as a launching point for his fictional story. In his novel, woman is at the show with her husband, and among all the photographs, two jump out at her. They’re taken a year apart, and the photos are so different—one is of a handsome man in a cashmere coat, the other a dirty laborer—a casual observer wouldn’t know them to be the same person. But the woman knows, because she used to know the man—and he’s not just any man



to her, but the man who changed her life... though she doesn't want to tell her husband as much. The woman hasn't seen him in nearly thirty years, but when she sees those photos, they take her right back to the night they first met, the beginning of *the* most important year of her life, the year when everything changed.

[3:46]

In Towles' book, all that happens in just nine pages, in the preface, and next, we readers get to find out WHAT HAPPENED back then that matters so much, that made such a difference in these people's lives thirty years later.

After that nine page preface we have chapter one begins on new years eve, 1937. Towles says it's no coincidence the book follows a calendar year, because that's how he wrote it. He wanted to make sure he completed this novel and he wanted to do it in one year. So beginning in January, he planned to write one chapter every two weeks. You can see he stuck to his plan: count the chapters, there are 26 of them.

Our narrator is a young woman named Katey Kontent, at one point she says, "yes that's how you pronounce it. It's like the state of being." She's the woman from the art show, but on New Year's Eve 1937 she's 25 years old, she's the daughter of Russian immigrants. Who grew up as "Katje" but she's just moved to Manhattan and is reinventing herself. She's smart, ambitious, she has a wry sense of humor, and a strong moral compass, that's important in the story. Not all readers find her likeable, but I sure do.

It's New Years Eve and Katey and her friend Evelyn Ross are broke, but determined to have a good time. They have \$3 between them and their plan is to stretch it as far as it will go, so they head to a Greenwich Village hotspot to see what excitement they can find. If you're picturing a 1930s *Sex in the City*, you're getting it right. But the hotspot is pretty lame... until a man named Tinker Gray walks in. He's handsome, sophisticated, he's a banker, he's obviously loaded.

On that night, Katey enters Tinker's world and a whole new world of her own. She's already ambitious, striving to make her way in the man's world of publishing, but she soon finds an unlikely but comfortable place among the smart set, collecting friends with names like Dicky,



Bitsy, and Peaches, attending parties that feel straight out of *The Great Gatsby*, frequenting jazz clubs, and visiting suites at The Plaza. The period detail is fantastic: you feel like you're *there*, scurrying through the glittering streets of 1938 Manhattan after midnight.

[MUSIC]

[6:00]

Rules of Civility feels familiar, in that it channels old favorites—*The Great Gatsby*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* for starters—yet it feels new, in no small part because it keeps surprising the reader. The story centers around old themes: wealth and privilege, envy and determination, honor and conscience, love and chance—and specifically, how one unexpected meeting or impulsive decision can change the course of your entire life. It's about both coming into your own and reinventing yourself, even when it's hard, and even when it hurts. And importantly, it's about how things—and people—are not always what they seem.

If you like the sound of a good literary novel that probes human nature and yet also tempts you to keep reading way past your bedtime—add this to your list, pronto. If you enjoyed *A Gentleman in Moscow*, definitely give *Rules* a try. But if *Gentleman* wasn't for you, I encourage you to give this one a try anyway. It moves a little faster, and is a little less interior than Towles's more recent novel.

In short, if you're looking for an unputdownable literary novel about Manhattan, reinvention, and the machinations of fate... *Rules of Civility* may be the next great book you're looking for.

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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Share your thoughts on *Rules of Civility* with me on Twitter @AnneBogel, that is Anne with an E, B as in books O-G-E-L or on Instagram find me there @AnneBogel and @WSIRN

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Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading." Happy reading, everyone.