

Our Ocean in Distress

By Susan Toms

What can we do?

Have you seen the video of the sea turtle with the plastic straw lodged in her nose? Or the whale that dies after swallowing 80 plastic bags? If this doesn't make you sick, then read some of the statistics:

- Researchers predict that by 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish.
- More than 500 million plastic straws are used each day in the US, and most are not recycled.
- There are more micro plastics in the ocean than stars in the Milky Way.
- Eight million metric tons of plastic are dumped into the ocean every year, which is equivalent to dumping a full garbage truck every minute.
- One hundred billion plastic bags are thrown away every year.

There are a few simple things we can do that will possibly save a sea creature's life and help to protect this fragile ecosystem where we live:

- Say "No" to the plastic straws and stirrers. Encourage your local restaurants and coffee shops to provide these "on request."
- Use your own reusable bottle. Besides reducing plastic waste, you will avoid ingesting the harmful chemicals from plastics.
- Use your own reusable shopping bags. Plastic bags do *not* go in the recycling containers because they clog the machinery at the recycling plant. Thank Lidl for charging for bags; this encourages us to be more mindful.
- Reduce the use of plastic foam and plastic cutlery by planning ahead for alternatives. (*Editor's note:* It's actually not Styrofoam that's the offender in this case. Manufactured by the Dow Chemical Company, the name-brand product Styrofoam is used in construction projects and is never made into the shape of a plate, cup or disposable cooler.)

What positive actions are others taking?

- There is a possible jail sentence or \$38,000 fine in Kenya for using, selling or producing a plastic bag.
- In the UK, there is a tax on plastic bags and a plan to eliminate *all* plastic within 25 years.
- Zimbabwe has a total ban on plastic foam.
- Montreal, New Delhi, and four states in Australia ban plastic bags.
- Malibu, California, which has a beautiful ocean area like ours, bans the distribution and use of single-use plastic straws, stirrers and utensils.
- France just announced a total ban on plastic cups, plates, bags and utensils.
- In Rwanda, using a plastic bag can earn you a jail sentence.
- California is the first state to ban plastic bags and plastic foam.

There are many other places in our state, country, and world that are trying to make positive changes in our plastic habit. If each of us can become more aware of our individual habits, we can make a difference. We may not be able to change the world, but we can change some of our own habits. As you toss another piece of plastic in the trash, think of where it may end up. Hopefully, it won't make its way to the ocean to damage our precious marine life.

We appreciate the bountiful nature in Pine Knoll Shores with the beautiful beaches, warm ocean and maritime forest. Let's encourage each other to do our part to protect our ocean and the fragile habitat for marine life.

Sources used in writing this article: *Ocracoke Observer*, National Public Radio ("Here and Now"), Global Citizen (globalcitizen.org) and sustainablebrands.com.

Book Talk

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles
Scribner, 2017

Reviewed by Ken Wilkins

Count Alexander ("Sasha") Ilyich Rostov has become a "former person" in Soviet Russia, but because of a pro-revolutionary poem he wrote in 1913 is spared the death penalty or a camp sentence. Instead, he is committed to house arrest in the Hotel Metropol in Moscow. This was in 1922, and he had already lived in the hotel for nearly four years. Discounting the infinitesimally small odds of such a punishment—we really do have to suspend disbelief—*A Gentleman in Moscow* is a good read with a number of levels to explore.

A word about the structure of the book: Each chapter's name begins with the letter A, and the timeline of the plot follows an accordion-like schedule. By this I mean that the first chapter is the day Rostov is sentenced, the second is one day after, next two days after, then five days, 10 days, three weeks, six weeks, three months, continuing to double up to 16 years after his sentence. At this point the timeline reverses itself and each chapter reduces the interval between by half, leading up to the furious days prior to the ending, 33 years after the sentence. Don't worry, no spoiler here.

The story is of how the suave, educated Rostov manages to adapt to life in the Metropol, never being allowed to leave it. He has the benefit of money he has stashed away, but more importantly he is able to develop relationships with multiple characters, both within the hotel and without. A KGB agent even has regular dinner/movie dates with him in order to pick his brain about the west. Again, almost certainly this never would have happened. Former people were rounded up and sent to the camps or simply put up against a wall and shot. Osip Ivanovich Glebnikov, the KGB man, even says that it is easier to keep up with former people "when you place them in the ground."

Rostov meets Nina Kolikova, a precocious nine-year old imp who possesses a passkey and knowledge of the hotel's back passages that is unsurpassed. The count enjoys her company and keeps up with her as she grows. She buys into Soviet Communist ideology and leaves Moscow as a young adult to help with the collectivization of agriculture. Nina returns to the hotel, disillusioned with the system, as her husband has been arrested and sentenced to five years in a labor camp, part of the infamous Gulag. She surprises Rostov and leaves her very young daughter with him while she settles herself near the camp, promising to return in a month or so to collect Sofia. Of course, she never comes back, and Rostov becomes Sofia's de facto father.

The rest of the novel turns on Sofia's upbringing, her development into a concert pianist, and Rostov's further adaptation to his circumstances. Cameo appearances are made by historical figures such as Nikita Khrushchev and Harrison Salisbury. A love story percolates through the pages, seemingly in the background. There's even a little spying.

Towles' style is as smooth as his protagonist's, and the book moves almost on its own. *A Gentleman in Moscow* provides a nice précis of the first 40 years of Soviet history, and is worth the read just for that. The twists and surprise ending will keep the reader's interest. At its root, however, this is a novel of adaptation to circumstances. The question asked is not why certain things happen, but rather how are we to respond to events that happen and are out of our control. How do you answer that?



**Yield to pedestrians in a crosswalk.
It's the courteous thing to do—and it's the law.**