

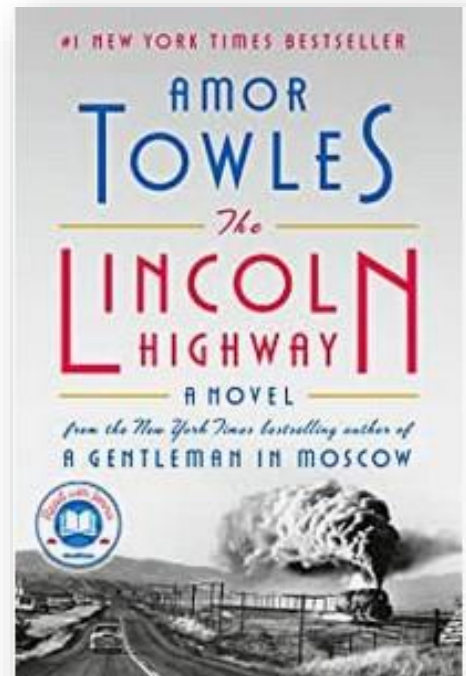


# Book of the Month

## ***The Lincoln Highway* by Amor Towles**

**Book Review by Sue Minchew, Board of Trustees, Starkville-Oktibbeha Public Library**

Published in 2021 and his 3<sup>rd</sup> novel, *The Lincoln Highway*, by Amor Towles was named the best novel of the year by Amazon and listed among the top 10 best books of 2021 by the New York Times. Jenna Bush Hager in her Read with Jenna Book Club said of the novel: “Not only is it one of the most beautifully written books I have ever picked up, it’s a story about hope, friendship and companionship in a time when we need it so much.” Although the novel has, indeed, garnered great critical reviews, it nonetheless, has its detractors as well with some readers calling it “boring” or “tedious.” It is, admittedly, quite a departure from Towles’ previous novel *A Gentleman in Moscow*, a universal favorite and a huge best seller. In an online interview Towles said that he deliberately went in a totally different direction with his latest novel. While *A Gentleman in Moscow* took place in a turbulent time in Russia, spanned 30 years, and was entirely inside a posh Russian hotel with a mature, incarcerated aristocratic main character, *The Lincoln Highway* is set in the very calm 1950’s (1954 to be exact), spans just 10 days, and takes the reader on a journey across America from Nebraska to New York City with three teenage boys and an eight-year-old boy. Both novels do begin rather slowly but build speed and interest. I confess that I had read about 50 pages before I found the latest novel really absorbing. At that point, however, it became hard to put down. It is a somewhat challenging read with eight different points of view. Towles innovatively begins with chapter 10, ending with chapter 1, perhaps to mirror the 10 day trip. A coming of age novel, it has an episodic structure which has been compared to *Huckleberry Finn* and to Homer’s *The Odyssey*, in which Ulysses wandered for 10 years before finding his way home.



The novel begins with the return home of 18-year-old Emmett Watson to his Nebraska farm after serving 15 months in a Kansas juvenile work camp for involuntary manslaughter. (He had accidentally killed a bully during a fist fight.) As the warden, who has driven Emmett home, prepares to leave, he says to Emmett's neighbor, "I don't need to tell you what a fine young man he is. I was just telling him . . . that having paid his debt to society, he's got his whole life ahead of him." But what a life it is! Emmett's father has died, the farm is being foreclosed, his mother abandoned the family when Emmett was only 8, and Emmett now has the responsibility of his eight-year-old brother Billy. Undaunted, however, he plans for him and Billy to go to Texas and build houses. Billy, a very brainy child, insists that they travel instead to California to find their long-lost mother. He has concluded, based on a series of post cards that she had sent them, that she is in San Francisco. He also believes that she will be at a certain San Francisco park on the Fourth of July to witness the spectacular fireworks display since she had always loved fireworks. Emmett agrees to travel there, but as they prepare to embark on their journey in Emmett's Studebaker (for which he had paid with summer work), they are shocked to discover that two of Emmett's friends from the work camp, Wooly and Duchess, had stowed away in the trunk of the warden's car, and the two stowaways propose a different plan. They advocate driving to New York to retrieve Wooly's substantial trust fund money, which they can divide three ways. Emmett and Billy can then pursue their dream of going to California to find their mother and to flip houses. They can even travel on the Lincoln Highway (Billy's dream), which originates in New York City, all the way across the country to San Francisco. Emmett and Billy agree to the plan and thus begins a saga that includes many twists and turns as the young men encounter both good and evil characters along the way; Emmett and Billy even ride the rails for a time after Duchess "borrows" Emmett's car.

The narrative perspective changes with each chapter. Although Towles uses eight different points of view, he keeps the focus primarily on Emmett, Duchess, and Wooly. It is interesting that he uses the third person perspective for all but two of the characters. Only Duchess and Sally have first person narratives. Why them? Sally, the young girl Emmett's age who lives on the adjacent farm, has taken care of Billy for a while. Very independent and capable, she has also taken care of her father and brothers since her mother died. In an interview, Towles expressed great fondness for her, saying that she was based somewhat on his own grandmother, a tough, take-charge Midwesterner herself. Sally is also a forerunner of the women of the women's liberation movement of the 1960's. Although religious, she doesn't "buy" everything she hears at church or even reads in the Bible. She thinks back over a recent sermon about the story of Jesus and his disciples visiting in the home of Mary and Martha. While Martha toiled away in the kitchen, Mary sat at Jesus's feet doing nothing to help her sister. When Martha complained to Jesus, he told her, "It is Mary who has chosen the better way." Sally says that it was clear to her that men wrote the Bible. She did not believe that Jesus would "turn his back on a woman who was taking care of a household." No, she said she blamed "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and every man who's served as priest or preacher since." It is no surprise when this spunky, practical, independent woman later follows the young men to New York.

Duchess is the most flamboyant and charismatic character in the novel. He is also the most complex and the least reliable. Towles described him as a product of his upbringing. His father

was an itinerant Shakespearean actor/con man living from pillar to post. Duchess was thus exposed to the seamier side of New York, from flop houses to houses of prostitution. Although he seems to be immoral, Towles says that he actually lives by his own moral code, the frontier, wild west code of an eye for an eye. If someone has wronged him, he thinks that he or she should have to pay. At the same time, he believes that if he has wronged someone else, he owes that person recompense as well. One reviewer said that although Emmett is really the main character, it is Duchess with whom the reader at first identifies because of his first-person perspective. It is then all the more shocking when we find out what he is *really* like. It is ironic that though Duchess is more capable of evil than the other characters, he was actually the only one of the three boys who was unjustly sentenced to the work camp. It turns out that Duchess had been set up by his own father. It was also his father who had dumped him at an orphanage. We know that Duchess is determined to find his father, and with knowledge of his payback philosophy, we can only imagine what he plans to do. (It would, no doubt, be more than the whack on the head that he gave the retired and abusive camp warden Ackerly.)

Brainy, eight-year-old Billy does not have a separate point of view, but he plays a significant role in the narrative. He carries with him a juvenile book by Professor Abenathe about great heroes, some real, some fictional, from which he reads to Wooly and later Ulysses, the large black man who saves Billy from the evil Pastor John. After the encounter, Ulysses shares details of his life with Billy. He had been in the military for several years and returned home to find that his wife and child had left. He has wandered searching for them. He mentioned his belief that he was named for Ulysses S. Grant. Billy tells him that he is mistaken for he must have been named for the hero Ulysses as his life is a mirror of that great character's journey. Billy said that Duchess always wanted everyone to have a "good time." Indeed, it was Duchess who took Billy to find Professor Abernath on the 55<sup>th</sup> floor of the Empire State Building. It is an understatement to say that the Professor is just as impressed with Billy as Billy is with him.

Perhaps the character who is the most difficult to understand is Wooly; sometimes described as "not all there," he is more intelligent than he seems. Reared by wealthy parents, he has traveled in Europe and attended the "best" private schools. In fact, he was kicked out of three. His indiscretions, however, are not malevolent. In fact, he often "means well," as when he was caught driving a fire engine with the intention of finding its station house and returning it where it belonged (mistakenly thinking that it had been deserted or misplaced). In spite of his privileged upbringing, he is quite naïve and gullible. He has a sweet nature and truly cares about his friends. His generous nature is evident in his willingness to share his trust fund with them. He even gifts Billy his grandfather's watch. He must take medication, but we are never told exactly what it is or what it is for. One might speculate that he suffers from a hyperactive or other psychiatric disorder. It is comical that it is the commercials on the radio that he loves, not the stories or the music.

When my book club recently discussed the novel, it was the ending that was most talked about. It is the culmination of the 10-chapter book and the 10 day journey. We wondered whether the ending was appropriate, whether it veered too far from earlier events. One person felt that what happened was "out of character" for Emmett particularly. She said that she was "disappointed" in him. We also commented that the title of the book is somewhat ironic since

the characters never actually travel on the Lincoln Highway. I can say without giving away too much, that Emmett does promise Billy that they will travel the Lincoln Highway all the way to California and that they will begin the journey where the highway originates in Times Square. Perhaps Towles is leaving the door open for a sequel. I do highly recommend the book with the caveat that you need to be patient and not give up on it too soon. It is a journey worth taking!

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