

For the growing number of us coming to terms with this new world of self-isolation, social distancing, lockdowns and quarantine, who can help us cope with such previously unimagined restrictions on our social interactions and freedom of movement?

Did I say previously unimagined? Well I was wrong. In his wonderful 2016 book *A Gentleman in Moscow*, Amor Towles tells the story of Count Rostov, sentenced by a revolutionary tribunal to remain forever in the Metropol hotel or face execution. Over decades of confinement, as his physical world progressively shrinks, his personal world flourishes. This is a glorious, heart-warming, life-affirming tale of a man out of his time, coming to terms with changes for which nothing in his previous life could have prepared him. His resilience, humour and good manners, as well the kindness of others, is a celebration of the individual's ability to triumph over confinement. To adapt yet remain true to oneself. Above all, it is about the importance of generosity of spirit in hard times and dignity in adversity.

I read this pre-pandemic and even in those happier times I felt a sense of loss when I turned the last page and had to say goodbye to the Count and his/my many friends in the Metropol. So, whilst this is a beautifully written book for our times, even if set almost a century ago in a state that no longer exists, maybe getting through our times will be a long haul, calling for a series rather than a single tale, no matter how wonderful.

P G Wodehouse is of course the author many turn to in adversity. With dozens and dozens of titles to choose from there's plenty to keep you going, including several series (Jeeves and Wooster, Blandings Castle, Mr Mulliner, The Oldest Member, Psmith and my personal favourite, Uncle Fred). Timeless tales of well meaning, erudite, often silly people who have good hearts and usually far more money and time than they know what to do with. A cynic might say once you've read one, you've read them all but I think that's unfair and anyway, with such superb writing, why wouldn't you want to return again and again to such reassuringly unchanging sunny uplands where nothing truly horrible ever really happens? There is a reason why Wodehouse books have long been the most popular choice in prison libraries.

And if your current world too has suddenly, temporarily shrunk to little more than four walls and a window and is beginning to feel a tad claustrophobic, perhaps you might care to venture out on to endless seas under high, wide skies? If so, download Patrick O'Brian's tales of Captain Jack Aubrey and Surgeon/secret agent Stephen Maturin.

Written over a thirty-year period (1969 to 1999), these clever, sometimes challenging but always entertaining stories follow two friends as they sail together during the Napoleonic Wars. They have a global army (or should that be a navy?) of devoted fans, including me. I am hugely looking forward to returning to them over the coming months.

And if the sea, and a ship-board diet which includes weevilly biscuit and doughy puddings that rejoice in names like 'drown'd baby' make you feel slightly queasy, how about sun, good wine, great food and the occasional murder in Sicily with grumpy epicure Inspector Montalbano? This is a series of detective stories written by Andrea Camilleri, but ones which concentrate as much (as does Montalbano himself) on consuming fine lunches as solving vile crimes. Amusing and atmospheric, they make the imaginary town of Vigata in which they are set as real as the world outside that window. And make you think about ordering in pasta!

Enjoy!