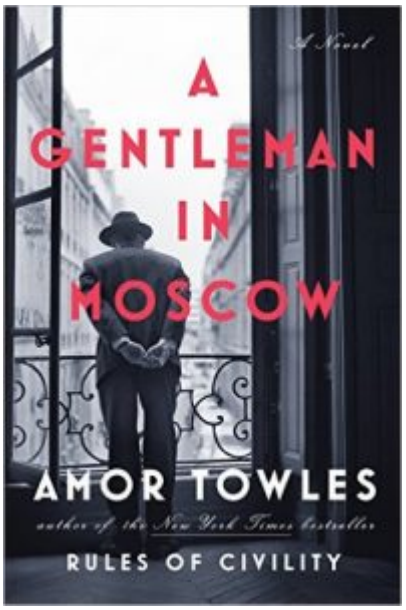
One-line book reviews: Immigrants find their way in 3 novels

By Kim Wyatt

What makes one leave his or her home? What makes one stay? Three novels convey powerfully the effects in our lives of borders created by political forces and those we create in our own minds.



"A Gentleman in Moscow"

By Amor Towles

480 pages, Viking

An enchanting spell about Mother Russia cast in tumultuous times.

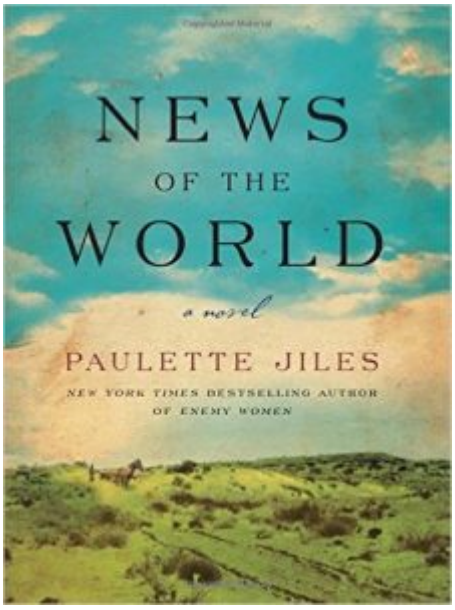
In 1922, Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov received a life sentence for writing a poem. An aristocrat, Rostov was sentenced by a Bolshevik tribunal to house arrest at the elegant Metropol Hotel near Red Square. A man of charm, wealth and wit, he accepts his fate and makes the best of it, while the Soviet machine presses on outside the gilded doors.

“A Gentleman in Moscow” is a sophisticated romp for those who like their entertainment full-bodied. History, love affairs and letters are steeped in humor, and word play, imagery, allusion, metaphor and simile are tropes on full display. I imagine a mustache-twirling narrator who, although melodramatic, is never condescending to a captivating cast of characters: a smart seamstress, temperamental chef, seductive actress and earnest writers, naturally, add dimension and verve to this charming novel. Punctuation, at this time in Russia, matters: Union meetings turn into melees over word choice, exclamation points issue from cannons, and treatise hang on a comma—this is a world I understand and adore, and made me laugh out loud.

The count’s friendship with a little girl, Nina, an occasional prisoner in the hotel due to her father’s travel, is the spark that fires up the story and leads to its somewhat satisfying resolution. Occasionally, I wondered why the count never left the hotel; but the world within was so elegantly rendered, I might just stay myself to enjoy a 1912 San Lorenzo Barolo rather than battle Siberian snow.

The winter equivalent of a beach book, “A Gentleman in Moscow” is best read by the fire, wrapped in a blanket, where you can effortlessly slip into the count’s world, a magnificent hotel protected as if inside a perfectly lovely snow globe while

Russia revolts just outside the glass.



“News of the World”

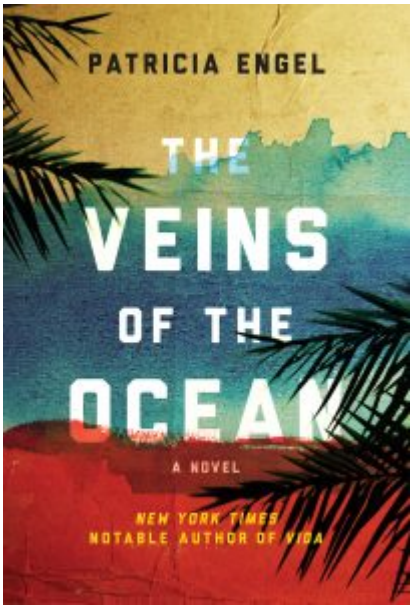
Paulette Jiles

224 pages; William Morrow

A fast-moving feminist Western that literally turns on a dime.

About one third of the way though “News of the World” by Paulette Jiles I said to my husband, “I’m reading a western!” This National Book Award finalist is the story of Capt. Jefferson Kyle Kidd, a Civil War veteran who travels through northern Texas in 1870, giving live readings from newspapers to audiences hungry for news of the world. Many people are illiterate, or don’t have access to newspapers and are eager to hear what is transpiring in New York, Europe or on the roads leading into town, where ambushes are common. On one

stop, Kidd is offered a $50 gold piece to return a young girl whose parents had been killed by Kiowa Indians to her family home in south Texas. Johanna, now 10 years old, had been raised by the Kiowa until her rescue by the Army. With reluctance on both parts, their treacherous journey begins. The return of the girl to her family is heart-wrenching, illuminating the life of female children on the plains and also the difficulty of assimilation after living with Native Americans. If you think you wouldn't like a story about a gun-toting curmudgeon and the return of an orphan to her blood family—not necessarily her best family—this book will put that to the test, showcasing the aftereffects of war, and what happens when we care for one another. I couldn't put it down.



"The Veins of the Ocean"

Patricia Engle

320 pages, Grove Press

A modern-day immigration story set in Florida and the Bermuda Triangle of family, hope and home.

What if you had the chance to start over? To break free from the shackles of family and place? Would you begin again, or remain in the past? After the death of her brother, Carlito, in Miami's South Glade Penitentiary, Columbian immigrant Reina Castillo finds herself in the Florida Keys. Reina has no hope for a better life; without her weekly visits to her brother and the grisly crimes that tether them, she is adrift. So it's fitting that she meets Nesto, a Cuban exile who is comfortable with the ocean—it is his lifeline to the wife and children who wait on the other side of the sea. Together, these two navigate the rocky shore toward redemption.

If you like complicated novels about the bonds of family, are beguiled by the strange beauty of Florida or intrigued by modern immigrant stories, consider "The Veins of the Ocean" by Patricia Engle. I was drawn in by the cadence of Reina's voice, her lens on the world, and her lack of pretense. There is a subplot involving the release of dolphins from a rickety theme park, a nod to Florida's complicated relationship with the environment, but the story is really about deliverance. When Reina meets Nesto, you have more hope for her than she has for herself. I wanted Reina to find happiness, but she has a lot to resolve, and her personal exploration, it turns out, is as deep as the sea.

Kim Wyatt is the owner of ***Bona Fide Books*** *in Meyers.*