

Books & Authors



Community Rating ☆☆☆☆☆

Hardcover

0385343663 Trade Cloth

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The Imperfectionists (2010)

Tom Rachman (Author)

Author Tom Rachman examines the lives of foreign journalists in *The Imperfectionists: A Novel*. It's been decades since the newspaper was first started in 1953 by a millionaire. Headquartered in Rome, Italy, the journalists who keep the unnamed English-language paper afloat are more interested in their personal lives than the news they plaster across the front page. Editor-in-chief Kathleen feels betrayed by her husband, even though they have an open-marriage agreement. A death changes obituary writer Arthur Gopal's life forever. Financial officer Abby regrets mixing her personal and professional lives, and a reporter who just graduated college finds he's not cut out for the newspaper business. First novel.

MAIN CHARACTERS : Kathleen, Editor, Arthur Gopal, Journalist (obituary writer), Abby, Journalist (financial officer)

SUB GENRE : Contemporary

SETTING(S) : Rome, Italy, Europe, Paris, France

SUBJECT : Newspapers, Writing, Publishing industry, Journalism, Marriage, Betrayal, Interpersonal relations, International relations, Jealousy

TIME PERIOD : 21st century AD

EXPERT PICKS

New York Times Hardcover Fiction Best-Seller List, June 13, 2010

New York Times Hardcover Fiction Best-Seller List, June 6, 2010

New York Times Hardcover Fiction Best-Seller List, May 30, 2010

New York Times Hardcover Fiction Best-Seller List, May 23, 2010

RECOMMENDED SIMILAR TITLES

13 rue Therese - Elena Mauli Shapiro

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Brodeck's Report - Philippe Claudel; John Cullen

The Case of the General's Thumb - Andrey Kurkov; George Bird

Chronic City - Jonathan Lethem

The Dead Hour - Denise Mina

Field of Blood - Denise Mina

Foreign Affairs - Alison Lurie

The Foreign Correspondent: A Novel - Alan Furst

French Lessons - Ellen Sussman

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo - Stieg Larsson; Reg Keeland

The Incident Report - Martha Baillie

Nemesis - Philip Roth

The New Republic - Lionel Shriver

The Once and Future Con - Peter Guttridge

Sunset Park - Paul Auster

The Uncoupling - Meg Wolitzer

Zoo Station - David Downing

Gale Document Number: GALE|M1300166775

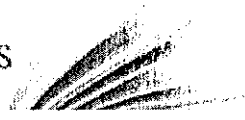
Gale Database: *What Do I Read Next?*, 2013

SOURCE CITATION : "The Imperfectionists." 2013. [Books & Authors](http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/start.do?p=BN&u=gale). Gale. Gale Internal User. 26 Feb 2013 <<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/start.do?p=BN&u=gale>>

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Books & Authors

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Tom Rachman

Birth Date : 1974

Place of Birth : United Kingdom, London

Nationality: Canadian

Occupation : Novelist

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Personal Information

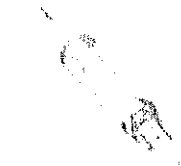
Career

Writings

Media Adaptors

Sidelights

Related Information



about this author

Personal Information:

Born 1974, in London, England. **Education:** Attended University of Toronto; Columbia University, M.A. **Addresses:** Home: London, England.

Career Information:

Journalist and writer. Associated Press, New York, NY, editor, foreign correspondent, 1998-2008; International Herald Tribune, Paris, France, editor, 2006-08.

Writings:

- *The Imperfectionists: A Novel*. Dial Press (New York, NY), 2010.

Media Adaptors:

American actor Brad Pitt has bought the production rights for *The Imperfectionists*.

Sidelights:

Tom Rachman is a London-born writer and journalist whose varied career has taken him around the world. He studied cinema at the University of Toronto and completed a master's degree in journalism at Columbia University. He subsequently worked as an editor at the foreign desk of the Associated Press in New York. This job took him on reporting trips to India and Sri Lanka. In 2002 he became an Associated Press correspondent in Rome, which led him to destinations including Japan, South Korea, Turkey, and Egypt. From 2006 to 2008, he worked for the *International Herald Tribune* in Paris, but in 2008 he quit journalism altogether to pursue writing fiction full time. Rachman's debut work, *The Imperfectionists: A Novel*, was published in 2010. *The Imperfectionists* is a fictionalized and satirical take on the world of reporting, based on Rachman's personal experiences in the field. It has received a great deal of publicity and high praise. American actor Brad Pitt was so impressed with the novel that he bought the production rights for the book and plans to adapt it for film. In an interview with Scott Butki on *Blogcritics*, Rachman expressed his goal in producing the novel: "To write a novel that would captivate readers, that would convey a little of my perspective, and that would capture an extraordinary period in the media. But, above all, I wanted to produce a great read--something that, whether you love newspapers or couldn't care less about them, contains tales to grip you." In an interview posted on Rachman's home page, he stated: "I worked for most of my professional life in journalism. ... The depiction of journalism in *The Imperfectionists* is accurate and offers an inside view of how the news is produced. But the characters and stories are all fictional."

The Imperfectionists is a humorous novel that chronicles the happenings at a struggling English-language newspaper based in Rome. Readership is dwindling, and the paper is struggling financially. The writers and editors of the unnamed paper are quite a hodgepodge of characters, and the novel is told in episodes that delve into each of their lives in turn. Readers encounter the lazy obituary writer Arthur Gopal; desperate business writer Hardy Benjamin; the lonely, older copy editor Ruby Zaga, who looks for affection wherever she can get it; and the washed-up and depressed Lloyd Burko.

Reviewing the work, Christopher Buckley, a contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*, awarded the book such high praise that, according to Rachman, following the publication of the review, he began receiving a great deal of attention. Buckley stated: "This first novel by Tom Rachman ... is so good I had to read it twice simply to figure out how he pulled it off. The novel is alternately hilarious and heart-wrenching, and it's assembled like a Rubik's Cube. I almost feel sorry for Rachman, because a debut of this order sets the bar so high." Buckley also noted: "I don't mean to make the book sound overcomplicated or in any way challenging to read. It isn't, but it's so intricately constructed you may find yourself skipping back and forth to connect the dots and assemble the pieces of the puzzle."

Louis Bayard, a contributor to *Washington Post Book World*, commented: "Rachman is a fine observer and a funny writer--and a writer who knows how to be funny in character." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor praised the book: "Rachman's ability to create a diverse group of fully formed individuals is remarkable. ... Some are instantly sympathetic, others hard to like. Each is vivid and compelling in his or her own way." D.J. Taylor, a contributor to the London *Guardian*, put forth: "Anyone who has ever spent time in newspaperland will recognise *The Imperfectionists*' high degree of authenticity. So--you hope--will quite a few people beyond it. The citadel may be crumbling, but the righteousness of the defenders, miraculously, endures." *Spectator* contributor Christian House said: "Ultimately, this fine debut focuses on the bittersweet inevitability of the twilight. The impermanence of passions and worries is the refrain." *Library Journal* contributor Sally Bissell stated: "This polished, sophisticated debut can be relished in one sitting or read piecemeal as a satisfying series of vignettes." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called it a "zinger of a debut," and *Star Tribune* contributor Laurie Hertzell described the work as "funny, poignant and generous, a love letter to the deeply flawed people who toil away in crumbling newsrooms." *Christian Science Monitor* contributor Yvonne Zipp commented: "What is truly memorable about *The Imperfectionists* is the way that Rachman uses the structure of his novel to give meaning to his insecure, scrabbling characters."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Christian Science Monitor*, June 15, 2010, Yvonne Zipp, review of *The Imperfectionists: A Novel*.
- *Denver Post*, May 9, 2010, "All the Dark Comedy That's Fit to Print," review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 11.
- *Economist*, May 15, 2010, "Inky Fingers; New Fiction," p. 91.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, June 18, 2010, "Summer Reads Head to Hollywood," p. 19; June 25, 2010, "The Hot First Novel That Wowed Brad Pitt," p. 79.
- *Europe Intelligence Wire*, March 26, 2010, "A Sense of Character," review of *The Imperfectionists*; March 26, 2010, "That's the End of the News," review of *The Imperfectionists*; March 27, 2010, "Read All about It," review of *The Imperfectionists*; April 1, 2010, "An Amusing Insight into Journalism," review of *The Imperfectionists*; May 1, 2010, review of *The Imperfectionists*.
- *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), June 3, 2010, Elizabeth Renzetti, "An Ink-Stained Payday," review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 1; June 5, 2010, Kevin Chong, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 7.
- *Guardian* (London, England), April 10, 2010, D.J. Taylor, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 11.
- *Guelph Mercury* (Guelph, Ontario, Canada), September 21, 2010, "Jane Urquhart, Doug Coupland on Long List for Giller Prize," p. 10.
- *Hamilton Spectator*, September 21, 2010, "Giller List Buzz," p. 14.
- *International Herald Tribune*, April 30, 2010, "The Unbearable Oddness of Newspaper Folk," review of *The Imperfectionists*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 1, 2009, review of *The Imperfectionists*.

- *Library Journal*, October 1, 2009, Barbara Hoffert, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 58; January, 2010, Sally Bissell, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 92.
- *Maclean's*, June 28, 2010, "On the Secret to Writing a Bestseller, the Pressure of Success and Selling Movie Rights to Brad Pitt: Novelist Tom Rachman in Conversation with Anne Kingston," p. 14, author interview.
- *National Post*, May 8, 2010, Janet Maslin, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 15.
- *New Yorker*, May 3, 2010, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 77.
- *New York Times*, May 6, 2010, "Hopscotching the World in Headlines," review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 1.
- *New York Times Book Review*, May 2, 2010, Christopher Buckley, "The Paper," review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 1; May 9, 2010, "Editors' Choice: Recent Books of Particular Interest," p. 22.
- *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 2, 2010, "An Artful Look inside a Newspaper," review of *The Imperfectionists*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, November 30, 2009, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 25.
- *Record*, September 21, 2010, "Urquhart, Coupland Named on Long List for Giller Prize," p. 4.
- *Spectator*, August 7, 2010, Christian House, "A Choice of First Novels," review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 32.
- *Star Tribune*, June 20, 2010, Laurie Hertz, "Tom Rachman's Debut Novel about a European Newspaper Is Delightful," review of *The Imperfectionists*.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, April 9, 2010, Ed Cumming, review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 21.
- *Toronto Star*, June 13, 2010, "Ink-Stained Wretches, Fiction; a Debut Novel from an Ex-Reporter Is Earning Applause from Newsroom Denizens Everywhere," review of *The Imperfectionists*, p. 6.
- *Tulsa World*, May 23, 2010, "Perfect Portrait of an 'Imperfect' World," review of *The Imperfectionists*.
- *USA Today*, May 20, 2010, "Book Buzz: What's New on the List and in Publishing," p. 04.
- *Washington Post Book World*, May 1, 2010, Louis Bayard, review of *The Imperfectionists*.

ONLINE

- *Blogcritics*, <http://blogcritics.org/> (May 29, 2010), Scott Butki, author interview.
- *Three Guys One Book*, <http://threeguysonebook.com/> (December 6, 2010), review of *The Imperfectionists*.
- *Tom Rachman Home Page*, <http://tomrachman.com> (December 6, 2010).

OTHER

- *All Things Considered* (radio transcript), August 19, 2010, Robert Siegel, "Short Stories to Die For: The Art of the 'Obituaries,'" author interview.*

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2011

Gale Database: *Contemporary Authors Online*

Gale Document Number: GALE|H21528616

Source Citation: "Tom Rachman." 2011. *Books & Authors*. Gale. Gale Internal User 26 Feb 2013 <<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/start.do?p=BNA&u=gale>>

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Published Reviews:

Title :

Rachman, Tom. The Imperfectionists

Source :

Library Journal 134.16 .: pg.58(1)

Document Type :

Book review

Book review, bookreview1.

Rachman, Tom. The Imperfectionists. Dial. Feb. 2010. 320p. ISBN 978-0-385-34366-4. \$25.

Now here's a tale that hits home: AP foreign correspondent Rachman crafts the story of a failing English-language newspaper based in Rome, where he now lives.

Gale Document Number:GALE|A210099246 [Hide](#)

Title :

The Imperfectionists

Source :

Publishers Weekly 256.48 .: pg.25(1)

Document Type :

Book review

Book review, bookreview2.

* The Imperfectionists Tom Rachman. Dial, \$25 (288p) ISBN 978-0385-34366-4

In his zinger of a debut, Rachman deftly applies his experience as foreign correspondent and editor to chart the goings-on at a scrappy English-language newspaper in Rome. Chapters read like exquisite short stories, turning out the intersecting lives of the men and women who produce the paper--and one woman who reads it religiously, if belatedly. In the opening chapter, aging, dissolute Paris correspondent Lloyd Burko pressures his estranged son to leak information from the French Foreign Ministry, and in the process unearths startling family fare that won't sell a single edition. Obit writer Arthur Gopal, whose "overarching goal at the paper is indolence," encounters personal tragedy and, with it, unexpected career ambition. Late in the book, as the paper buckles, recently laid-off copy editor Dave Belling seduces the CFO who fired him. Throughout, the founding publisher's progeny stagger under a heritage they don't understand. As the ragtag staff faces down the implications of the paper's tilt into oblivion, there are more than enough sublime moments, unexpected turns and sheer inky wretchedness to warrant putting this on the shelf next to other great newspaper novels. (Apr.)

Gale Document Number:GALE|A213957707 [Hide](#)

Title :

Rachman, Tom: THE IMPERFECTIONISTS

Source :

Kirkus Reviews . .: pg.(1)

Document Type :

Book review

Book review, bookreview3.

Rachman, Tom THE IMPERFECTIONISTS Dial (Adult FICTION) \$\$25.00 Feb. 1, 2010 ISBN: 978-0-385-34366-4

An English-language newspaper headquartered in Rome brings together a strongly imagined cast of characters in journalist Rachman's first novel.

Lloyd Burko used to be a stringer living in Paris. He's still in Paris, but now he's just an impoverished former journalist who pretends to have a computer and whose latest wife has moved in with the guy across the hall. Arthur Gopal is languishing as an obituary writer until a death in his own life enables his advancement by erasing his humanity. Hardy Benjamin is a business writer, savvy and knowledgeable about corporate finance but utterly hapless in romance. What they have in common is the never-named paper, whose history is doled out in brief chapters beginning in 1953. The novel's rich representation of expatriate existence surely benefits from the author's experiences as an AP correspondent in Rome and an editor at the International Herald Tribune in Paris; his thoroughly unglamorous depictions of newsroom cubicles and editorial offices will resonate with anyone who's had a corporate job. But, while the newspaper is its unifying factor, the narrative's heart beats with the people who work there. Rachman's ability to create a diverse group of fully formed individuals is remarkable. Characters range from a kid just out of college who learns the hard way that he doesn't want to be a reporter, to an Italian diplomat's widow. Some are instantly sympathetic, others hard to like. Each is vivid and compelling in his or her own way. The individual stories work well independently, even better as the author skillfully weaves them together. Cameo appearances become significant when informed by everything the reader already knows about a character who flits in and out of another's story. The novel isn't perfect. The interpolated chapters about the paper's past aren't very interesting; the final entry ends with a ghastly shock; and the postscript is too cute. Nevertheless, it's a very strong debut.

Funny, humane and artful.

Gale Document Number:GALE|A214551987 [Hide](#)

Title :

Rachman, Tom. The Imperfectionists

Source :

Library Journal 135.1 : pg.92(1)

Document Type :

Book review

Book review, bookreview4.

* Rachman, Tom. The Imperfectionists. Dial: Random. Feb. 2010. 288p. ISBN 978-0-385-34366-4. \$25. F

At the Caffè Greco in Rome, circa 1953, Atlanta financier Cyrus Ott makes an offer that can't be refused. He will establish an international English-language newspaper to be run in Italy by Betty, the woman he once loved, and her husband, Leo, a hack writer for a Chicago daily. Within the building's walls an entire history of the print news business plays out over a 50-year span as writers, editors, and accountants grow in professional stature, squander their reputations, and fade into obsolescence. A former editor for the Paris branch of the International Herald Tribune, Rachman makes outstanding use of his credentials to place readers in the center of a newsroom so palpable one can hear the typewriters clacking and feel the uncomfortable undercurrent of professional jealousy among the writers jockeying for position. Navigating the minefields of relationships, parenthood, loneliness, and failure, each realistically imperfect character, developed through intimate, candid detail, becomes a story unto himself(or herself). VERDICT With its evocative Italian setting and its timely handling of an industry in flux, this polished, sophisticated debut can be relished in one sitting or read piecemeal as a satisfying series of vignettes linked by historical references to the Ott family empire. Buy it, read it, talk it up. [See Prepub Alert, LJ 10/1/09.]--Sally Bissell, Lee Cty. Lib. Syst., Ft. Myers, FL

Gale Document Number:GALE|A217510750 [Hide](#)

Title :

The Imperfectionists

Source :

The New Yorker 86.11 ,: pg.77(1)

Document Type :

Book review

Book review, bookreview5.

This acute debut portrays the world of neurotic journalists--"as touchy as cabaret performers and as stubborn as factory machinists"--at an English-language paper in Rome. Vignettes introduce us to various characters: a naive Cairo stringer; an obituary writer unable to address the death of his daughter; a canny business writer blind to the scam in her love life; and a corrections editor who is crusading in the office but kindly outside of it. The ironies may sound obvious, but Rachman, a former editor for the International Herald Tribune, paints the characters' small dramas and private disappointments with humanity and humor. Throughout, italicized asides take us through fifty years of the "stolidly black-and-white" paper's history, from heyday to decline.

Title :

Paperback Row

Source :

The New York Times Book Review . ,Arts and Entertainment: pg.20(L)(1)

Document Type :

Book review

Book review, bookreview6.

THE IMPERFECTIONISTS, by Tom Rachman(Dial, \$15.)This intricate first novel is built around the world of neurotic journalists -- "as touchy as cabaret performers and as stubborn as factory machinists" -- at an unnamed English-language newspaper in Rome. Rachman, a London-born journalist who has lived and worked all over the world, devotes each chapter to a particular staff member (or, in one case, a reader), from the editor in chief on down to a copy editor. "The novel is alternately hilarious and heart-wrenching, and it's assembled like a Rubik's Cube," Christopher Buckley wrote in the Book Review.

Gale Document Number:GALE|A246038446 [Hide](#)



PHOTO: © ALESSANDRA RIZZO

TOM RACHMAN was born in London and raised in Vancouver. A graduate of the University of Toronto and the Columbia School of Journalism, he has been a foreign correspondent for the Associated Press, stationed in Rome. From 2006 to 2008, he worked as an editor at the *International Herald Tribune* in Paris. He lives in London.

A Conversation Between

MALCOLM GLADWELL and TOM RACHMAN

Malcolm Gladwell has been a staff writer with *The New Yorker* since 1996. He is the author of *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (2000), *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005), and *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008), all of which were number one *New York Times* bestsellers. His latest book, *What the Dog Saw* (2009), is a compilation of stories published in *The New Yorker*. From 1987 to 1996, he was a reporter with *The Washington Post*. He was born in England, grew up in rural Ontario, and now lives in New York City.

Malcolm Gladwell: You and I, it turns out, have more than a few things in common. We were both born in Britain and moved to Canada as boys. Both our fathers are professors, and our mothers are therapists. We both went to the University of Toronto, and we both moved to the United States after graduation to work in the newspaper business. We're the same person! Does this mean my love for *The Imperfectionists* is no more than a kind of displaced narcissism?

Tom Rachman: I confess—we are in fact the same person. I hadn't wanted you to learn this in such a public forum, but I am your double. Doppelgänger or not, I'm delighted you liked the book. And in a fruitless attempt to pretend we're actually different people, let me ask you something about your early days in newspapers. When I left Toronto and entered journalism in the late 1990s, I had many notions about the news business, nearly all of them wrong, as it turned out. How about you? Was journalism what you expected?

MG: Oh, no. It was a complete surprise. I was stunned by the pace of newspapers: by the fact that something could happen at four o'clock in the afternoon and a reporter could make a dozen phone calls, track down every major player, and write 2,500 words on the subject—all by six o'clock. I spent my first six months at *The Washington Post* with my jaw open. What was it you found surprising?

TR: I had pictured journalism as I'd seen it in the most ennobling films, where the reporter battles for the truth, propelled by conviction, and is triumphant. There are journalists who fit that ideal. But in my experience, lesser drives were more commonly the engine: an urgent need for copy and quotes, the terror of enraging one's irritable bosses, the desire for advancement or for prestigious postings. My own career started in New York at the Associated Press, a fast-paced news agency where we rarely had time for deep reporting. We might be expected to work on a dozen separate subjects in a week without error. One had time to cope, but rarely to excel. And although we were immersed in cataclysmic subjects, one's day was more likely dominated by the mood of the person seated at the next desk. This was something that struck me from the outset—the contrast between the grand and the human—and it was a theme I tried to explore in this novel.

MG: I have to say that this was part of what I loved about *The Imperfectionists*. Anytime you read a novel or see a film that is about the world you inhabit, you're always on your toes. (I know lawyers who roll their eyes at *Law & Order*, and the only cop show on television that cops ever liked—and I'm not making this up—was *Barney Miller*.) So I have to admit I was hunting for false notes. In particular, I was bracing myself for the kind of romanticization that inevitably creeps into books or movies about the newspaper business. But it never happened. And now I see why. But here's what puzzles me. I snail found the portrait of the papers—and the journalists—to be incredibly sympathetic on some level. Is that just me? And if not, how did you manage to make a portrait of, as you say, the “lesser drives” of journalism, so generous?

TR: That's a paradox I've noticed, too: The news business held little romance for me, yet writing about it somehow stirred my affections. This applied to the characters as well. Several are tricky types, the

sorts who, had I met them in a newsroom, might have prompted me to run. But on the page, I had fondness for them. It's writing that did this. To form these characters, I tried to conceive of their motives, sentiments, disappointments; I watched them gazing unhappily into the mirror, or wincing at office slights. Writing (and reading) is a sort of exercise in empathy, I think. In life, when you encounter people, you and they have separate trajectories, each person pushing in a different direction. What's remarkable about fiction is that it places you in the uncommon position of having no trajectory. You stand aside, motives abandoned for the duration. The characters have the trajectories now, while you just observe. And this stirs compassion that, in real life, is so often obscured by our own motives.

What I wonder is whether any of this sympathy for fictional characters translates into greater sympathy for people in life. What do you think? Looking back on novels and stories you've loved, do you think they affected how you see people?

MG: Absolutely. In fact, to me this is the great virtue of fiction—well, “good” fiction. One of the most troubling consequences of online communication, for instance, is that it is polarizing. That is, when you deal with someone in such a limited way, it has the result of either making you like them a great deal more than you would otherwise (this is the foundation of Internet dating) or hate them a good deal more than you would otherwise (this is the reason blog comments are so nasty). Because you get such a limited sense of the person on the other end, you fill in the blanks with your prejudices. Fiction is the opposite kind of experience. In a good book we get an intimate and nuanced picture of someone—to the point where our own prejudices are entirely displaced (or almost entirely displaced) by the world created by the author. That's an extraordinarily important kind of social discipline: It reminds us that an important part of what it means to be human is to replace our snap judgments about people with the actual empirical evidence about themselves that they offer us. I feel that Lloyd, whom you open *The Imperfectionists* with, is a great example of this. If you were to meet him at a cocktail party, you would almost certainly form an instant dislike of him: he's a narcissistic loser, right? But after being exposed to him over the course of your novel, I developed a real sympathy for him—and I can't help but think that maybe that will give me a little more sympathy for the Lloyds of this world

when I meet them in real life. Here's my question, though: Does writing about people in that way have the same effect? If reading fiction civilizes us, does writing fiction civilize us even more?

TR: I want to say, "Yes!" But I don't know that I can. The biographies of writers are so full of misbehavior that it would be hard to correlate writing and morality. What is remarkable is how often writers and other artists produce works of moral depth, yet are accused of having been monstrous in private. Art itself can warp the artist, I think. The process involves a public exposure of what may be deeply private, and criticism can feel like a review not of mere work but of the artist's inner life. This turns some into egoists or recluses or both. Yet while painters or musicians don't necessarily have to understand others, writers of fiction must. For some, perhaps writing becomes a repository for their humanity instead of a source. They project a fictional world containing longed-for justice, resolutions that are rare in life, enemies they can punish, friends with whom they'll never bicker. When such writers leave the manuscript for the evening, all their humanity may be inked on those pages.

Yet I must add that creative work surely does affect us in edifying ways. It just feels so humanizing! In a way, this contradiction between a humane creation and an inhumane creator is something I tried to discuss in the book, notably in the Arthur Gopal chapter, when he goes to interview an ailing intellectual, Gerda Erzberger. She argues that it's not necessarily grand motives that produce grand works, and that sometimes they are the by-products of drives, such as the hunger for status. This comes up again in the form of Rich Snyder, who bullies Winston Cheung, elbows his way through life, and is breathtakingly inconsiderate. Yet he sometimes ends up with amazing stories on subjects that ought to require a caring eye. I witnessed this in journalism: I had instances when I hugely admired a reporter, found his or her prose incredibly perceptive, only to meet a person who was consumed by ambition and seemingly insensitive to the material. Not that those who achieve great things are all villains—far from it. But what role, I wondered, does ambition have in our success stories, and what effect on our happiness? It's a question I explore throughout *The Imperfectionists*. And it's a matter, I believe, that affects so many people trying to balance personal contentedness and professional aspirations, often with difficulty.

MG: I'll accept that. Yes, there is no necessary connection between the sensitivity that is required of the writer in his craft and whatever grace and sensitivity that he or she may possess as a person. Clearly there are some writers for whom the effect of being perceptive or insightful in their writing leaves little time or energy for that same quality in their own lives. But where does that leave the persistent feeling that readers have that they "know" an author after reading his works? I feel like I know you, for instance (our eerie autobiographical similarities aside), after reading *The Imperfectionists*. Is that simply an illusion? Or is it that what I think I know about you is your voice—which is, in the end, a very different thing than your character. I don't think this is a trivial issue. A good part of the reason we read fiction (or nonfiction, for that matter) is that, unconsciously or not, we want to satisfy our curiosity about the writer. My editor at *The New Yorker* always says of Adam Gopnik—whom I think is the gold standard for *New Yorker* writers—that when he explicitly writes about himself he actually tells you nothing about himself, but when he writes about something entirely different from himself he tells you everything. Hearing that made me go back and read some of my favorite Gopnik pieces again. Of course, it also made me shudder. Good lord: What on earth have I inadvertently given away about myself in my writing?

TR: That's funny. And you're right about the feeling that one "knows" writers. It's their sensibility we're absorbing, I think. Their humor, curiosities, manner of speech, perspective, even when these are embodied in characters who are radically different from them. This is the case in my book. I'm sometimes asked which of the characters in *The Imperfectionists* was based on me. None was, yet each contains aspects of me. This might seem impossible, given that the characters are so different in profile both from me and from each other: a young red-headed woman, a dissolute old cad, extroverts and introverts. There's not one type. Yet in each there are flickers of me—features that are perhaps tiny in myself but that I magnify in the novel, dropping them into personalities that are sharply at odds with mine, and watching the effects. Only, please don't ask me which features are mine! You see, I'm a private person. Perhaps like you, I shudder at the thought that my inner life might be on view. On the other hand, presumably this is one reason why people write in the first place: to declare—albeit in ornamented, storified fashion—their prospect on the world. The

great Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer once said in an interview, "The truth is if Tolstoy would live across the street, I wouldn't go to see him. I would rather read what he writes." As an admirer of Singer, I feel like I know him already. And would I cross the street to see him? Yes, absolutely. But I know what he means: The part of a writer that is available for public viewing is what's on the page. This is the truest version of themselves. Truer, in a way, than they might appear if you met them. These days, literary events, readings, interviews, and the Internet tend to thrust forward the personality of the writer. I wonder, is this sort of personal exposure a good or bad thing?

MG: You are being a tease, Tom. Just give us one little example of something of yourself that you buried in a character!

TR: I guess I opened myself up for that question! Well, the Winston Cheung character shares not only my fascination with primates but also how shipwrecked I sometimes felt in journalism, when I realized how unprepared I was for an assignment and how much was expected of me. It's a feeling you often have at a new job, I think, and you hang on till you gain competence. But if you're a reporter, the fear is particularly acute since you may be expected to write knowledgeably about something you know little about, and are expected to be correct in every detail and to be so in public for anyone to check and critique, publicize your errors, even sue you if you mess up. It's a fearful position for a young, inexperienced journalist. That fear of impending disaster was seared into me, and something I depicted in a comic key with the Winston character.

Other traits of mine in the characters are harder to tease out. For example, the affection that Arthur Gopal has for his daughter—I feel that's my affection for her, and yet I have no children. Or the loneliness of Ruby Zaga—I feel that's mine without it having been mine, without her life or her personality or her responses or situations having been mine. What happens, I think, is that you separate off a potential in yourself—perhaps even just an emotion—and place it in the petri dish of this other character and watch what becomes of it. That's why these characters feel like parts of me, though they're not in any recognizable sense me.

MG: That wasn't so hard, was it? Although I realize that it is the question that novelists always get, so I feel a little sheepish about having forced you into it. Thankfully, those of us who write nonfiction never have to answer that one (although we have our own version: Where do you get your ideas?).

I sense we are close to the end, Tom, but I wanted to ask you one more question, which might sound a little odd. But do you consider *The Imperfectionists* to be a success? I don't mean a financial or even critical success. I mean that now, when a significant amount of time has passed since you wrote it and that you have heard from all kinds of readers and that you have, no doubt, moved on to write something new, do you look back on this book and feel content? Or is there some sense in which you wish you could do it—or at least parts of it—over again? I'm guessing that the answer to that question has as much to do with your personality as it does with the book itself. (And I'll let you guess which of the two positions—the remorseful or triumphant—I tend to take.)

TR: I'm a fairly self-critical person, so I'd expect to have regrets about the book. But I'm satisfied with *The Imperfectionists*. It's the book I intended to write, and that is all I could hope for. Writing can so easily take the upper hand over the writer, I think, gaining its own shape and momentum, and pulling in unintended directions. That can be good; at its best, it's creativity. But if it derives from laziness or laziness, then it's a disaster. It means that the words only approximate what your mind contained. And what could be worse for a writer! I battled with this book, worked on it until I was exhausted. Finally, it was as close to what I had conceived as I was able to produce at that point in my life. Certainly, *The Imperfectionists* must contain many imperfections. But they are the best imperfections I had in me at the time! For that, I am contented.

QUESTIONS and
TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did you feel when you encountered a protagonist from one chapter in a different key somewhere else? Did these moments ever catch you by surprise?
2. Why do you think Cyrus Ott started his newspaper? Why do you think his family kept it going?
3. Do you think Hardy Benjamin made the right decision by ignoring the theft she uncovered? And which is more important in a relationship: love or honesty?
4. Is there a lesson to be learned in the story of Arthur Gopal's rise through the ranks?
5. What do you think kept Ruby Zaga in her job all those years? Is her persistence admirable?
6. At one point Herman Cohen muses: "All this has been the most extraordinary surprise; he had expected an unhappy life, yet ended up with the opposite." What do you think accounts for his happy fate? Is it luck, or something else?
7. Do you think someone like the war correspondent Rich Snyder might gain fame and recognition despite his bad behavior—or because of it? Would you rather be Snyder or Winston Cheung?
8. Do you see traits of any of the characters in people you've worked with?
9. How did the Roman setting inform the reading experience of *The Imperfectionists*? What do you think it would be like to be an expatriate?
10. What do you think the future holds for the newspaper? How has the way you receive news day-to-day changed in recent years?

Read-a-Likes



Community Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Hardcover

0385343663 Trade Cloth
9780385343664 Trade Cloth

The Imperfectionists (2010)



Field of Blood (Mina, Denise) (2005)

Wannabe journalist Patricia "Paddy" Meehan, who struggles with issues of morality, works as a copygirl



The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2008)

AWARD WINNER

This novel, published posthumously, is the first of a trilogy of crime novels set in modern-day Sweden.



Foreign Affairs (Lurie, Alison) (1984)

AWARD WINNER

Two American academics are alone in London. Virginia Miner, an Anglophile, feels as though she's come



French Lessons (2011)

In French Lessons, author Ellen Sussman tells the story of three Americans touring Paris, France. Josie,



Zoo Station (2007)

In 1939, freelance journalist John Russell is living in Berlin and trying not to cause any trouble. An



Nemesis (Roth, Philip) (2010)

Philip Roth's Nemesis tells the story of Bucky Cantor, a young man who works as a playground director

once

The Once and Future Con (2005)

Con
Frost

Freelance journalist and hapless amateur sleuth Nick Madrid and his friend Bridget Frost, a.k.a. the



The Incident Report (2009)

Martha Baillie's The Incident Report takes on the format of more than 140 short reports that recount



The Uncoupling (2011)

In the town of Stellar Plains, New Jersey, strange things are happening among the women. A carefree new



The Foreign Correspondent (2006)

In Paris in 1939, an Italian/Slavic journalist named Carlo Weisz makes his home, working as a foreign



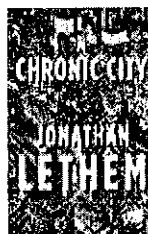
Born Yesterday: The News as a Novel (2008)

Artist, journalist, and true-crime writer Gordon Burn delivers a unique and modern novel about events



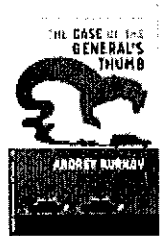
The New Republic (2012)

A man fights for popularity and success in the midst of terrorism and journalistic deadlines in this



Chronic City (2009)

Chase Insteadman was once a child star who made the world laugh in a top-rated sitcom. As of late, however,



The Case of the General's Thumb (2012)

A thumbless corpse sparks an international investigation in this suspenseful and darkly humorous mystery



Sunset Park (2010)

In Sunset Park , author Paul Auster explores how the financial meltdown of 2008 affects a group of young



Brodeck's Report (2010)

Brodeck is a shy man still struggling to piece his life back together after surviving a concentration



13, rue Therese (2011)

In Elena Maizlish's 13, rue Therese , Trevor Stratton is an American man employed by a college



The Dead Hour (2006)

Young journalist Paddy Meehan is hoping to make it off the dreaded night shift. Nightly, she listens