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The Imperfectionists by Tom Rachman

DJ Taylor on a journalists' romp



DJ Taylor
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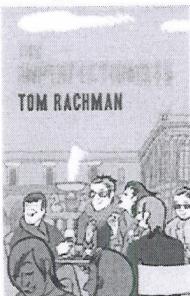
The Imperfectionists

by Tom Rachman

318pp,

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However cynically conceived, novels about journalists usually inspire some faint, emulative tic in the people who read them. Half-a-dozen late-Victorian literary men left rapt testimonies to the impact wrought on them by the scene in Thackeray's *Pendennis* in which Warrington marvels at "the great engine" of the printing press. "She never sleeps," Warrington enthuses. "She has her ambassadors in every quarter of the world . . ." If Tom Rachman's first novel has a flagrant drawback, it's that his account of some of the tribulations facing the modern newspaper man (and woman) is unlikely to send any wide-eyed recruits scampering towards what on this evidence is a deeply neurotic profession.

The particular organ that Rachman, a former International Herald Tribune staffer, has chosen for this series of dispatches from the frontline of print journalism is an English-language daily published in Rome. Something of its difficulties may be gauged from the editor's reflections: "The paper is hardly at the cutting edge of technology – it doesn't even have a website. And circulation isn't increasing. The balance sheet is a catastrophe, losses mount annually." The subscribers are "ageing and dying off" and the publisher, fey, semi-detached Oliver, seems more interested in his dog than the family trust he represents.

To move his story forwards, Rachman offers 11 representative figures, whose personal lives are intimately connected to the paper's slow decline. They include Lloyd, the seventy-something Paris correspondent, his career in terminal freefall, who tries to use his son as the source of a story about French involvement in Gaza; Arthur, the obits editor blown off track by the death of his daughter; Kathleen, the hard-as-nails editor, contemplating a fling as a means of getting back at her philandering husband; and Winston Cheung, the newly appointed Cairo stringer, constantly outfoxed by veteran rival Snyder, who says things like "Dude, let's commit some journalism." End-of-chapter asides sketch in some of the paper's history since its early 1950s founding.

All this is played out with – in most cases – a fair degree of subtlety. Lloyd discovers that his son Jerome is a secretive fantasist. Truth-seeking Kathleen learns rather more about herself than she likes. The 30 pages devoted to Herman Cohen, the ever-vigilant corrections editor ("If none of you nitwits knows what GWOT means, then why is GWOT in the paper?"), quietly uncover some of the holes in his long relationship with a supposedly glamorous friend whose complete ordinariness is apparent to everyone but Cohen.

At the same time there are drawbacks to the short-story-collection-as-novel form, particularly one set around a newspaper, where the metaphorical tide can sometimes sweep in a little too violently for comfort. Despite a fair amount of cross-referencing, desultoriness – together with the constant thought that none of this is going to end well – is only narrowly kept at bay. The parallels (or discrepancies) between the characters' careers and their private lives are sometimes a bit obtrusively picked over.

Then there is the novel's faint yet persistent resemblance to Joshua Ferris's *And So We Came to the End*, much of whose obliquity and ground-down communal spirit it shares. But these are quibbles. 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.

DJ Taylor's *At the Chime of a City Clock* is published by Constable.

FIRST NOVELS