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Hopscotching the World in Headlines

By JANET MASLIN

THE IMPERFECTIONISTS

By Tom Rachman

272 pages. Dial Press. \$25.

On an epochal day in 2007 the newspaper staff in "The Imperfectionists" must deal with a huge story. "Thankfully," Tom Rachman writes, "most of the editorial staffers are occupied piecing together copy on a shooting at Virginia Tech" when the other story, the really big one, breaks.

What's the word "thankfully" doing in a chapter titled "Gunman Kills 32 in Campus Rampage"? It's there because Mr. Rachman, a former journalist, knows and loves the myopia of his old profession, the gallows humor of its practitioners and the precariousness of the business to which they devote their lives. Armed with this knowledge and somehow free of the fashionable diffidence that too often plagues fiction about the workplace, he has written a rich, thrilling book that is both love letter to and epitaph for the newspaper world.

Mr. Rachman's transition from journalism to fiction writing is nothing short of spectacular. "The Imperfectionists" is a splendid original, filled with wit and structure so ingeniously that figuring out where the author is headed is half the reader's fun. The other half comes from his sparkling descriptions not only of newspaper office denizens but of the tricks of their trade, presented in language that is smartly satirical yet brimming with affection.

Calling "The Imperfectionists" hilarious yet heartbreaking might even pass muster with the grammar czar at the novel's unnamed newspaper, and that guy hates exaggeration. He forbids the phrase "literally jumped out of his skin" unless the "literally" is accurate. If it were, he notes, it would be front-page news.

Each chapter in "The Imperfectionists" comes with a headline and a job description. So the grammar tyrant of this Rome-based English-language newspaper, Herman Cohen, is listed as "corrections editor." And the headline for him is a beauty, mistake-wise: "Global Warming Good for Ice Creams." Each ostensible news headline turns out to be subtly germane, as in the book's opening chapter about the paper's Paris correspondent, Lloyd Burko, which is "Bush Slumps to New Low in Polls." This first section of the book isn't about a president's fortunes; it's about Lloyd's.

Lloyd occasionally turns up elsewhere, since the time span through which "The Imperfectionists" cleverly skitters is more than half a century. He's mentioned as a promising Paris correspondent and then, later, as one of the paper's stars. But in the "Bush Slumps" section he is over the hill and desperate, so worried about money that his toes clench when he hears the price of a steak dinner.

For the first time in his life he tries to fake a serious foreign-policy piece and to pad it so that it's long enough to be worth extra money. "Australia Mourns Crocodile Hunter" is the headline for the article that appears in the paper. (The book's chronology can be deduced from news hooks like this one.) Needless to say, it is not what Lloyd had in mind.

Although each chapter revolves around a different person, it would be wrong to describe this book as an elaborate set of short stories. The chapters are unified by an overarching tone, one that's filled with bonhomie but is punctuated by tough, wrenching flourishes. The trickiest of these involves a situation that's reason enough to be hooked by Mr. Rachman's storytelling: What would happen if the company's belt-tightening chief financial officer, who is "all suits and boots, eyes cold as coins" at the office, were to take a trans-Atlantic flight and find herself seated next to a male copy editor she'd just had fired? There's not a false move in the delicate drama that develops between them.

Even at its most uncomplicatedly funny, this book is carefully nuanced. The "Cairo Stringer" section, headlined "The Sex Lives of Islamic Extremists," finds an overbearing blowhard dropping in on the young writer who's trying out for the Cairo assignment, and the kid is easily overwhelmed by this bully. Upon being ordered to ask a Muslim woman in a burka — or as the blowhard puts it, that "chick" in the "coat thing" — whether she has any sexual kinks, the younger man is all but helpless.

(“Couldn’t I do a man-on-the-street with a man on the street?” he pleads.) But the stringer once studied the behavior of primates, and he knows that his visitor’s behavior resembles a baboon’s way of marking his territory. No stray detail is wasted here; the primate issue will figure startlingly in the book’s epilogue. Intermittent parts of “The Imperfectionists” are devoted to the family of Cyrus Ott, who founded the newspaper in 1953 and by 2007 is remembered by no one. By that point the paper’s publisher is Cyrus’s most useless grandson, a friendless loser who’s been sent to Rome “because Europe was artsy, which would appeal to him.” Everything about Oliver Ott, the publisher, is obliquely perfect, including the fact that even his dog, a basset hound, lives “life at sniff level” because he, like Oliver, is low to the ground. Oliver won’t read the newspaper. He won’t talk to its brisk, talented, no-nonsense female editor. He doesn’t understand why Italian food tastes more like rosemary than salt, and he particularly doesn’t understand the art collection that Cyrus amassed. That one of Cyrus’s prized possessions was a Turner painting of a sinking ship, an image that is valued and understood very differently as the family’s fortunes change, is very much part of this newspaper story too.

Just as “The Imperfectionists” is much bigger than the sum of its parts, it’s also much farther reaching than the life cycle of any particular profession. The effects of time and technology (the segments can also be dated by whether dot-matrix printers are obsolete, whether the BlackBerry is in use yet) can be felt in any personal or professional environment and will take their toll.

Mr. Rachman may write about other subjects with equal grace and ease. But this book, his marvelous first, will always seem like one from the heart.