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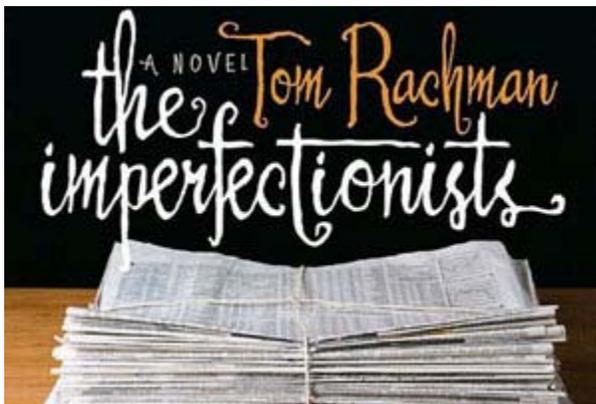
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# Tom Rachman on Journalism, Female Characters, and Brad Pitt

Aug 14 2010, 1:25 PM ET

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[The Imperfectionists](#), a tale of American expat-journo at work (or not) in Rome, came out earlier this year mostly to [reviews](#) that belie its title. Michael Kinsley, for example, [called](#) it "a book about journalists that even a non-journalist can love."

Here, author Tom Rachman, a former AP reporter and copy editor at the *International Herald Tribune*, talks about his debut novel.

**Your novel tells its story through portraits of different characters involved in one newspaper as reporters, editors, managers and readers. Was there a character you started writing who ended up on the cutting room floor (a sports writer or editor, for example)? As your writing went on, did you find yourself going back to change some of your portraits as different characters developed?**

Yes, a few characters disappeared, others materialized, the central players shifted about, elbowing for more room or receding to the background. That is my editing process. I write a rough first version,

summon my courage, and read it—it's a scary moment. Then I go at it again. And again. And again. Revision is everything for me. My early drafts are a horror show. Gradually, painstakingly, the book appears, in some ways as I had conceived, in others quite unexpected.

**How important is Rome to the book? Put another way, how do you think the story would have been different if it had been set in Paris (where you placed one of your characters, and where you worked)?**

Rome is important to my novel in the way that, say, one's house is important: you could have lived in another but the particular setting affects you, determines you in myriad small ways. The novel had to take place overseas, but I ruled out Paris because people might have assumed that the fictional paper was a veiled version of the International Herald Tribune, which it isn't. Since Rome is a city I know well, I set the book there. As the drafts piled up, it increasingly seemed that this could have happened nowhere else: like a lived-in home, Rome came to feel inevitable.

**Expats can be a notoriously detached and quirky bunch, expat journalists maybe even more so. I'm guessing your primary purpose in writing the book wasn't to spark a debate about the future of news, but do you worry that readers might get a distorted view of journalism through the expat prism?**

No, I'm not worried about that. I believe the depiction is accurate, and I have been encouraged by how many journalists have found in the book characters and scenes that recalled their own experiences. My primary aim was to write a novel that would grip readers, full of stories with thought and consequence in them. If, in writing this book, I also offered a peek into the world of news, then I'm very happy to hear it.

**You passed my acid test in writing female characters—namely, my wife really liked the book. I'm curious, though, about how women in general have responded to your depiction of Kathleen Solson, the editor-in-chief, who seems kind of scheming, superficial, and self-absorbed.**

Readers have responded favorably to the characters, showing interest and sympathy even for the difficult ones. My book contains a range of people, and there isn't a uniform image of men or of women. I'd be sorry if a reader tried to split characters up by gender—I sought something more complex than two blunt categories. The writers I admire approach characters with a level of curiosity and concern that matches what you feel toward a dear friend or close relative. You don't think of that friend as primarily, say, a 56-year-old or a female or a Scot—you respond to a totality, a person influenced by her parts but defined by none alone. Such are the characters I want to read, and the characters I aspire to write.

**Some reviewers have dinged you for an overly negative portrait of journalists. I don't agree—your characters seemed no more guilty of human weakness than people in other professions, and I admired the compassion you brought to them. But your views on marriage were pretty bleak. By my reckoning, there's only one happy marriage in the book (that of Herman Cohen). As they say in the zeitgeist, what's up with that? Is that a reflection of your view of marriage, or your view of married journalists?**

Couples can be wonderfully happy, of course. But fiction thrives at points of tension. And the tension-point surrounding relationships is one of the great subjects of literature. We have two urges battling inside us: to pair off or to be free. From the depths of our genes, we are riven by these opposing impulses. And the rigors of journalism don't exactly help. Often, the job demands crazy hours, weekends at the office, last-minute travel, intense stress, perhaps even the obligation to move cities or

countries to advance a career. To balance that with stable relationships can be tough.

**You're now writing another novel, and I know you don't want to talk about its contents. But what have you learned from *The Imperfectionists* that will shape your next book?**

Having written *The Imperfectionists*, I can confront the nervous moments of writing with more confidence. I mentioned earlier that an early draft can be a horror show. Well, nowadays, I can look without screaming. I remind myself that I must push on and that, eventually, I will wrench out the book that I had in mind.

**Last question: Brad Pitt has bought the film rights. Do you see a role for Angelina Jolie in the movie?**

I'll leave the casting in their capable hands, while hoping of course that there'll be a cameo for me as a rumpled copy editor typing in the background!

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