

# **The Imperfectionists: A Novel Study Guide**

**The Imperfectionists: A Novel by Tom Rachman**

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# Plot Summary

The Imperfectionists is the first novel by writer Tom Rachman. The novel is a collection of stories about the imperfect people who work at an unnamed international newspaper that is on the verge of shutting down. Through these stories, the reader learns about the idiosyncrasies of newspaper reporting as well as the common difficulties that each featured employee suffers in their everyday life. The Imperfectionists is a sometimes funny and often shocking look at human nature with the backdrop of the newspaper business.

Lloyd Burko is an older man who has been a newspaper reporter for more than forty years. However, Lloyd is beginning to find it difficult to make a living as most of his stories are not of a quality to be published daily. Lloyd meets with his son, who works for the French foreign ministry, and asks for a story he might write about. The son offers some information, but makes his father promise not to write about it. Lloyd does anyway only to discover the story was fictional and that his son does not actually work for the French foreign ministry anymore. In the end, Lloyd ends up confessing everything to his son and moving in with him.

Arthur Gopal is the son of a famous writer who is content to write obituaries until the day that his daughter dies in an accident. Arthur suddenly finds a passion for writing and is promoted to culture editor. Hardy Benjamin is a young and intelligent business writer who struggles in her love life. Therefore when Hardy meets an Irish man who shows just the slightest interest in her, she ignores everything unpleasant about him including the fact that he and his friends burglarized her apartment.

Herman Cohen is a grammar-aphile who is constantly driving the staff of the newspaper crazy with his bible of words not to be used in the newspaper. Herman has a good friend from childhood who he always thought would be a prize-winning writer, someone he could look up to. However, when his friend comes for a visit in Rome, Herman finally realizes he does not aspire to greatness, effectively ending the friendship.

Kathleen Solson is the editor of the newspaper. Her husband has recently engaged in an affair, causing Kathleen to consider one of her own. However, running into an old boyfriend changes her view of herself and causes her to be more content with her husband. At the same time, Winston Cheung, a professional student, tries his hand at being a foreign correspondent and discovers he does not have the killer instinct to fight off competition.

Ruby Zaga is a bitter copyeditor who feels isolated and a target of humiliation at work. Ruby expects to be fired at any time, an idea that makes her happy for the freedom she will have. However, Ruby is extremely happy when she is not fired. Craig Menzies is the second in command at the paper, therefore he is the one who does the bulk of the work. At home, Craig is ridiculously happy in his relationship with a much younger woman. However, when that woman has an affair, Craig becomes sullen and finally breaks when she shows him a rejection letter from a patent she applied for in his name. Craig asks

her to leave only to attempt an apology a few hours later, only to discover her in another man's arms once more.

Ornella de Monterecci is the paper's most devoted reader, but she reads so slowly that she is thirteen years behind. Abbey Pinnola is the paper's financial officer, known as Accounts Payable around the office. On a trip to Atlanta, Abbey has a flirtation with a copyeditor she had fired from the paper only to be humiliated when he demands to know why she chose him. Finally, Oliver Ott is the reluctant publisher of the paper his grandfather created and his father carefully maintained. Oliver has little idea what is happening at the paper until the day he is forced to announce the decision to shut the paper down. In retaliation, someone kills his dog.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Tom Rachman is a reporter who has worked for several international newspapers. Rachman currently lives in Rome.

Lloyd Burko lives in Paris where he once reported for several major newspapers and magazines. Now Lloyd only writes for a single paper based out of Rome. Although married, Lloyd's wife is having an open affair with a neighbor and therefore spends little time with Lloyd in their apartment. Lloyd is running out of money and knows that his wife would pay the rent if he asked, but he cannot make himself ask. Instead, Lloyd spends what little money he has to take a gift to his daughter, but she does not like her father due to his past sexual indiscretions and multiple marriages. The next day Lloyd makes a date with his son Jerome, the only one of his children who still cares enough to make time for his father. Jerome works for the French foreign ministry so Lloyd thinks he might ask him for some inside information on which he might write a story to pay the rent. Lloyd is afraid to ask however, and puts it off until it is too late. Lloyd finds himself forced to make a second date with his son.

Jerome tells Lloyd about France proposing a U.N. peacekeeping force in Gaza. Lloyd contacts the paper's news editor and proposes the story to him. Menzies is excited, but his excitement wanes when Lloyd faxes his first draft and it is filled with vague quotes. Menzies pushes Lloyd to tell him who his contact is. Finally Lloyd admits that it is his son. Menzies agrees to run with the story, but the next day it is not there. Lloyd calls and learns that the editor, Kathleen Solson, learned from a contact at the French foreign ministry that the story was a fabrication.

Lloyd goes in search of his son Jerome at the French foreign ministry because he does not know where he lives. Someone tells Lloyd that Jerome could not pass the language test in order to become an employee of the service. Lloyd then goes to an old address of Jerome's to see if someone has a forwarding address for him, but discovers Jerome still lives there. Lloyd tells Jerome he is about to be evicted from his apartment. Jerome agrees to allow his father to live with him.

In the section titled 1953, Cyrus Ott meets with an old friend and her husband and tells them of his desire to begin an international newspaper based out of Rome that will be written in English. Ott will be the publisher and he wants his friend, Betty, and her husband, Leo, will run the day to day business.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

In this chapter the reader meets Lloyd Burko, an older man who probably should have retired years ago from his work as a reporter. Lloyd was once quite the womanizer, moving from woman to woman rather quickly, leaving behind the wreckage of ruined



marriages and unhappy children. In an ironic twist, it is Lloyd's current wife who is unfaithful, sleeping with another man right under Lloyd's nose. A once honest and successful reporter, Lloyd finds himself so desperate for money that he fabricates a story based on a lie his son has told him. Lloyd believes his son to be successful despite the warning signs and believes everything he tells him. However, it turns out that Jerome is cut from the same cloth as his father, telling lies to hide his lack of success in life.

The novel is about a newspaper that is on its way out; a type of media that has been overshadowed for decades by technology. Lloyd is a perfect metaphor for this dying industry, a tired womanizer who no longer finds much pleasure in life. The author has begun with the end in a way, showing the reader that the newspaper is much like Lloyd, a thing that was glorious in its heyday, but tired and used now that it has reached the end of its days.

At the end of the chapter, the reader is given insight into the meeting that began the paper and the man who started it. This man is a rich and powerful businessman who built his empire from nothing. The question of why such a man would leave his family and build such a business is one that will keep the reader guessing until the end of the novel.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Arthur Gopal is the son of a famous author, but he is personally content with his job writing obituaries and preparing the daily Puzzle-Wuzzle despite his strong dislike of his immediate supervisor, Clint Oakley. The main reason Arthur likes his job so much is that it gives him precious time with his daughter, Pickle. Arthur picks Pickle up at school each day and they have the most enlightening conversations. However, Arthur's routine is disrupted when the paper's editor, Kathleen, asks Arthur to interview Gerda Erzberger in Geneva in preparation for an obituary on the dying feminist activist. Arthur reads Gerda's book on the train to Geneva and is impressed with her writing, but is deeply disappointed when he meets the woman and finds a bitter woman full of regrets.

While interviewing Gerda, Arthur discovers dozens of calls on his phone from his wife. Arthur calls his wife and abruptly ends the interview to rush back to Rome. Pickle has been in an undescribed accident and died. Arthur takes months off from work, unable to face reality without his daughter. Craig Menzies suggests that Arthur come back at the beginning of the new year and, to make the transition easier, he come to the Christmas party. While almost everyone is polite and considerate at the party, Clint Oakley is rude and talks of nothing but his own children.

When Arthur returns to work, he learns of Gerda Erzberger's annoyance that he never finished their interview. Arthur returns to Geneva at his own expense to finish the interview so that he might write the obituary for her. At home, Arthur works on the article in Pickle's former room. The article is better than anything Arthur has ever written before. Kathleen promises to run it in its entirety the moment Gerda dies. Arthur continues to put more effort into his writing, eventually turning Pickle's room into his study despite protests from his wife. When Arthur learns that Gerda has died, he takes his story to Clint Oakley and tells him Kathleen wanted it run in its entirety. When Oakley objects, Arthur agrees to allowing him to cut it down to a blurb at the end of a story about the death of the world's oldest living person. However, when Oakley does exactly this, Arthur calls Kathleen and objects. Kathleen decides to have Arthur begin reported only to her. In time, Kathleen gives Arthur Oakley's job while demoting Oakley to obituaries.

In 1954, Cyrus Ott bought out the third floor of a gray building on Corso Vittorio with the basement reserved for the printing press for his new paper. The paper begins with great enthusiasm. Betty is the editor while Leo serves more as a supervisor. Betty and Leo can rarely agree on anything, therefore they often refer to Ott to mediate their frequent disagreements. Ott continues to live in Rome separated from his wife and child without explanation.



## Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader moves to Rome where the newspaper is based. Arthur Gopal, a milquetoast of a man, is introduced in this chapter. Opposite from Lloyd Burko, Arthur was never ambitious and never had a stellar career. Arthur has settled for mediocre in order to have time to spend with his precious daughter unlike his father, who was a drunk and a disinterested parent. In an ironic turn of fate, however, the loss of Arthur's daughter sparks ambition in him and he becomes a more proficient writer than he has ever been. Arthur finally begins to show initiative, to take an interest in the world around him and his profession. This costs Arthur his marriage, but it also wins him a promotion at the paper that will change his life irrevocably. However, the reader must wonder at what cost this change has come and what it will cost Arthur in the future.

In the short snippet at the end of the chapter, the reader learns how Ott gave up everything to work at the paper in Rome. The reader once again finds themselves wondering why Ott has decided to begin this paper and what reason he has for turning his back on his small family. When the reader learns how inept Betty and Leo are at working together and running the paper, the reader begins to wonder exactly what relationship Ott and Betty once had. He wants to figure out if this has anything to do with Ott's interest in the paper.





## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3 Summary

Hardy Benjamin is the business reporter for the paper. Hardy is having coffee with her friend, Annika, one morning when she receives a call that someone has broken into her apartment. Hardy rushes home to find many of her possessions missing and her kitchen window broken. The police will not allow Hardy to retrieve the possessions they reclaimed from the burglars until the other victim, an unknown man, is present. Hardy waits several weeks before the police finally call and let her know she can reclaim her items. When Hardy arrives at the police station, she meets the other victim, an Irishman who is charming, but somewhat flighty. When Hardy tells him she plans to report the crime to her insurance company so that she can get her kitchen window fixed, he offers to do it for her.

Hardy waits weeks for the Irishman, Rory, to come and fix her window, but he never shows. Hardy goes to Rory's residence and reminds him of his promise. Due to his odd living arrangements, Rory lives in a warehouse, Hardy takes him home and feeds him. Over the next couple of weeks, Hardy goes in search of Rory several more times. Soon the two of them develop something of a relationship. When Hardy learns that Rory aspires to be a standup comic, she allows her friend Annika to arrange a gig for him at a local club. However, Annika is embarrassed for Hardy when most of Rory's act consists of crude and invasive jokes about Hardy. Annika and Hardy argue over Rory, with Annika pressuring Hardy to split with him and Hardy arguing that she does not want to be alone and Rory is the first man she has been with in a long time. In time, this argument ends Hardy and Annika's friendship.

When Rory moves in with Hardy, Hardy volunteers to clean his old residence for him. Hardy arrives alone and is cleaning out a closet when she finds some items of hers that were lost in the burglary. One is a Rubik's cube her father once gave to her. Hardy knows this means that Rory was in on the burglary, but she cannot bring herself to say anything to Rory about it. In the end, Hardy decides it is better to have a boyfriend who is dishonest than none at all.

In 1957, as the paper begins to do better, Ott buys a mansion to live in. To decorate the mansion, Ott takes Betty with him to pick out paintings to hang on the walls. Ott simply likes to have the excuse to spend time with Betty.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

Hardy Benjamin is a deeply intelligent woman who is good at her job. However, Hardy is not as attractive as she would like to be and therefore feels as though she will never find a man to love her. Therefore, when Hardy meets Rory and he seems to care for her, Hardy will hold on to him no matter what. In the end, however, it is clear to both the



reader and Hardy that Rory is a loser who is only using Hardy because she is willing to allow him to live off of her. This story seems to show the insecurity in a woman like Hardy, a woman who is bright and talented, but feels inadequate when it comes to the opposite sex. Hardy has a lack of self-esteem. Perhaps this can be seen as a metaphor for a newspaper that struggles against other newspapers of higher quality in a market struggling to survive against new forms of technology.

At the same time the reader is learning about Hardy's difficult love life, the author offers a snippet of the relationship between Ott and Betty. It is clear in this snippet that Ott has deep feelings of affection for Betty despite her marriage and his own. The reader begins to get an idea of what has caused Ott to abandon his family to begin this unsuccessful venture.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Herman Cohen is the corrections editor at the paper. Herman drives his staff crazy with his picky corrections, writing down every word that has appeared in the paper as a mistake in a collection he calls his bible. Herman never thought he would be a writer, let alone work in the newspaper industry for so long. Herman always assumed his friend, Jimmy, would be the acclaimed writer. Jimmy comes for a visit while Herman's wife is in Philadelphia visiting their daughter and grandchildren. Throughout the visit Herman speaks to Jimmy about working on his novel, a novel that Herman believes has been more than thirty years in the working.

As teenagers, Jimmy and Herman met at a Presbyterian private school, the only two Jewish boys there. Jimmy protected Herman from his classmates and they became fast friends. Later, while Herman was in college, Jimmy came and slept on his floor, filling the room with dozens of exciting strangers. Jimmy would go on to have a scandalous affair with a Mexican artist. Jimmy then married a woman and settled down in Arizona, working as a paralegal during his tumultuous marriage. Finally Jimmy settled in California after a heart attack to write his first novel. Herman found all this very exciting, very exotic, and imagined one day he would write a book about his relationship with the great writer.

At dinner one night during Jimmy's visit, Jimmy insists on paying. Herman only allows this if Jimmy will agree to write an article for the paper. Jimmy works all night, finally giving his article to Herman hours before dawn. When Herman reads it, deeply disappointed by the amateurish work. Herman worries about trying to have it published, only to discover later that Jimmy has erased the article from a flash drive and replaced it with a note freeing Herman from the deal. That night Jimmy tells Herman that he gave up all thoughts of being a writer thirty years ago, but he allowed Herman to continue thinking it because it seemed to make him so happy. Soon after Jimmy leaves, Herman finds himself no longer in awe of his friend, therefore no longer interested in the relationship.

In 1960, Ott is dying of cancer, but he has not told anyone. Ott sits at his desk and attempts to write a letter to his wife and child only to put it aside to write another. Soon afterward, Ott dies but no one knows until days later when the maid who brings his meals becomes concerned and checks on him. In the aftermath of his death, Ott's brother, Charles, comes to the paper and announces that he plans to continue it in his brother's name.



## Chapter 4 Analysis

Herman is a perfectionist who irritates the people at the paper with his perfectionism. However, at home Herman is a different person. Herman is a person who sees himself living in the shadow of brilliance, both in his wife and his friend, Jimmy. However, when Herman learns that his friend Jimmy is not the brilliant, ambitious man he thought he was, Herman lets go of a forty year friendship. This story seems to be a metaphor for the paper as well, a suggestion that the paper was a star before television and the Internet. However, with the advent of these new technologies, readers have lost their glow for the newspaper in favor of better sources of news.

In the short snippet at the end of the chapter, the reader learns of Ott's death and his brother's decision to keep the paper going because it seemed important to Cyrus Ott for reasons no one can figure out. However, Charles' attitude toward Betty seems to suggest that the family suspects she had something to do with Cyrus' interest in the paper. The reader has begun to suspect this as well and wonders if the letter Cyrus was writing at the end was for Betty.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Kathleen Solson, the editor-in-chief at the paper, has recently begun to suspect that her husband, Nigel, is having an affair. Nigel was a lawyer in Washington, but has become something of a househusband since moving to Rome with Kathleen. Kathleen enjoys this arrangement, therefore she does not want a divorce. However, it crosses her mind that this might give her the right to have an affair of her own.

At a newspaper conference in Rome, Kathleen runs into Dario de Montecchi. Kathleen and Dario lived together for six years when Kathleen previously worked as a reporter at the paper. That was ten years ago. Dario calls a few days later and invites Kathleen out for drinks. Over drinks, Dario tells Kathleen that one of her copyeditors, Ruby, whom Kathleen and Dario were interns together with years ago, has been calling Dario incessantly since he kissed her one night weeks ago. Dario wants Kathleen to tell Ruby to back off. Kathleen distracts Dario by asking him to tell her what he thought of her when they were together. Dario admits that he thought Kathleen was too aggressive when it came to their intimate relationship.

After confronting her husband with his affair, Kathleen visits Dario at his office. Kathleen makes a pass at Dario, but then backs off. Later, however, Kathleen returns to Dario's office and again initiates a sexual encounter before again backing off. A few days later, Dario and Kathleen meet for drinks again. Dario tells Kathleen that he is no longer attracted to her and is in love with his wife.

In 1962, in the aftermath of Ott's death, the newsroom becomes chaotic because Leo and Betty cannot get along. Boyd, Ott's son, visits the paper and seems intent on learning the newspaper business. A short time later, Betty moves back to New York to work at a women's magazine.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Kathleen is a strong, intelligent woman much like Hardy Benjamin. Unlike Hardy, however, Kathleen is attractive and has never had trouble attracting men. Kathleen seems to like soft, passive men and is content in a marriage in which her husband stays at home to care for her. When Kathleen runs into an old lover, she learns that he always thought her too aggressive in their relationship. This shows Kathleen a side of her personality she has never paid much attention to before, forcing her to see herself from the viewpoint of the men in her life. Kathleen does not like it much and the reader gets the impression that she will not change anything even though she states that this is her intention. Again the reader might see a metaphor for the newspaper business in this story, a strong, passionate business that has been confronted with its own faults but has failed to do anything about them.



In the snippet at the end of the chapter, the reader learns of Boyd Ott's interest in his father's paper, not because he likes the newspaper business, but because he believes it was a passion for his father and he wants to embrace anything that his father cared about. Boyd is a young man who was abandoned by his father and rather than resent this fact, Boyd has idolized his father and made him into something he was not. At the same time, Betty loses interest in both the paper and her marriage, finally leaving Leo to live in New York. The reader wonders how it might have impacted her relationship with Ott if she had done this years ago.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Winston Cheung is a young graduate student who has suddenly decided he would rather be a reporter. After a string of emails with Menzies, Cheung goes to Cairo to try out for the stringer position with the paper. After two weeks, Cheung learns that another reporter trying for the job, Rich Snyder, is coming to town and wants him to pick him up at the airport. From the moment Cheung picks up Snyder, Snyder insinuates himself on Cheung. Snyder moves into Cheung's apartment, uses his laptop, and even locks Cheung out when he takes off with the keys. Snyder claims to want to give Cheung a contributor's tag on an article if he will help him with the research. Snyder takes Cheung out onto the street and has him asking passersby questions. Cheung nearly finds himself in trouble with touches a woman in a burka to ask about her sex life. A short time later, Snyder is taken away by a man from the interior ministry, taking with him Cheung's laptop and apartment keys.

Cheung turns to Zeina, a wire-service reporter from his alma mater, who gave him the apartment for new keys. Zeina offers to help Cheung write an article for the paper as well. Zeina takes Cheung to a press conference and arranges for him to speak to a government official. However, the man talks too fast for Cheung to take proper notes and his article is too flowery to be of any use. Cheung, downhearted, returns to his apartment where Snyder calls him and asks him to do research on their article. Cheung does this, taking three days, only to learn that Snyder has already submitted the article without him. Cheung goes to Zeina and complains only to learn that the stringer position for which Cheung thought he was competing with Snyder has been filled by Zeina.

In 1963, with Leo the sole head of the paper, it begins to decline throughout the sixties. When Charles steps down as chairman of the Ott Group, he leaves Boyd in charge. Boyd fires Leo. Leo eventually goes back to Pittsburgh and runs a trade publication for the coal industry. Boyd begins the search for an editor-in-chief who can return the paper to its glory days.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter shows the competition that exists between reporters. While the paper seems to be on the decline, reporters are still fighting for jobs that they can use as stepping stones to the more prestigious papers. Winston Cheung is a professional student who finds himself in a rut and he decides to try to be a reporter in order to change up his life, to add some excitement to it. However, when Snyder comes along and takes advantage of his naivety and his innocence, Cheung gets a rude awakening to the ways of the world. In the end, however, it is not Snyder who cheats Cheung out of his change to be a reporter, it is Zeina, whom Cheung had thought was his friend.

Boyd, who still idolizes his father, fires Leo and makes an attempt to turn the paper around, to make it something glorious as a tribute to his father. However, Boyd misunderstands why his father wanted the paper in the first place and does not realize that Ott's true reasons for starting the paper have already disappeared.





# Chapters 7-8

## Chapters 7-8 Summary

Ruby Zaga is a copyeditor at the paper who hates her job and everyone she works with, convinced that she will soon be fired. On New Year's Eve, Ruby goes to a hotel so that she will not have to be home alone and so she can maintain an image of her that her family holds, even though no one in her family ever visits and rarely bothers to call. Ruby calls Dario several times from the hotel to beg him to join her, but he is annoyed with her frequent calls and tells her not to ever call him again. On New Year's Day, Ruby returns to work and is surprised when Craig Menzies compliments her work. Ruby is even more surprised to discover she has not been fired.

In 1975, Boyd has had trouble finding an editor to stick with the paper. When Boyd finds Milton Berber, he is not exactly what Boyd was hoping for. Milton is a reporter for a prestigious Washington newspaper, but he is older than Boyd wanted. On Milton's first day, Boyd is present for his first speech to the staff. Milton upsets Boyd with this speech, suggesting the paper is a mess and needs to be completely redone. However, Milton lives up to his promises and begins making changes immediately.

Craig Menzies is the news editor at the paper. Menzies is a workaholic who is incredibly grateful to have a girlfriend half his age waiting for him at home each night. Annika, Menzies' girlfriend, is a photographer, but she has rarely worked at her craft since coming to Rome with him. Instead Annika spends her days doing the laundry and planning meals for Menzies return from work. Menzies worries about Annika growing bored with him so he gives her yoga lessons for her birthday. In a short time Annika's classmates at yoga encourage her to get back into her photography, which she does. After a back injury, Annika quits yoga but continues with her photography. Then, one day, Menzies finds an email on his work computer from an Italian man who claims to be having an affair with Annika. The man has sent the email to everyone at the paper.

Menzies goes home to confront Annika, but finds he cannot. Instead, Annika confronts him and promises the relationship is over. Over the next few weeks Menzies and Annika settle into an uncomfortable understanding. Then Annika's lover sues her for breach of promise. Menzies pays him off. Sometime later, Annika shows Menzies a rejection letter for a patent she filed on his behalf for one of his many inventions. Menzies finally becomes angry, yelling at her for her trampling on his privacy. Menzies then buys Annika a plane ticket and kicks her out of the house. Menzies does this because he thinks it is what is expected, but he quickly calls Annika to apologize. However, when he does, Annika is with her lover.

In 1977, the paper improves under Milton Berber, widening its circulation and making some money. However, as the paper became a success for the first time, the Ott Group took a few hits when Boyd was implicated on a fraudulent bankruptcy of a Midwestern bank and connected to a stock-fixing scandal. Then, in the 1980s, the Ott Group was



connected with toxins dumped in a rural water source in Zambia, leading to birth defects among the villagers nearby.

## Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Ruby Zaga is a sad, dark woman who is lonely but cannot make herself reach out to people who might make a difference in her life. Instead Ruby remains fixated on a man she had a crush on in the eighties, a man who never showed interest in her and is now married to another woman. Ruby thinks everyone at the paper hates her, that they do not want to get to know the real her, and that they will soon fire her. Ruby claims to be happy about the possibility of being fired, but in reality she is scared to death of losing the paper and is grateful when she is not fired. In the end of the novel, in an ironic twist, the reader learns that Ruby's job was on the chopping block but that Kathleen, someone Ruby believes hates her, goes to the mat for her. This story seems to be about perception and how a person can blind themselves to the truth for reasons varied and sometimes beyond their control.

Craig Menzies is something like Ruby Zaga. Menzies is a kind man who works harder than he should without complaint. The one joy in Menzies' life is his girlfriend, Annika. However, when Annika has an affair Menzies loses his confidence in the relationship and eventually shoves her away because he thinks this is expected of him. This act, however, causes Menzies to lose the only thing that ever matter to him.

In the two snippets on the Ott saga at the end of these chapters, the reader learns of Boyd's attempts to find a permanent editor-in-chief for the paper. While Boyd ends up hiring a man who is not exactly what he wanted, it turns out he has hired a competent and successful editor. Milton Berber turns the paper around and makes it successful for the first time in its history. However, the same cannot be said for Boyd and the Ott Group. In an ironic twist of fate, Boyd has set out to keep his father's legacy alive and to make it successful. However, all that he has done is put a black mark on the bulk of his father's legacy and made a success of a newspaper that his father never really cared much about, but started to give him an excuse to be close to the woman he loved.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Ornella de Montecchi, Dario de Montecchi's mother, has been reading the paper since the seventies when her husband was a diplomat in Riyadh. Ornella reads the paper so slowly that she has only just finished the edition for April 23, 1994. Ornella keeps all the papers in a storage space in the ceiling of her apartment, but she will not retrieve them herself because she does not want to look ahead. For this reason, it is the job of the maid to get the next days paper when Ornella is ready. This day, however, Ornella stops the maid from getting April 24, 1994 down from the attic. Instead, Ornella calls Dario to ask him to get it, but when he arrives she delays him until finally he looks and discovers it is not there.

The next day, Ornella visits Kathleen at the paper. They were once close when Kathleen and Dario were lovers. Ornella tells Kathleen she needs the April 24, 1994 copy of the paper, but Kathleen says she cannot get it for her. Then Ornella tells Kathleen what happened to her on that day, how her husband who suffered from mental illness, disappeared for several days and then was arrested on that day, forcing Ornella to pick him up at the police station. High on illegal drugs, Ornella's husband came home speaking frantically of odd things, then beat her until she hit in the head with a kitchen cabinet door. It was then that her husband was hospitalized to treat his mental illness.

When Ornella goes home, she looks up in the storage area for the first time and begins to drag the papers out. Soon the storage space is empty. Ornella reads all night, jumping around in time. The next day, Ornella begins to read the current paper and is filled with a great many questions.

In 1994, as the paper moves into the nineties, Milton decides it is time for him to retire. In his absence, the paper failed to move with technology. With the advent of the Internet and every other paper creating a website with free content, the paper did nothing.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Ornella is a woman who has allowed herself to become lost in time. Ornella reads the paper slowly and refuses to learn anything about the world that lives outside of her current paper. For this reason, Ornella is stuck in 1994, a year in which her husband became mentally ill and pushed Ornella into some of the darkest hours of her life. Ornella does not want to remember this time and hides from it, but when she finally reaches this date in her newspapers, she finds herself forced to confront it. When she does, Ornella is able to let go of her newspapers and live in the present day. Again the reader can see a metaphor to this and the newspaper's refusal, after Milton Berber leaves, to move into the future by starting a website for the paper. Both are lost in the past, in a more romantic time when the world was not quite as scary and moving as

fast. However, Ornella saw the error of her ways and fixed it where the paper has not and will not.



# Chapters 10-11

## Chapters 10-11 Summary

Abbey Pinnola, the financial officer for the paper, boards a plane for a trip to Atlanta to attend an Ott board meeting in place of the current publisher, Oliver Ott. Abbey is surprised to discover Dave Belling is sitting in the seat beside her. Abbey is responsible for Dave, a copyeditor at the paper, losing his job. Dave does not appear to be aware of this, however, and spends much of the flight flirting with Abbey. Abbey is in to Dave until he points out her embarrassment after one of his comments, causing her to shut down. At the airport, Dave wants to share a cab, but Abbey refuses and goes to the hotel alone, thinking she will never see Dave again. However, Dave calls Abbey from the lobby of her hotel and invites her down to drinks. Abbey goes and soon finds herself in a romantic clutch with Dave. Dave takes her back to her room, undresses her, and then confronts her on her decision to fire him.

Boyd continues to fight for his father's newspaper, eventually finding Kathleen Solson to take the position of editor-in-chief. Shortly afterward, Boyd learns he has cancer, just like his father. Boyd's children show no interest in caring for him in his final days except his son, Oliver. After his death, Boyd's ungrateful children divide up the company, giving Oliver the newspaper because they feel he cannot mess it up. Oliver, however, has no interest in the newspaper business and spends as little time at the paper as he can.

Oliver Ott has never had any close friends, nor has he ever had any interest in making any. Oliver is content spending time with his basset hound, Schopenhauer. Oliver spends most of his day either walking the dog, or hiding in his grandfather's mansion, ignoring the phone. For several days Oliver listens to incessant messages from Kathleen and Abbey at the paper, but he ignores them. Finally when he hears a message that peaks his curiosity, Oliver takes a call from his brother, Vaughn. Oliver learns that the Ott Group, on Abbey's recommendation, has decided to shut down the paper. As publisher, it is Oliver's job to tell the employees.

Oliver goes to the office for the staff meeting with his dog. Kathleen insists that Oliver should handle the meeting himself and that he has to leave the dog in her office. Oliver is shy and unclear what is going on, therefore he does not know what to say. Finally he simply reads from a report from the board and apologizes. People are angry and several storm out of the office. When Oliver finally ends the awkward meeting and returns to Kathleen's office, he discovers that someone has killed his dog.

In 2007, the employees of the paper are not inspired to work up to their potential in the final days of the paper and many simply fail to show up. Lloyd Burko continues to live with his son in Paris where they struggle to get by. Arthur Gopal gets a job as a crime reporter for a major New York newspaper. Hardy Benjamin moves to London with her deadbeat boyfriend, Rory. Kathleen returns to her old paper in Washington, but at a less prestigious job. Herman Cohen retires and settles in Philadelphia with his wife to be



near their grandkids. Winston Cheung takes a job at an exotic-animal refuge in Minnesota. Ruby can return home to Queens, but chooses to remain in Rome while Menzies moves to Brussels, and Abbey moves to Milan. Oliver Ott returns to Atlanta and takes a largely ceremonial job with the Ott Group.

## Chapters 10-11 Analysis

Abbey is the financial officer at the paper, the one who has kept the paper afloat for years by making cuts and providing funds where necessary. Abbey is not well-liked around the office because she often has to ask for layoffs in order to keep the paper afloat. This includes recently firing Dave Belling from the copyeditor's desk. That is why it is ironic that Abbey finds herself on an eleven hour flight to Atlanta with Dave as her seat partner. At first Abbey is afraid that it will be uncomfortable because of her role in Dave's firing, but soon discovers that Dave is charming and she is interested in a romantic relationship with him. All seems great until Dave humiliates her and asks why she chose him to fire. For Abbey, it seems everything about her job is thankless and perhaps this leads to her decision later to ask the Ott Group to shut down the paper, which has been struggling since the advent of the Internet.

Finally the reader meets the current publishes of the paper who has been named several times before, but never introduced. Oliver Ott is a simple guy who would rather spend his day reading and walking his dog then working. Oliver cares little for the paper and does nothing to improve it or support its employees. This creates a difficult situation when Oliver is forced to announce the decision to end the paper. Poor Oliver loses his dog in the process, a cruel act that seems to be a final metaphor for the paper. No one likes the paper, no one is happy working there, but when it is taken away someone reacts with violence. This seems to be because the paper, although a tool to allow one man to be near the woman he loves, has become something of a metaphor for life that the employees are loath to lose.

In the snippets at the end of these chapters, the reader learns of the board's decision to hire Kathleen and how she failed to institute changes necessary to make the paper a success, including moving with the technology of the time. The paper had its heyday and served its initial purpose, but now it's time has come to an end. Each of the people who were the focus of the novel adjust to their new reality, moving on without the paper in a way that makes it seem as if the paper was of no consequence to many of them. It seems that the author is trying to point out how fleeting a thing can be, even something that seemed so important and affected so many over more than five decades.



# Characters

## Cyrus Ott

Cyrus Ott is a business man who has built an empire out of nothing and created the Ott Group. Cyrus owns a great deal of real estate and various businesses through the Ott Group and has become a very wealthy man. When Cyrus is in his late fifties, he travels to Rome and proposes creating an international and English-speaking newspaper with an old friend, Betty, and her husband, Leo. While Cyrus will be the publisher, Betty and Leo will run the paper. Cyrus never explains to anyone why he wants to begin a newspaper, which is an industry he has never shown interest in before. He also does not explain why he wants to do it in Rome when his wife and child are in Atlanta.

Cyrus helps run the paper for several years until cancer finally ends his life. Over those years, Cyrus spends a great deal of time collecting art with Betty. In the end, the reader learns that Cyrus and Betty had a love affair twenty years before, but they separated and both married other people. Cyrus began the paper as a way to be with Betty again without forcing either of them to break the bonds of their marriage.

## Betty and Leo

Betty is a writer whom Cyrus Ott once knew in New York before either was married. Leo is her husband. Betty and Leo live in Rome when Cyrus decides to look them up and propose a business venture to them. For reasons unknown to anyone, Cyrus wants to start a newspaper in Rome that will print in English and sell throughout the world. Cyrus wants Betty and Leo to run it. Both Betty and Leo agree, but they cannot decide at the beginning if Cyrus' offer is genuine.

When the paper begins publication, Betty and Leo are in charge; Betty in charge of the copy while Leo is in charge of everything else. Unfortunately, they cannot make joint decisions and often refer to Cyrus to break the tension. When Cyrus dies, Betty soon finds that she is no longer happy at the paper. Betty moves back to New York without Leo, leaving the paper to suffer under Leo's tyranny.

## Boyd Ott

Boyd Ott is Cyrus Ott's son. Boyd did not know his father well because his father disappeared when he was just a boy. For this reason, Boyd has romanticized his father. Boyd spends the rest of his life attempting to do things that he believes his father would have wanted him to do such as keeping the paper going. Boyd makes the mistake of not fully understanding his father's intentions however, and ends up placing a blot on the face of much of the Ott empire while making the newspaper a success for the first time in its existence. Boyd then leaves his younger son, Oliver, in charge of the paper. Oliver takes little interest in the paper and leads to its destruction.





## Hardy Benjamin

Hardy Benjamin is the business reporter for the paper. Hardy is an unattractive woman who sees herself as living a very lonely life because of her inability to attract members of the opposite sex. For this reason, Hardy allows a man into her life who is only interested in living off of her money and not working for his own living. Hardy becomes a metaphor for a newspaper industry that underestimates itself and does not keep up with the changing times.

## Arthur Gopal

Arthur Gopal is the son of a famous writer who was a drunk that was uninterested in fatherhood. For this reason, Arthur embraces fatherhood himself and pays little attention to his own writing career. When his daughter dies, however, Arthur turns to writing as a way to fill his time. Arthur quickly becomes more productive and is given a promotion at work. Arthur's character is a parallel to that of Boyd Ott in that they both have powerful fathers that they both admire and detest.

## Kathleen Solson

Kathleen Solson is the editor-in-chief of the newspaper. Kathleen is a highly ambitious woman who works hard at her career in order to get everything she ever wanted. Kathleen fails to make the paper a success in an era of modern technology, but she keeps it going for several years despite a lack of money and a withering market. In her personal life, Kathleen is shocked to learn that a former boyfriend sees her as overly aggressive and domineering even though Kathleen is currently married to a man who has given up his career to become a househusband, staying home to care solely for Kathleen. Kathleen is the consummate working woman, the personification of a modern woman. However, Kathleen is not a happy woman and when the paper closes, she will find herself forced to take a demotion at her new job.

## Craig Menzies

Craig Menzies is the news editor at the paper who finds himself doing most of the grunt work that Kathleen does not like to do. Craig works hard, long hours, but he often is unhappy in his work. Craig's only true happiness is his relationship with his much younger girlfriend, Annika. However, when Annika has an affair Craig finds himself at a loss as to how to deal with it. In the end, Craig throws her out onto the street, but then calls to apologize only to discover she has turned to her lover in this time of crisis.





## Abbey Pinnola

Abbey Pinnola is Accounts Payable or the financial officer at the paper. Abbey is a divorced woman with three children and a lack of a love life. Abbey is lonely, but also content in her own way with her life. When Abbey meets Dave Belling on a flight to Atlanta, she is afraid he will be rude because she is chiefly responsible for getting him fired at the paper. However, Dave is kind and they flirt the entire flight. In the end, Dave humiliates Abbey for her role in his firing; something that seems to inspire Abbey to recommend the closing down of the paper.

## Clint Oakley

Clint Oakley is the rude and overbearing cultures editor when the novel begins. Clint is brass and unkind to Arthur Godal when he returns to work after the death of his daughter, Pickle. For this reason, Arthur targets Clint in a scheme to get himself promoted. Arthur takes Clint's job and Clint ends up in Arthur's old job as the obituaries writer. It is a step down for Clint, but he does not seem to mind as long as he still has a job to keep his kids in private school.

## Rory

Rory is Hardy Benjamin's boyfriend. Rory and Hardy meet when both of their homes appear to have been burglarized. Rory is a flaky, unreliable person whom Hardy finds herself having to drag to her home on several occasions in order to get him to keep his promises to her. In the end, Hardy discovers that Rory and his friends were behind the robbery in her apartment. This does not change things for Hardy, however, who continues to be involved with Rory out of fear of being alone.



# Objects/Places

## Letter

Oliver Ott finds a letter written by Cyrus Ott in the mansion that his grandfather bought years ago that appears to explain Ott's decision to begin the paper.

## Dog Leash

Oliver Ott's dog is strangled with his leash the day that Oliver comes to tell the newspaper's employees that the paper is to be shut down.

## Winston's Laptop

When Snyder comes to Cairo, to try out for the stringer job as well, he takes over much of Winston's belongings, including his apartment and his laptop.

## Gerda Erzberger Obituary

Arthur writes an obituary on Gerda Erzberger, a former feminist, that creates a disagreement between Kathleen and Clint Oakley that eventually leads to Arthur being promoted and marks the beginning of his more prestigious writing career.

## Paintings

While in Rome, Ott and Betty spend many afternoons together buying paintings to decorate Ott's new mansion.

## White Carpeting

Ott puts white carpet in the newsroom when the paper begins in order to display the prestige by which he wants the reporters to think of the paper. Berber later replaces the carpet with more white carpet, but this carpet remains uncleaned until the paper closes its doors to become more of a symbol of the disintegration of the paper.

## Newsroom

Ornella, a faithful reader of the paper, visits the newsroom after the paper closes its doors and is overwhelmed by the silence.



## **Ott's Mansion**

Cyrus Ott buys a mansion in Rome where he lives while in Rome to work on the paper.

## **The Paper**

The novel revolves around the employees of and the running of an unnamed international newspaper based in Rome.

## **Rome**

Most of the novel is set in Rome.

## **Paris**

Lloyd Burko lives and works in Paris.

## **Cairo**

Kathleen needs a reporter in Cairo to report on events in that part of the world. At one point, Winston Cheung thinks he is competing for a stringer position in Cairo, but later learns that a woman he thought was his friend has actually been given the job without his knowledge.



# Themes

## Love

No one knows why Cyrus Ott, who has built a fortune from nothing, would want to go into the newspaper business. However, this is exactly what Ott does in the final few years of his life. As the author allows the reader little snippets of Ott's actions, the reader comes to realize that Ott has done this so that he might spend the final years of his life in the company of the one woman that he truly loves, Betty. However, Ott is such an honorable man that he cannot bring himself to break his marriage vows even though he has left his wife and child back in Atlanta, Georgia.

A newspaper that was begun for love does not treat its latter employees as kindly however. Many of the people who work at the paper find themselves struggling to find love or to keep it. Hardy Benjamin becomes involved with a lazy and unkind man who burglarized her house simply because she is afraid of being alone. Abbey Pinnola has a flirtation with a man who humiliates her. Kathleen is married to a man who has cheated on her while Craig Menzies throws out his cheating girlfriend not because she cheated on him, but because she tried to help him get a patent for one of his many science inventions.

Love is a theme of the novel not only because it is the main motivator in many of the stories, but instead because it is a basic emotion that creates conflict and provides motivations for many events in a single person's life. Love is in everything in this novel - from the relationship between a father and his daughter, to the motivation of a man to keep his father's newspaper open even though it is a colossal loss of money.

## Father Child Relationships

Many of the stories in this novel include a relationship between a father and a child. In the first story featuring Lloyd Burko, Lloyd finds himself going out with all his children but one, a boy who lies to his father about his job and his home to keep his father from knowing the truth about his life. In the end, these two men end up living and struggling together. In Arthur Gopal's story, Arthur simply sleepwalks through his work so that he might spend every available moment with his daughter, Pickle. However, when Pickle dies, Arthur becomes a better writer than even he suspected he could.

The most important Father and child relationships in this book involve the Ott family. Cyrus Ott abandons his son in order to spend the final years of his life with the woman he loves. However, Boyd grows up admiring his father and spends the rest of his life trying to run his father's company in a way that he thinks would make the old man proud. In the end, Boyd is even happy to have cancer just like his father did. Boyd's own relationships with his children was difficult, leaving his son Oliver feeling as though he was always a disappointment to his father. It is Oliver that finally runs the paper into the



ground and brings about its destruction. In the end, it seems each of the Ott men has let down his father or his son in some fashion.

## **Newspaper Business**

The main theme that runs through all the stories in this novel is the newspaper business. In the late fifties when the paper is first founded, the newspaper is still the main source of news for most people. However, with the advent of the television era in the sixties and seventies, and then with the origination of the twenty-four news channel in the nineties, the newspaper began to lose its allure with the general public. With the birth of the Internet, the paper found itself competing in an arena that it is not prepared to enter.

The paper refuses to create a website and insists on remaining in the same format that it has published since its beginnings. For this reason, the paper is only a success for a short time in the late seventies and eighties. Despite this, the Ott Group keeps the paper going for fifty years out of a sense of loyalty to their founder, Cyrus Ott, who founded the paper for unknown reasons in the late fifties. In the end, the paper is losing too much money and the Ott Group finally decides to close it in its fiftieth year.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person point of view. The novel is written in a short story format and therefore each chapter has a different protagonist, or narrator. The author uses a point of view that allows the reader to feel close to the main character, but not so close as to know everything about the story. This allows for a few surprises at the end of some of the stories.

The point of view of this novel is appropriate to the format because the third person point of view limits any confusion a reader might experience with so many changes in narrating characters. The point of view also helps the reader to understand the thoughts and actions of the narrating characters, but leaves a distance that keeps the reader from knowing everything the narrating character knows. This allows for the author to surprise the reader at the end of some of the stories with twists in the plot.

## Setting

The novel begins in Paris, but much of the plot takes place in Rome. The author, who currently lives in Rome, paints a lovely picture of the city that describes its various neighborhoods as well as the historic landmarks that most readers are more than likely familiar with.

The setting of Rome for this novel gives the stories something of a romantic backdrop that is contrary to the darkness that takes place in many of the stories. The setting also gives the story an exotic theme that gives some of the more mundane aspects of the plot an exciting element that makes them somewhat more interesting. Finally, the foreign settings of the novel provide a backdrop that allows the reader to see that despite the differences in language and culture, most human emotions are basically the same throughout the world.

## Language and Meaning

Although the novel takes place in a foreign country, much of the novel is written in a basic English. The language of the novel is more educated than most modern bestsellers might offer their wider range of readers, but this more educated language supports the highly educated characters that populate the novel.

The language of this novel is appropriate for the novel because it is more of a literary style book; a book that is written as much for the love of language as it is for the love of plot. This novel is unique in that it has both a strong plot and a clear admiration for language in general. The language is appropriate to all levels of readers, but will be

better appreciated by readers who are more mature and enjoy a well-crafted sentence as well as an ironic plot.

## Structure

The novel is written in a collection of eleven short stories that are each given the title of a newspaper headline that is pertinent to the story itself. At the end of each story is a short snippet of the history of the newspaper that describes its founding, its long struggles, and the decision to bring it to an end. Many of the stories are told in a combination of dialogue and exposition. However, a great many of the stories take place in the thoughts of the narrating character, as though the character is thinking back on the events that take place within the plot and are relating it at a later time.

The novel contains twelve individual plots. Each plot deals with a person involved with the paper in some way, from a freelance writer to the editor-in-chief and the founder of the paper. The plots vary from romantic plots that involve two people falling in love to plots about the end of love affairs. There are plots that involve fathers and sons, as well as plots that revolve around lifelong friendships. Most of the stories have a common thread with the others and all the stories come to a satisfying conclusion at the end.

## Quotes

"Libido: it has been the tyrant of his times, hurling him from comfortable America all those years ago to sinful Europe for adventure and conquest, marrying him four times, tripping him up a hundred more, distracting and degrading and nearly ruining him. Yet now it is mercifully done with, desire having dwindled these past years, as mysterious in departure as it was on arrival." (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"A few blocks away, Ott sat on his hotel bed. Perhaps, he thought, I should go no further with this. Perhaps I should leave everything as it was. Perhaps I should not start this paper." Chapter 1, p. 25).

"Erzberger, as she depicted herself in writing, is morally bold, uncompromised by her epoch, endearing, even inspiring. In person, she showed little of this." (Chapter 2, p. 44).

"He doesn't call. She wants to scream. But this is how he is: easygoing, which means tough-going for everyone else." (Chapter 3, p. 65).

"He and Jimmy are not, as Herman has always believed, gradations of the same man - he the middling version and Jimmy the superlative one." (Chapter 4, p. 94).

"When she realizes that Nigel is having an affair, her first sentiment is satisfaction that she figured it out. Her second is that, despite all the palaver about betrayal, it doesn't feel so terrible." (Chapter 5, p. 103).

"Still, these myths spurred him on. He was bold because his father had been, and proud because this, too, had been Ott's fashion. Yet Boyd's boldness lacked pleasure, and his pride lacked dignity. He styled himself a man of the people, as his father had been. But the people mistrusted Boyd, and he in turn despised them." (Chapter 6, p. 156).

"It made her scared to ever move home to Queens—if she did, they'd figure her out, see what a lie all this was, how ordinary she was." (Chapter 7, p. 168).

"As they enter the newsroom, he releases her hand, then wishes he still held it." (Chapter 8, p. 186).

"She has been dreading tomorrow ever since it happened the first time." Chapter 9, pg. 205

"Once at the boarding gate, Abbey falls into her customary travel coma, a torpor that infuses her brain like pickling fluid during long trips." (Chapter 10, p. 225).

"The paper—that daily report on the idiocy and the brilliance of the species—had never missed an appointment. Now it was gone." (Chapter 11, p. 269).





## Topics for Discussion

Who is Lloyd Burko? Why is Lloyd's daughter angry with him? Why does his wife no longer live with him? Why does Lloyd feel like he needs to go to his son for help in writing an article that will pay his rent? How does this turn out? Why does Lloyd end up moving in with his son? Why do you think the author chose to begin his story with Lloyd?

Who is Kathleen Solson? Why is she shocked to learn her former lover believes she is overly aggressive? What does he mean by this? Why is Kathleen offended by this? Why does Kathleen attempt to have an affair with her former partner? What impact does this have on Kathleen's marriage? What impact does it have on Kathleen's sense of self? What does this story say about Kathleen in general?

Who is Cyrus Ott? How did he make his fortune? Why does he decide to found a newspaper? Why does he choose Betty and Leo to help him run the paper? What did Ott plan to do with the paper at the end of his life? What does Ott's brother decide to do with the paper? Why does Ott's son attempt to make the paper profitable? How does this turn out? What does this say about Ott and his son's relationship?

Who is Craig Menzies? How many times is he mentioned before he appears in his own story? What picture do these mentions present of Menzies? What is the nature of Menzies relationship with Annika? How does Menzies feel when he learns Annika has been untrue to him? What finally ends the relationship? What does Menzies learn when he calls Annika to apologize at the end of the story? How is this ironic?

Who is Hardy Benjamin? Why is she so desperate to be loved? What does she learn about Rory that should have needed their relationship? Why does Hardy not end the relationship? How does this impact her relationship with Annika? For what reason? How does Hardy's story compare to Kathleen's? How does her story compare with that of Ruby? How does her story compare with Abbey's?

Who is Arthur Gopal? How does Arthur feel about his father? What did his father do for a living? How does Arthur's actions as a father compare to his own father's behavior as a father? Why does Arthur take his career more seriously after the death of his daughter? Why does the author never tell the reader how Pickle died? What happens to Arthur's wife at the end of the story? How does he feel about this? Why?

Who is Oliver Ott? What role does he play at the paper? How does he respond to his responsibilities at the paper? Why is Oliver required to tell the paper's employees about the closure? How do people respond? How is Oliver's story slightly different from the others? Why?