



***The Italian Teacher*, by Tom Rachman
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, September 2018**

The Italian Teacher, Tom Rachman's latest novel, begins in Rome in the mid-1950s. Five-year-old Charlie Bavinsky—nicknamed "Pinch"—lives there with his larger-than-life father, Bear Bavinsky, an expressionistic painter, and his mother Natalie, a ceramics potter from Canada. Natalie is Bear's much younger third wife; they had met when she was studying art in Rome.

Bear is a star in the international art world, and his colorful masterworks are in demand. His unusual paintings feature body parts: "...a bare throat filling the huge canvas, or a roll of tummy fat, or a pricked shoulder"—but never faces. When sitters pose for him, they aren't told what Bear will paint until after the portrait is completed.

Ever the temperamental *artiste*, Bear discards sub-standard canvases as well as wives and their children with equal abandon. When teen-age Birdie, one of Bear's daughters from an earlier marriage, comes for a visit, she sets her half-brother Pinch straight about their errant father. "Everything is about his art," she explains. "He doesn't care about his creations."

Pinch idolizes his brash, self-centered father. When Bear leaves Natalie and Pinch and then decamps for the United States, the boy keeps up a correspondence with Bear. Natalie, whose career as a potter is in decline, encourages Pinch's artistic aspirations.

Now 15, Pinch is thrilled when Bear invites him for a visit to Larchmont where he is living with a new wife and ever-increasing progeny. Bringing his best drawing along, Pinch hopes Bear will proudly acknowledge his talent. However, Bear only takes a quick look at his son's artwork, and his quick and caustic reaction changes the direction of Pinch's life.

Pinch, as an adult, follows Natalie to London where he teaches Italian, the language of his childhood; hence the title, *The Italian Teacher*. Tom Rachman, the author, had been an AP correspondent based in Rome. His breakout novel *The Imperfectionists* (a personal favorite) also is set in Rome and features a richer array of characters. If there's a flaw in *The Italian Teacher*, it's that Pinch, the title character, isn't as fascinating as his father Bear Bavinsky, who looms large in every scene.