

# Close Reading Competition 2018

The *emagazine* Close Reading Competition is now a well-established fixture in the year. We pride ourselves on selecting very different passages each year for you to respond to (from Edith Wharton, John le Carré and Charles Dickens to Lisa McInerney) and this year is no exception. We've chosen an extract from Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*. Winner of the Betty Trask Award 2002 and the Somerset Maugham Award 2003, it's a novel described by the *New York Times* as 'sweeping [and] audaciously playful...' and by the *Literary Review* as 'marvellous, original and intelligent'.

We're confident it's a passage you'll enjoy reading and writing about.

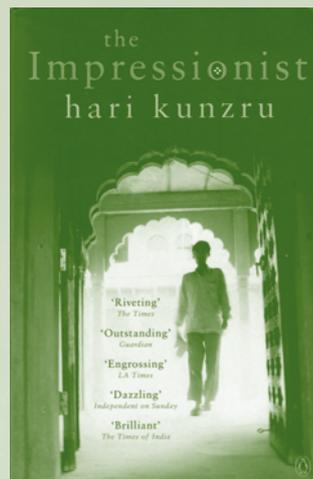
This year the competition will be judged by the *emag* editors and Professor John Mullan, University College London and author of *How Novels Work*.

## Entering the competition

- Write a 500-word close reading of the passage from *The Impressionist*.
- Download the official entry form from the *emagazine* page of the English and Media Centre website:  
<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/>
- Fill in your details and paste your entry into the space provided.
- Email your entry to [web@englishandmedia.co.uk](mailto:web@englishandmedia.co.uk), using *emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2018 as the subject line.

## Timeline

- Close of competition: 5pm Thursday 29th March 2018. (Please note: we will NOT accept entries received after 5pm Thursday 29th March, so don't leave it to the last minute!).
- Results announced online and by email: 8th May 2018.
- Results and winning entry published in *emagazine*: September 2018.



## The Impressionist – Hari Kunzru

This extract is taken from part way into the first chapter of the novel. Published in 2002, *The Impressionist* is an historical novel set in India at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Fire and water. Earth and air. Meditate on these oppositions and reconcile them. Collapse them in on themselves, send them spiralling down a tunnel of blackness to re-emerge whole, one with the all, mere aspects of the great unity of things whose name is God. Thought can travel on in this manner, from part to whole, smooth as the touch of the masseur's oiled hands in the hammam. Amrita wishes she could carry on thinking for ever. That would be true sweetness! But she is only a woman, and for ever will not be granted her. In the absence of infinity, she will settle for spinning out what time she has, teasing it into a fine thread.

Inside the palanquin it is hot and close, the smells of food and stale sweat and rosewater mingling with another smell, sharp and bitter. Once again Amrita's hand reaches out for the little sandalwood box of pills. She watches the hand as she would a snake sliding across a flagstone floor, with detachment and an edge of revulsion. Yes, it is her hand, but only for now, only for a while. Amrita knows that she is not her body. This crab-like object, fiddling with box and key and pellets of sticky black resin, belongs to her only as does a shawl or a piece of jewellery.

A bump. They have stopped. Outside there are voices. Amrita rejoices. At



nineteen years old, this is will be her last journey, and any delay is cause for celebration. She swallows another opium pellet, tasting the bitter resin on her tongue.

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As it does every year, the wind has blown steadily out of the south-west, rolling its cargo of doughy air across the plain to slap hard against the mountains. For days, weeks, the air has funnelled upwards, cooling as it rises, spinning vast towers of condensation over the peaks. Now these hanging gardens of cloud have ripened to the point where they can no longer maintain themselves.

So, the rain.

It falls first over the mountains, an unimaginable shock of water. Caught in the open, herdsmen and woodcutters pull their shawls over their heads and run for shelter. Then in a chain reaction, cloud speaking to cloud, the rain rolls over the foothills, dousing fires, battering on roofs, bringing smiles to the faces of the people who run outside to greet it, the water for which they have been waiting so long.

Finally it comes to the desert. As it starts to fall, Forrester listens to the grubby Brahmin's chit-chat, and hears himself tetchily agreeing that now would be a good time and here a good place to camp. Perhaps this Moti Lal is offended by his brusqueness, but Forrester can't worry about that. His eyes are fixed on the palanquin, the grumpy maid fussing around its embroidered curtain. Its occupant has not even ventured a peek outside. He wonders if she is ill, or very old.

Soon the rain is falling steadily, swollen droplets splashing into the dust like little bombs. Camels fidget and grumble as they are hobbled. Servants run around unpacking bags. Moti Lal keeps up a steady stream of conversation as Forrester dismounts and unsaddles his horse. Moti Lal is not the master here, oh no, just a trusted family retainer. It has fallen to him, the duty of escorting the young mistress to her uncle's house in Agra. Most unusual, of course, but there are extenuating circumstances.

Extenuating circumstances? What is the bloody fool on about? Forrester asks where they have come from, and the man names a small town at least two hundred miles west of where they stand.

'And have you walked all the way?'

'Yes, sir. The young mistress says walk only.'

'Why on earth didn't you go by rail? Agra is hundreds of miles from here.'

'Unfortunately train is out of the question. Such are extenuating circumstances, you see.'

Forrester does not see, but at the moment he is far more concerned with erecting his tent before the rain worsens. It seems to be getting stronger by the second. Moti Lal puts up his umbrella and stands over the Englishman as he bashes in pegs, just close enough to get in his way without actually offering any shelter. Forrester curses under his breath, while all the time the thought circulates in his head: so she is a young woman.

Rain drips through the ceiling and lands in her lap, darkening red silk with circles of black. Amrita turns her face upwards and sticks out her tongue. The rain sounds heavy. Outside it is dark, and perhaps, though she is not sure, she feels cold. To ward off the feeling she imagines heat, calling up memories of walking on the roof of her father's haveli in summertime. Vividly she senses the burning air on her arms and face. She hears the thud of carpets being beaten and the swish of brooms as the maids sweep sand from the floors. But heat leads on to thoughts of her father, of walking round the pyre as the priest throws on ghee to make it flame, and she recoils back to the dark and cold. Drops of water land on her forehead, on one cheek, on her

tongue. Soon the rain is pouring through in a constant stream. The soaked curtains start to flap limply against her side. The wind is rising, and still no one has come for her. No one has even told her what is happening. With no mother or father she is mistress now. If only she could gather the energy to assert herself.

Amrita unlocks her box, shielding it from the water. She is to be delivered to her uncle, and that will be an end. He writes that he has already found her a husband. At least, said the old women, she will arrive with a good dowry. So much better off than other girls. She should thank God.

Within half an hour the dust has turned to mud. Despite his tent, Forrester is drenched. He clambers to the top of a hill and looks out over the desert, scored by a fingerprint whorl of valleys and ridges. There is no shelter. As the wind tugs at his topi and forked lightning divides the sky into fleeting segments, he is struck by the thought that perhaps he has been a fool. His red-brown world has turned grey, solid curtains of water obscuring the horizon. Here he is, out in the middle of it, not a tree in sight. He is the tallest thing in this barren landscape, and he feels exposed. Looking back down at his tent, set at the bottom of a deep gully, he wonders how long the storm will last. The Indians are still struggling to put up their own shelters, fumbling with rope and pegs. Amazingly the palanquin is still where they discarded it. If he had not been told otherwise, he would have sworn the thing must be empty.

Before long, a trickle of muddy water is flowing through the gully, separating Forrester's army tent from the Indians' contraptions of tarpaulin and bamboo. A fire is out of the question, and so the bearers are huddled together forlornly, squatting on their haunches like a gaggle of bidi-smoking birds. Moti Lal climbs the ridge to engage Forrester in another pointless conversation, then follows him back down the hill and crouches at the door of the tent. Finally Forrester is forced to give in and talk.

'So who exactly is your mistress?'

Moti Lal's face darkens.

THE IMPRESSIONIST by Hari Kunzru (Penguin Books, 2003). Copyright (c) Hari Kunzru, 2002, with permission.