

New 'literary lion'

Latest hit Brit makes a stellar first 'Impressionist'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

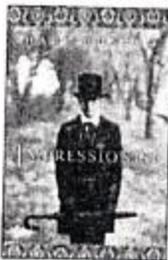
Britain seems to invade the United States culturally every few years — think "The Full Monty," Oasis and "Absolutely Fabulous."

The latest colonial outpost is in the literary world. London is bursting with talented young writers, and they're crossing the Atlantic with ease.

Zadie Smith scored massive critical acclaim and a bestseller with her debut, "White Teeth,"

which came on the heels of Helen Fielding's comic romp, "Bridget Jones's Diary." Jonathan Coe is up next with "The Rotters' Club," a scathing look at the 1980s.

But the best of them all may well turn out to be Hari Kunzru,



Dutton
383 pages, \$24.95

show host on satellite TV and free-lance journalist.

Add to that his mixed parentage — his mother was British and his father Indian — his friendship with author Smith (they share the same editor) and his stunning advance, and you've got the recipe for a media frenzy.

"Zadie Smith is quite a good friend of mine," said Kunzru, who is single and lives in London. "She used to go out with one of my best friends. I kind of met

her just as she was transforming into famous Zadie. I've taken a certain amount of flack for being the male Zadie Smith."

He laughs, but at least that meant she could offer useful pointers about dealing with the notoriously nasty British press,

right?

"Her contribution has been mainly to laugh [at me]. 'Ha, ha, ha. They're going to eat you alive, and I'm going to enjoy it!'"

A rip-roaring satire, "The Impressionist" tackles the Empire on Which the Sun Never Sets through the story of Pran Nath of India.

Pran is born of an English soldier and an Indian mother, but his mother — who has since married a wealthy Indian businessman — keeps the identity of Pran's dad a secret.



Hailed by reviewers in London, the 32-year-old Hari Kunzru scored a reported \$1.8 million advance for his acclaimed debut novel, "The Impressionist" (left).

When her family discovers Pran's mixed-race status, he is thrown out on the streets, gets drugged and forced into a harem, avoids the fate of a eunuch, becomes a sexual pawn in plans to topple a local despot and works with Scottish missionaries.

All before slipping into Oxford under yet another

identity and wooing the bohemian daughter of an anthropologist. (She will find Pran "too English" by half, and dreadfully conventional.)

(Kunzru reads from his book Wednesday at the Chelsea Barnes & Noble, on Sixth Avenue at 21st Street.)

Kunzru's unflappable

debut tackles racism and cultural identity in the most entertaining ways — by returning to the spirit of all the "crusty old white guys" like Rudyard Kipling and Evelyn Waugh.

"Kipling is pretty much the most unfashionable writer you could imagine," Kunzru said, even though his book opens with a quote from Kipling's classic "Kim."

"He is a terrible old right-winger. But at the same time, there's good stuff there, and he certainly knows how to tell a story. My sympathy was drawn more than I expected to some of the imperialists and the colonialists."

Still, his book is fired by the underlying confusion Kunzru felt as a very "beige" kid in a very white neighborhood, where people kept asking this London-born lad, "Where are you from?"

"Where I grew up, it was not a cool thing to be Asian, and it was really quite a cool thing to be white and blond and that kind of stuff," Kunzru said.

"Then I went to university and the trance scene was a cool thing, so there were boys with posters of Indian gods on their walls, and suddenly, 'Oh my God, you're Indian! That's so cool! You must be so spiritual!'"

Though wickedly satirical, "The Impressionist" is old-fashioned in its willingness to entertain and embrace the rich style — if not the politics — of Kipling and Waugh.

Sure, Waugh's African books are "unforgivably racist," Kunzru said, but they had something else in common:

They're still worth reading.