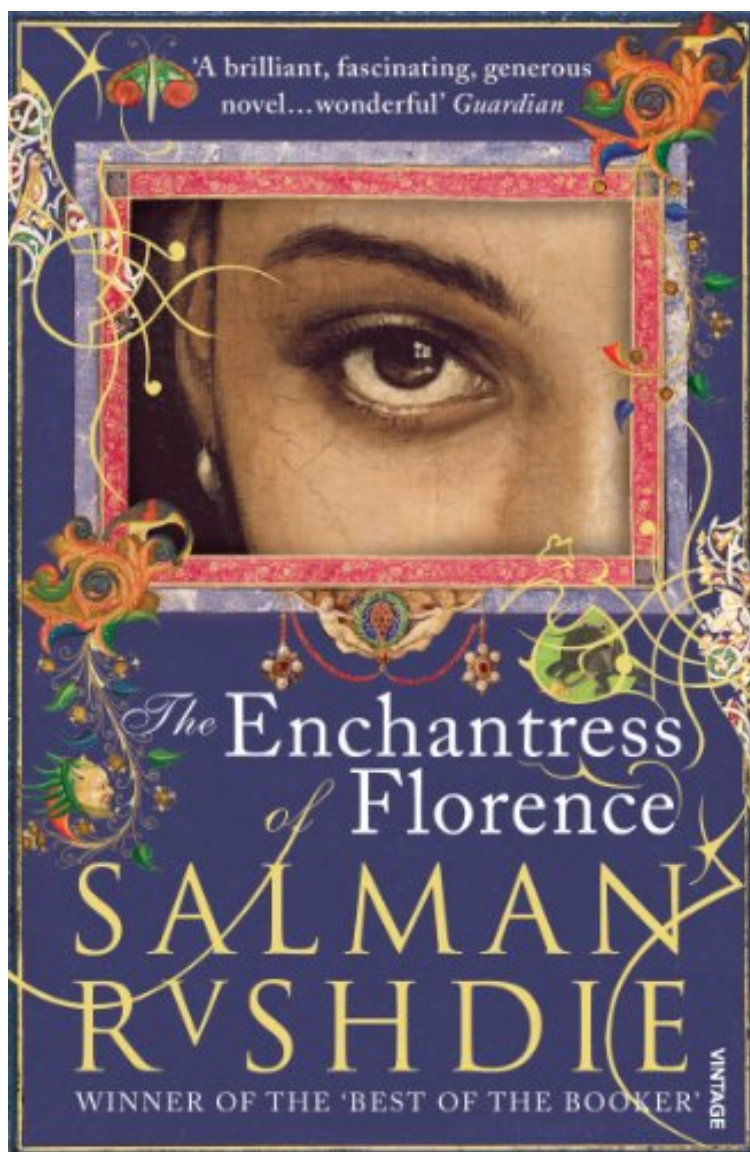


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# The Enchantress of Florence



*Par Salman Rushdie*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWhen a young European traveller arrives at Sikri, the court of Mughal Emperor Akbar, the tale he spins brings the whole imperial capital to the brink of obsession. He calls himself Mogor dellAmore, the Mughal of Love, and claims to be the son of a lost princess, whose name and very existence has been erased from the countrys history: Qara Kz, or Lady Black Eyes.Lady Black Eyes is a fabled beauty believed to possess great powers of enchantment and sorcery. After a series of abductions by besotted warlords, she finds herself carried to Machiavellian Florence. In her attempts to command her own destiny in a world ruled by men, Lady Black Eyes brings together the two great cities of sensual Florence and hedonistic Sikri, so far apart and yet so alike, and two worlds become dangerously entwined..com Best of

the Month, June 2008: Trying to describe a Salman Rushdie novel is like trying to describe music to someone who has never heard it--you can fumble with a plot summary but you won't be able to convey the wonder of his dazzling prose or the imaginative complexity of his vision. At its heart, *The Enchantress of Florence* is about the power of story--whether it is the imagined life of a Mughal queen, or the devastating secret held by a silver-tongued Florentine. Make no mistake, it is Rushdie who is the true "enchanter" of this story, conjuring readers into his gilded fairy tale from the very first sentence: "In the day's last light the glowing lake below the palace-city looked like a sea of molten gold." At once bawdy, gorgeous, gory, and hilarious, *The Enchantress of Florence* is a study in contradiction, highlighted in its barbarian philosophizing who detests his bloodthirsty heritage even while he carries it out. Full of rich sentences running nearly the length of a page, Rushdie's 10th novel blends fact and fable into a challenging but satisfying read. -- Daphne Durham

Extrait{ 1 } In the days last light the glowing lake  
In the days last light the glowing lake below the palace-city looked like a sea of molten gold. A traveller coming this way at sunset this traveller, coming this way, now, along the lakeshore road might believe himself to be approaching the throne of a monarch so fabulously wealthy that he could allow a portion of his treasure to be poured into a giant hollow in the earth to dazzle and awe his guests. And as big as the lake of gold was, it must be only a drop drawn from the sea of the larger fortune the travellers imagination could not begin to grasp the size of that mother-ocean! Nor were there guards at the golden waters edge; was the king so generous, then, that he allowed all his subjects, and perhaps even strangers and visitors like the traveller himself, without hindrance to draw up liquid bounty from the lake? That would indeed be a prince among men, a veritable Prester John, whose lost kingdom of song and fable contained impossible wonders. Perhaps (the traveller surmised) the fountain of eternal youth lay within the city walls perhaps even the legendary doorway to Paradise on Earth was somewhere close at hand? But then the sun fell below the horizon, the gold sank beneath the waters surface, and was lost. Mermaids and serpents would guard it until the return of daylight. Until then, water itself would be the only treasure on offer, a gift the thirsty traveller gratefully accepted. The stranger rode in a bullock-cart, but instead of being seated on the rough cushions therein he stood up like a god, holding on to the rail of the carts latticework wooden frame with one insouciant hand. A bullock-cart ride was far from smooth, the two-wheeled cart tossing and jerking to the rhythm of the animals hoofs, and subject, too, to the vagaries of the highway beneath its wheels. A standing man might easily fall and break his neck. Nevertheless the traveller stood, looking careless and content. The driver had long ago given up shouting at him, at first taking the foreigner for a fool if he wanted to die on the road, let him do so, for no man in this country would be sorry! Quickly, however, the drivers scorn had given way to a grudging admiration. The man might indeed be foolish, one could go so far as to say that he had a fools overly pretty face and wore a fools unsuitable clothes a coat of coloured leather lozenges, in such heat! but his balance was immaculate, to be wondered at. The bullock plodded forward, the carts wheels hit potholes and rocks, yet the standing man barely swayed, and managed, somehow, to be graceful. A graceful fool, the driver thought, or perhaps no fool at all. Perhaps someone to be reckoned with. If he had a fault, it was that of ostentation, of seeking to be not only himself but a performance of himself as well, and, the driver thought, around here everybody is a little bit that way too, so maybe this man is not so foreign to us after all. When the passenger mentioned his thirst the driver found himself going to the waters edge to fetch the fellow a drink in a cup made of a hollowed and varnished gourd, and holding it up for the stranger to take, for all the world as if he were an aristocrat worthy of service. You just stand there like a grandee and I jump and scurry at your bidding, the driver said, frowning. I dont know why Im treating you so well. Who gave you the right to command me? What are you, anyway? Not a nobleman, thats for sure, or you wouldnt be in this cart. And yet you have airs about you. So youre probably some kind of a rogue. The other drank deeply from the gourd. The water ran down from the edges of his mouth and hung on his shaven chin like a liquid beard. At length he handed back the empty gourd, gave a sigh of satisfaction, and wiped the beard away. What am I? he said, as if speaking to himself, but using the drivers own language. Im a man with a secret, thats what a secret which only the emperors ears may hear. The driver felt reassured: the fellow was a fool after all. There was no need to treat him with respect. Keep your secret, he said. Secrets are for children, and spies. The stranger got down from the cart outside the caravanserai, where all journeys ended and began. He was surprisingly tall and carried a carpetbag. And for sorcerers, he told the driver of the bullock-cart. And for lovers too. And kings. In the caravanserai all was bustle and hum. Animals were cared for, horses, camels, bullocks, asses, goats, while other, untameable animals ran wild: screechy monkeys, dogs that were no mans pets. Shrieking parrots exploded like green fireworks in the sky. Blacksmiths were at work, and carpenters, and in chandleries on all

four sides of the enormous square men planned their journeys, stocking up on groceries, candles, oil, soap and ropes. Turbaned coolies in red shirts and dhotis ran ceaselessly hither and yon with bundles of improbable size and weight upon their heads. There was, in general, much loading and unloading of goods.

Beds for the night were to be cheaply had here, wood-frame rope beds covered with spiky horsehair mattresses, standing in military ranks upon the roofs of the single-storey buildings surrounding the enormous courtyard of the caravanserai, beds where a man might lie and look up at the heavens and imagine himself divine. Beyond, to the west, lay the murmuring camps of the emperors regiments, lately returned from the wars. The army was not permitted to enter the zone of the palaces but had to stay here at the foot of the royal hill. An unemployed army, recently home from battle, was to be treated with caution. The stranger thought of ancient Rome. An emperor trusted no soldiers except his praetorian guard. The traveller knew that the question of trust was one he would have to answer convincingly. If he did not he would quickly die. Not far from the caravanserai, a tower studded with elephant tusks marked the way to the palace gate. All elephants belonged to the emperor, and by spiking a tower with their teeth he was demonstrating his power. Beware! the tower said. You are entering the realm of the Elephant King, a sovereign so rich in pachyderms that he can waste the gnashers of a thousand of the beasts just to decorate me. In the towers display of might the traveller recognized the same quality of flamboyance that burned upon his own forehead like a flame, or a mark of the Devil; but the maker of the tower had transformed into strength that quality which, in the traveller, was often seen as a weakness. Is power the only justification for an extrovert personality? the traveller asked himself, and could not answer, but found himself hoping that beauty might be another such excuse, for he was certainly beautiful, and knew that his looks had a power of their own. Beyond the tower of the teeth stood a great well and above it a mass of incomprehensibly complex waterworks machinery that served the many-cupolaed palace on the hill. Without water we are nothing, the traveller thought. Even an emperor, denied water, would swiftly turn to dust. Water is the real monarch and we are all its slaves. Once at home in Florence he had met a man who could make water disappear. The conjuror filled a jug to the brim, muttered magic words, turned the jug over and, instead of liquid, fabric spilled forth, a torrent of coloured silken scarves. It was a trick, of course, and before that day was done he, the traveller, had coaxed the fellows secret out of him, and had hidden it among his own mysteries. He was a man of many secrets, but only one was fit for a king. The road to the city wall rose quickly up the hillside and as he rose with it he saw the size of the place at which he had arrived. Plainly it was one of the grand cities of the world, larger, it seemed to his eye, than Florence or Venice or Rome, larger than any town the traveller had ever seen. He had visited London once; it too was a lesser metropolis than this. As the light failed the city seemed to grow. Dense neighbourhoods huddled outside the walls, muezzins called from their minarets, and in the distance he could see the lights of large estates. Fires began to burn in the twilight, like warnings. From the black bowl of the sky came the answering fires of the stars. As if the earth and the heavens were armies preparing for battle, he thought. As if their encampments lie quiet at night and await the war of the day to come. And in all these warrens of streets and in all those houses of the mighty, beyond, on the plains, there was not one man who had heard his name, not one who would readily believe the tale he had to tell. Yet he had to tell it. He had crossed the world to do so, and he would. He walked with long strides and attracted many curious glances, on account of his yellow hair as well as his height, his long and admittedly dirty yellow hair flowing down around his face like the golden water of the lake. The path sloped upwards past the tower of the teeth towards a stone gate upon which two elephants in bas-relief stood facing each other. Through this gate, which was open, came the noises of human beings at play, eating, drinking, carousing. There were soldiers on duty at the Hatyapul gate but their stances were relaxed. The real barriers lay ahead. This was a public place, a place for meetings, purchases and pleasure. Men hurried past the traveller, driven by hungers and thirsts. On both sides of the flagstoned road between the outer gate and the inner were hostelries, saloons, food stalls, and hawkers of all kinds. Here was the eternal business of buying and being bought. Cloths, utensils, baubles, weapons, rum. The main market lay beyond the citys lesser, southern gate. City dwellers shopped there and avoided this place, which was for ignora...