

Sparking the Perfume Conversation

Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez discuss their passion for fragrance and the emerging perfume culture

Luca Turin, a leading scholar in the field of olfactory science and author, along with perfume reviewer and collector Tania Sanchez, of *The Secret of Scent*, have released their latest book—*Perfumes: The Guide*. In this entertaining and opinionated book, Sanchez and Turin combine their talents and experience to review nearly 1,500 fragrances, separating the divine and the good from the monumentally awful. In each review, either Turin or Sanchez offers a vivid description of the scent along with a 1 to 5 star rating (1 being awful and 5 being a masterpiece).

In addition to the reviews, Turin and Sanchez provide around 50 pages of introductory essays on subjects such as the history of perfume, how to choose a feminine fragrance, frequently asked questions about perfume, and how the industry has changed—for better and worse—over the years. The back content includes a brief glossary of materials and terms used throughout the reviews and top 10 lists in nine different fragrance categories (see Top 10 Lists). Not only is *Perfumes* an essential guide to shopping for fragrance, but it is also a unique reading experience. *Perfumer & Flavorist* magazine recently spoke with Turin and Sanchez to discuss their relationship with fragrance, the effect fragrance writing has had on the industry, and the state of the fragrance industry.

P&F: What makes fragrance so special for you?

Luca Turin: Fragrance has always been the near-equal of music in terms of the amount of pleasure it gives me. I have always been amazed at fragrance's lowly status among the arts, and am determined to do something about it. In addition, I have always found it relatively easy and fun to describe fragrances.

Tania Sanchez: Perfume is one of the easiest, most accessible ways I know to increase the amount of beauty in an average day.

P&F: Can you each briefly describe your background in fragrance?

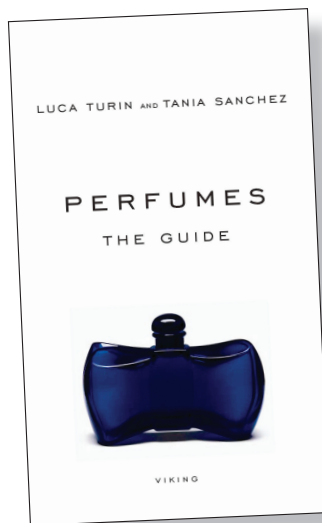
LT: I started collecting fragrances in the 1980s and wrote a perfume guide in French in 1992. After that, I began scientific work on olfaction and developed a semi-novel theory of primary olfactory reception in 1994–1996. Since 2001, I have been employed designing odorants for a US company—Flexital.



Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez

TS: In pursuit of the perfect perfume, I collected far too many, and far too many were perfect. Additionally, along with a couple of friends of mine, I became interested in collecting vintage perfumes and perfumery materials, learning more about the history and how perfumes work, and trying to apply the critical skills I learned as a literature major to the challenge of “reading” a fragrance as if it were a poem. This approach was largely inspired by Luca's previous writing on perfume.

P&F: What was the motivation for creating *Perfumes: The Guide*? How long did it take you both to smell and evaluate all the fragrances included in this book?



LT: Many people had asked me to [upgrade my 1992 French] guide in English to reach a wider audience. Things came together last year when I found a co-author to share the work, and an agent, who in turn found an enthusiastic publisher. It took me around 12 months to smell everything, which I did in my home office.

TS: We felt it was time the nascent perfume culture, which has been thriving online for some time, came

of age by incarnating itself in a massive book. Testing the scents took us about a year, and we only smelled a few samples in stores, of which we could not acquire fresh samples.

P&F: How quickly do you know if you like or dislike a fragrance?

LT: Some total duds, particularly of the imitative persuasion, are easy to assess quickly. Most good fragrances require smelling over several hours to fully appreciate and understand.

Top 10 Lists

Best Feminines

- Angel
- Après l'Ondée
- Black
- Bois de Violette
- L'Heure Bleue
- Joy
- No. 5
- Mitsouko
- Rive Gauche
- Shalimar

Best Masculines

- Azzaro pour Homme
- Beyond Paradise Men
- Cool Water
- Derby
- Eau de Guerlain
- Habit Rouge
- New York
- Ormonde Men
- Pour Monsieur
- Timbuktu

P&F: Have you ever had a major change of heart about a perfume?

LT: Yes. Paco Rabanne's *La Nuit* struck me as overly raunchy and brassy when I first smelled it. I later discovered that, in this instance, brassy and vulgar were exactly right.

TS: It happens all the time. For example, *Angel*, as I describe in *Perfumes*:

"The first time I smelled *Angel*, a flamboyant six-foot-three salesman with the shoulders of a linebacker encased in a baby blue zoot suit leaned over the counter and sprayed me. I recoiled. 'Is this a joke?' I thought of it, for years, as possibly the worst thing I had ever smelled. I suffered then from the naïve belief that women should smell only like flowers or candy; yet *Angel*, perversely, smells of both, with the same relation to your average sweet floral as the ten-story-high demonic Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from *Ghostbusters* has to your average fireside toasted sweet.

"In that sense, *Angel* certainly is a joke. Countless perfumes have copied parts of it (for a sample, see *Euphoria*, *Flowerbomb* and *Prada*), but they mistakenly play it straight. Although *Angel* is sold as a gourmand for girls, spoken of as if it were a fudge-dipped berry in a confectioner's shop, it's all lies. Look for *Angel*'s Adam's apple: a handsome, resinous, woody patchouli straight out of the pipes-and-leather-slippers realm of men's fragrance, in a head-on collision with a bold black currant (neocaspirene) and a screechy white floral. These two halves, masculine and feminine, share a camphoraceous (mothball) smell, which gives *Angel* a covering of unsentimental, icy brightness above its overripe (some say 'rot-

ting') rumble. The effect kills the possibility of cloying sweetness, despite megadoses of the cotton-candy smell of ethylmaltol, leaving *Angel* in a high-energy state of contradiction. Many perfumes are beautiful or pleasant, but how many are exciting? Like a woman in a film who seethes, 'He's so annoying!' and marries him in the end, I returned to smell *Angel* so many times I had to buy it."

P&F: Have you two ever had divergent opinions on a fragrance?

LT: All the time, but mainly in the mid-range where our opinions differed as to whether something was workman-like or below-par.

TS: If we wrote the book again, we might include more opinions in which we differed, though it was usually just by one star. This time around, if the disagreement was not severe we simply let the person who liked the fragrance more do the review.

P&F: What fragrance houses and/or perfumers do you admire? Who is doing something interesting or unique in the industry?

LT: I personally think that the trend for transparent woody-florals inaugurated independently by perfumers Marc Buxton and Bertrand Duchaufour some years ago is

very important and has given rise to some very beautiful creations.

TS: It was a revelation to me to receive the box of samples from Estée Lauder. Some people will think this makes me a dolt, but I had never given their line much thought, because I found the brand sort of stodgy. Their samples came late in the game, after we had reviewed roughly 1,000 other scents, and even the cheapest and least interesting of them was impressively coherent compared to others of its style. Clearly it's a brand that cares about what goes into the bottle.

P&F: What are some of your favorite fragrances from the book and why?

LT: Our favorites (five star ratings) will not surprise anyone; most of them are great classics.

TS: Actually, many people have been surprised by *Missoni*, but we both fell in love with it instantly. It's true it does not smell like an expensive composition, but its constantly shifting, bright, sparkling view is always coherent but never the same. It is a delight and a technical wonder.

P&F: What do you think about the kind of fragrance writing (blogs, critics, online communities, etc.) being done today? What effect do you think it has?

LT: It has had an enormous importance in the creation of

a grassroots perfume culture, and has enabled perfume lovers the world over to become aware of each other's existence, share information and opinions, and express likes and dislikes

TS: It is necessary and here to stay. I started out writing reviews on *MakeupAlley.com* and sharing samples with the members there. Online perfume writing filled a vacuum left by the mainstream media, which has generally reported on perfume as if the smell were beside the point. We hope our book will bring more people into the conversation.

P&F: Fragrance has suffered from an image problem over the last 10 to 15 years (at least), in part due to an overload of launches. Do you think some of the prestige will return?

LT: In reality the prestige never left. It was just confined to a few firms that do great work, from Estée Lauder to Parfums MDCI, and deserted those who do not deserve to be taken seriously in any case, i.e., all the ignorant cynics only in the business for a quick buck.

TS: I imagine they can't keep churning out hundreds of worthless perfumes a year indefinitely, especially now that consumers increasingly have more information. Of course, I've been wrong before.

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