

Reviews: 'The Perfume Lover,' 'Scent of Triumph' tell heady tales

Such books as "Coming to My Senses" take readers inside the perfume-making process, describe journeys of sensual discovery and weave heady tales of intrigue. (Viking)

By **Denise Hamilton**
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Eat. Pray. Love. Spritz.

Now inhale deeply and feel your life transform.

It's only May, but 2012 is already shaping up as the year perfume wafted from the lively online blogs and into mainstream publishing in a big way.

These days, new fragrance releases are greeted — and critiqued — with the intellectual sophistication formerly reserved for Paris fashion shows. Perfume is an art form and the "noses" who compose cutting-edge fragrances are rock stars.

Writers, always hip to the zeitgeist, are avidly chronicling this renaissance and some books have even inspired their own perfumes.

Recent months have brought a well-reviewed thriller set in the perfume world. A memoir of love, secrets, wedding frocks and sensual awakenings. Witty, erudite reviews of 100 top fragrances. A coffee table-sized fragrance manifesto with black-and-white portraits of top perfumers. And the story of how a world-famous "nose" joined forces with a sensualist writer to create a perfume.

My review copy of Denyse Beaulieu's new memoir "The Perfume Lover" describes her collaboration with French perfumer Bertrand Duchaufour and was accompanied by a tiny black bottle of their new perfume, *Séville à l'aube*. It's an intoxicating scent of orange blossom, incense, smoke, beeswax, flowers and musk that went through more than 100 iterations before everyone was happy. It also caught the eye of L'Artisan Parfumeurs, a major player in the boutique fragrance world, which plans to release it commercially later this year.

Beaulieu hails from Quebec but long ago fled Canada to re-invent herself as a Left Bank Parisian sophisticate. She is a writer, translator, instructor and perfume blogger — the bilingual Grain de Musc. She writes with penetrating intellect about perfume, gender roles, cultural signifiers, the boudoir and her Bohemian life in a style that marries Jacques Derrida with Anaïs Nin.

"I've come to think of perfumes as my French lovers — a way for gifted artists to seduce me, *parlez-moi d'amour* me and reflect the many facets of my soul in eerily perceptive ways," she writes.

Another book released this year, "Scent of Triumph," by perfume consultant and author Jan Moran, also features its own perfume — Chimere — a "floriental" based on the scent the heroine creates in this sprawling World War II epic.

In "The Book of Lost Fragrances," author M.J. Rose spins a heady tale of reincarnation, soul mates, ancient Egypt, a French perfume company and a fabled lost book that sparks international intrigue.

The paranormal thriller, published in March, adroitly weaves in lore about perfume distillation and *enfleurage*; the lavender fields of Grasse, France; the ancient world's long-lost kyphi perfume; the 18th century scented gloves that gave rise to modern perfumery and the industry regulations that — alas — have banned many raw perfumery materials today.

Rose's fictional Maison d'Etoile is a mash-up of dynastic French perfume companies such as Guerlain. One character was inspired by French perfumer (and jeweler) Olivier Durbano, whom Rose befriended while researching the scented world.

But I was most charmed by the author's evocation of the sprawling wooden laboratory desk known as the "perfumer's organ."

"She would sit ... and watch the light play on the small glass bottles ... [g]iving up ugly and strange and beautiful and powerful smells... Going back over two hundred years, her ancestors had sat there mixing up elixirs from the ingredients.... [S]ome of the oils ... were so rare that once [her brother] finished them, he could replace them only with synthetics."

In "Coming to My Senses: A Story of Perfume, Pleasure and an Unlikely Bride," Alyssa Harad recounts her Kate Chopin-like awakening to the sensual joys of perfume and the fulfillment, happiness and fragrant friendships that follow.

As a college professor, intellectual and feminist, Harad abjured fashionable, frivolous girly-girl things and viewed the pursuit of pleasure with suspicion. But one night, she read a vivid description of the perfume Paloma online and began to pine for it. When she finally sniffed it in a department store, Harad tumbled down the rabbit hole into perfume obsession and was soon ordering sample vials and lurking on blogs like Victoria Frolova's Bois de Jasmin, Marina Geigert's Perfume-Smelling Things and Robin Krug's Now Smell This, where she devoured their vibrant, passionate prose.

Soon, she would write her own missives: "Perfume tells a story on the skin. It has a beginning, a middle, and if it's good – a long, lingering end. To try a new perfume is to give yourself over to this story."

Harad, whose book is scheduled for release in June, recounts how her slow "coming out" as a perfumista provided a balm against the stress of her upcoming wedding. There are touching tales of her mother's friends throwing her a perfume shower (all the guests brought gifts of scent) and meditations on gender as she suggests perfumes for a fragrance-loving friend transitioning from woman to man.

For an insider's view, a reader can turn to "On Perfume-Making" by Frederic Malle, a French perfumer with impeccable lineage — he is the grandson of Serge Heftler-Louiche, who founded Parfums Christian Dior in 1947, and brother of movie director Louis Malle.

Malle's coffee-table book, published in January, includes a foreword by Catherine Deneuve, portraits of each Malle perfumer along with a description of how they created each perfume and illustrations by Konstantin Kakaniyas. The publisher is Angelika Books, an imprint of Angelika Taschen, wife of art book publisher Benedikt Taschen.

Malle launched his eponymous "perfume publishing house" in 2000 as an antidote to the crassly commercial, "chemical-smelling" perfumes produced by multinational firms that spend millions on marketing and celebrity faces while producing mass market fragrances of little interest and complexity.

"My plan was simple: go back to the roots of perfume making ... focus on perfume rather than its image, and most of all, let perfumers take the initiative, by giving them total creative freedom."

Malle also did something revolutionary: He splashed the perfumer's name on each bottle, acknowledging "its true author, to underline the fact that we are dealing with genuine works of art." Gratified, the industry's best noses lined up to create "the classic fragrances of tomorrow:" Dominique Ropion's Carnal Flower; Maurice Roucel's Musc Ravageur; Olivia Giacobetti's En Passant.

Another important book — from late 2011 but I'm sneaking it in — is "The Little Book of Perfumes: The Hundred Classics" by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez, who revisited 100 of their favorite perfumes from 2008's "Perfumes, the A-Z Guide." The Guide is widely regarded as the bible of perfume aficionados, many of whom can quote the snarky, funny, brilliant and synesthesiac reviews by heart.

Turin and Sanchez bemoan the fact that classics like Christian Dior Diorissimo and Guerlain's L'Heure Bleue have been defaced by reformulations. But their enthusiasm outshines their gloom, and they list many new classics worth praising.

Denise Hamilton's latest crime novel, "Damage Control," features a perfumista sleuth. She is also the editor of the Edgar Award-winning "Los Angeles Noir" story anthology and a Los Angeles Times Magazine perfume columnist.

[For the Record, 11:35 a.m. May 25: An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified Frederic Malle as the brother of Louis Malle; Frederic Malle is Louis Malle's nephew. In addition, the article incorrectly identified Angelika Taschen as the wife of Benedikt Taschen; she is his former wife.]

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