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Storied Perfume

For mystery writers, fragrance is often the most telltale clue left behind at the scene of a crime



UNCOMMON
SCENTS

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In the early stages of evolution, humans whose noses excelled at tracking prey—and could lead their tribe to water and alert it to big, musky predators—were rewarded with both survival and mates.

Scientists say that while we can still distinguish up to 50,000 smells, the need for keen sniffers has dwindled in real life. And yet it flourishes in literature—especially crime fiction, where authors utilize fragrance as clues, psychological triggers and objects of obsession.

Best known of the books is probably Patrick Süskind's 1985 novel (and subsequent movie) *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, about an 18th-century French idiot savant with olfactory perfect pitch who whips up a scent from the essence of a beautiful virgin that he has sniffed out in a secluded private garden, and the resulting odor is able to bewitch people into doing his bidding. *Perfume* is redolent with antique apothecaries, fragrant Grasse flower fields and enfleurage, the process of using odorless fats to capture the fragrant compounds that are exuded by plants.

But crime novels featuring perfumes reach back to the 1920s and '30s, the golden age of the classic French perfume houses. When sleuth Philo Vance sniffs the nozzle of an atomizer in a murdered lady's bathroom in 1934's *Casino Murder Case*, author S.S. Van Dine telegraphs his protagonist's high-class aesthetics: "Derline's Fleur-de-lis...Ideal for blondes." He then reads the label on the tube of bath tablets. "Also Derline's Fleur-de-lis. Quite consistent and correct. Alas, too many women make the fatal error of contrasting their bath perfume with their personal scent."

Derline is fictitious, but a keen appreciation of French perfume is something even macho men understand. Yes, there's a James Bond fragrance, but I prefer those that worldly connoisseur Ian Fleming name checks: Bond Girls wear Caron's Muguet de Bonheur, Balmain's Vent Vert and others whose splendor exists only in memory. Consider *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*: "The girl reached up a swift hand that smelt of Guer-lain's Ode and put it across his lips. I said, 'No conversation. Take off those clothes. Make love to me.'"

Alan Furst's moody, atmospheric World War II novels use perfume to lend authenticity and deft period detail. In *The Foreign Correspondent*, a woman answers the door "wearing only a modestly depraved smile and clouds of Balenciaga perfume."

Don't read fiction? Then try Tilar J. Mazzeo's scent biography *The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume*, whose World War II intrigue and skullduggery really happened.

And speaking of Chanel, authors have long turned to languid Oriental perfumes as a form of shorthand. In Anne Rice's *Merrick*, the signature scent of exotic New Orleans witch Merrick Mayfair is Chanel No. 22, a heady mix of incense, resins, aldehydes and sweet, druggy florals. (A reliable source tells me Chanel No. 5 is Anne Rice's signature scent).

In *Angelology*, Danielle Trussoni's 2010 gothic tale about the celestial beings among us, Gabriella, a beautiful, enigmatic convent student in 1940s France, drenches herself in Shalimar (extrait, I presume!).

British novelist Fay Weldon became infamous in 2002 for receiving an undisclosed amount to mention a luxury jeweler at least 12 times in *The Bulgari Connection*. Weldon's socialites may wear Bulgari jewels, but her home wrecker, Doris Dubois, leaves trails of Giorgio wherever she

50 Johnnys
A name that's rock 'n' roll gold



CAN YOU RECALL 'EM ALL?

travels.

In Jeffrey Marks' *Scent of Murder*, the manager of a cosmetics counter becomes a suspect when a perfume model is found murdered, a car is drenched in Paradise perfume and the coffee machine serves up perfume instead of cappuccinos.

In another *Scent of Murder* (crime writers can't resist the title), this one by Barbara Block, a character overdoes his Aramis and provides a clue.

In the *Hunger Games* YA trilogy, Katniss recoils from President Snow, who reeks of roses and blood. No brand names, but I'd venture Snow was layering L'Artisan's Voleur de Roses with Secretions Magnifique by Etat Libre d'Orange.

Perfume references abound in Ruth Rendell's dark psychological novels, reaching an apogee in 2003 in *The Rottweiler*, where characters wear Jo Malone Tube-rose, Charriol's Tourmaline and Bobbi Brown. Rendell even invents perfumes and incorporates a real-life trend—the resurrection of discontinued perfumes by classic houses (Lubin, Grossmith and Gabilla). After being sprayed with fragrance in a department store and fainting, the murderer finally begins to understand his impulses.

This spring, I'm looking forward to M.J. Rose's *Book of Lost Fragrances*, a historical/contemporary suspense novel about a woman whose family owns the oldest perfume house in France.

Meanwhile, fragrance wafts through *Damage Control*—my own latest novel, being released September 6—whose heroine is a budding perfumista, a skill that will come in handy by the end:

“What have you got there?” Mom asked.

‘Dune by Christian Dior. It’s smoky, resinous amber with a little patchouli, honey, citrus and musk. Luca Turin, who wrote a fragrance guide, calls it the bleakest beauty in all perfumery. Here, try.’


She sniffed and wrinkled her nose. ‘It’s bleak, all right...I’ll stick with my Charlie. Revlon makes some fine perfumes.’ ”

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I've been reading this column religiously and am delighted to see my own upcoming novel mentioned in such a great line up. And cant wait to read your own novel Denise!!!

Posted by: [M.J. Rose](#) | 09/02/2011 at 06:27 PM

What an interesting article!

I am curious whether any mystery writers have used any of the unique Possets perfumes yet. They are celebrating their 5th anniversary and include some state ones. My protagonist-to-be is selecting one.

<http://www.possets.com>

<http://www.possets.com/permanent?sort=20a&page=9>

--Brenda

Posted by: [Brenda](#) | 09/04/2011 at 02:28 PM

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