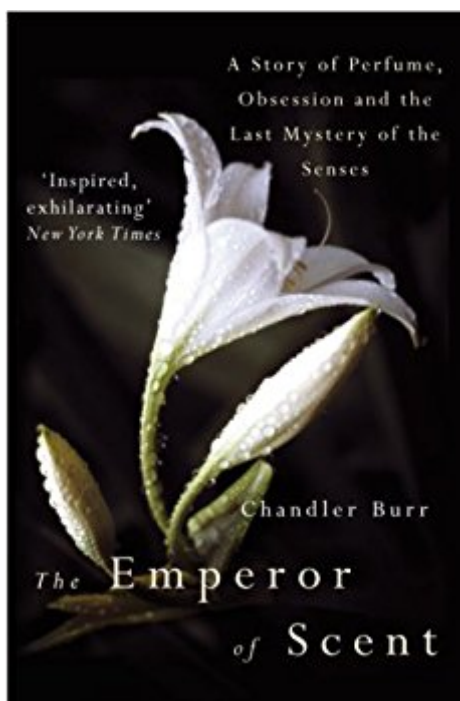


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The Emperor Of Scent



Synopsis

In the tradition of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* and James Gleick's *Genius*, *The Emperor of Scent* tells the story of Luca Turin, an utterly unusual, stubborn scientist, his otherworldly gift for perfume, his brilliant, quixotic theory of how we smell, and his struggle to set before the world the secret of the most enigmatic of our senses.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this absorbing book, Burr describes the fragrance industry and how scents are created and marketed, weaves a "scientific morality tale" of professional "corruption in the most mundane and systemic and virulent and sadly human sense of jealousy and calcified minds and vested interests," and attempts to explain and defend Luca Turin's novel theory of smell. He succeeds with the first two goals. Readers will learn about the seven "Big Boys" (the companies that create virtually all new scents) and how their chemists and perfumers produce fragrance. Whether you enjoy this aspect of the book depends, perhaps, on your interest in fragrance itself; the workings of these businesses fascinated me, but the descriptions of various scents (as well as Turin's remarkably nondescript reviews from his "perfume guide") struck me as tedious. Burr also portrays scientists as plagued by self-interest and laziness and resistance to new ideas. This suggestion always surprises lay

audiences, but it is hardly news to readers of Thomas Kuhn or of science writing in general. Galileo, Mendel, the early proponents of the Big Bang Theory, and many others encountered the same hostility or indifference faced by Turin. The success of the third goal--detailing and defending Turin's olfactory research--is limited, however. On the one hand, Burr ably elucidates the prevailing theory--that we sense molecules by their shape--and raises the standard objections to this view. He then clearly presents Turin's theory: that smell results from molecular vibration (more specifically, from electron tunneling).

"Start with the deepest mystery of smell" says author Chandler Burr in the opening stanza. "No one knows how we do it. Despite everything, despite the billions the secretive giant corporations of smell have riding on it and the powerful computers they throw at it, despite the most powerful sorcery of their legions of chemists and the years of toiling in the labs and all the famous neurowizardry aimed at mastering it, the exact way we smell things--anything, crushed raspberry and mint, the subway at West Fourteenth and Eighth, a newborn infant--remains a mystery". In this gripping and entrancing book, Chandler Burr tackles the life story of Luca Turin, a man with an unusually sensitive nose, and a man obsessed by perfume and smell, a sense that commands a 20 billion dollar entrancing industry of flavour and odors. I was bowled over by Turin, at least the way Burr has described him; a brilliant, feisty, passionate, uniquely creative and completely non-conformist scientist trying to decipher a deep puzzle. Strangely, we still don't know how exactly we smell, and Turin set about to find out just how. Collecting together bits and pieces of biology, chemistry and physics, recent and past, he resurrected a fifty year old theory of smell in an astoundingly novel way. Burr also chronicles the intense interactions Turin had with other scientists, prima donnas in the field, big perfumery company scientists and executives, and the editors of the prestigious journal Nature. Turin was as much of a public person as a private one. In the end, Turin fails to convince most of them of the value of his theory, and ends up publishing his theory in a reasonably good but not blockbuster journal.

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