



Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume

Barbara Herman

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Let *Scent and Subversion* take you for a whiff on the wild side of 20th century perfume.

Perfume has been -- and continues to be -- subversive. By playing with gender conventions, highlighting the ripe smells of the human body, or celebrating queer and louche identities, 20th-century perfume broke free from the assumptions of the prior century, and became a largely unrecognized part of the social and style revolutions of the modern era.

In *Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume*, Barbara Herman continues her irreverent, poetic, and often humorous analysis of vintage perfumes and perfume ads that she began on her popular blog YesterdaysPerfume.com. The book features descriptions of over 300 perfumes, starting with Fougère Royale (1882) and ending with Demeter's Laundromat (2000).

Lavishly illustrated with more than 100 vintage perfume ads, it will also regale you with essays on scent appreciation, a glossary of important perfume terms and ingredients, and tips on how to begin your own foray into vintage and contemporary perfume. Herman also looks to the future through interviews with scent visionaries such as odor expert and "professional provocateur" Sissel Tolaas, punk perfumer Antoine Lie, and Martynka Wawrzyniak, the artist behind "Smell Me," the world's first olfactory self-portrait.

The perfect book for perfume aficionados (aka "perfumistas") as well as connoisseurs of modern fashion and design, feminist and LGBTQ historians, and fans of vintage advertising.

Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume Details

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Author : Barbara Herman

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Barbara Herman**

From Reader Review Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume for online ebook

Jordan River says

I am walking along the longest path of the world, searching for the book of my heart.

Vien Tuc
?à L?t

Imagine a whole world where everyone smells of CK One. You probably don't have to imagine; you have probably been there as has Barbara Herman from Yesterday's Perfume. One day Barbara rebelled against office-friendly scents and went searching for the rude, the loud, the odd, the weird and the impolite. What she mostly found was vintage perfume and then some cutting edge 21st century olfactive artists. This led her on a fragrant journey through the 20th century which became her book *Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Fragrance*.

Throughout the book are pictures like posters for a scent cinema or as Barbara writes...

"like movie posters to perfume's invisible cinema."

These posters have been collected by Barbara over many years and reveal a lot about perfume, society and marketing 'art'.

This is not a picture book though there are many full colour pictures. Barbara starts off with the thoughts of Aristotle and Plato and continues through Fliess and Freud to Chandler Burr, Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez. She quotes Olivia Giacobetti, Christophe Laudamiel, and Avery Gilbert. In Part 3 there are interviews with Étienne de Swardt, Antoine Lie, Sissal Tolaas, and Martynka Wawrzyniak as well as a profile on Christopher Brosius.

In Part 1 Barbara courses through the development of 'Perfume: is it art? I like Barbara's conclusion that Perfume is a language.

Part 2 is a tour de force of 300+ vintage fragrances, including drugstore, all with back stories that you may have never heard before. I am not a vintage connoisseur so I learnt a lot from this book. If you know your vintage 'fumes then I imagine you will be delighted with the way they are portrayed in *Scents and Subversion*.

On Jicky

"the personality of a cat... sometimes with perfume more is more."

While I know the house Santa Maria Novella I had never heard of Peau d'Espagne – now I have and now I have ordered it on the strength of Barbara's description...

"so strong you can almost taste it."

Did you know that Caron released a 1911 perfume called Narcisse Noir , The Black Narcissus?

One perfume is described as...

"a sexual flower, one that is at its most fragrant, from a meadow in full bloom on the hottest spring day, visited by the horniest, healthiest bees at the height of health."

I won't tell you which one. Nor will I tell you what Jungle Gardenia by Tuvaché smelt like in 1932 or which perfume house released a Coconut Cuir Chypre.

There are tantalizing 'notes not known' under many perfumes. This is bound to provide additional material for the 2nd edition as Vintage Perfumistas analyze and discuss their knowledge and note proposals across The Fragrant Stratosphere. Octavian Coifan and Yann Vasnier are credited with supplying some previously never-before-revealed notes from vintage samples sent to them by Barbara.

On Modern vs Vintage

"the difference between modern and vintage perfumery is akin to the difference between polyester and velvet."

Part III looks at the future of scent and tells the the story of how the author's nose lost it's virginity. Perspective on the work of Étienne de Swardt, Antoine Lie, Christopher Brosius, Sissal Tolaas, Martynka Wawrzyniak, and Christophe Laudamiel make for an interesting read as does the chapter called A Brief History of Animal Notes in Perfume.

I think coffee table for the hardcover and the e-book for bedside reading.

This is a book you could read again and again as your own knowledges grows and as vintage bottles materialize on your own fragrant journey. If you already know everything then here it is all in one place. If you are new to perfume appreciation then a glossary and a guide called "Perfume 101: How to become an Informed Perfume Lover", will become your reference points as you begin your own fragrant journey.

On the website Now Smell This, Aleta describes this book as

"a worthy flanker to Perfumes: The Guide, one that takes something of the original format in order to build its own point of view."

Yes it is worthy flanker; a great companion volume.

In this book you will read about perfume set to music; this book is perfume set to words, erudite words that bespeak a mountain of research. Barbara has walked a long path, searching and researching. She has climbed the perfume mountain and found her own spot on the vintage plateau. What a view. This is the book of her heart.

A sample of pictures from the book

Deb says

I bought this after hearing an interview with the author on NPR. I have to admit, most of the information in the book about how perfumes changed over the past century was shared in the interview. The new information consisted of a short "biographical" sketch of all the perfumes the author tested, the fragrance notes, and once in awhile, some interesting trivia about it. Her thesis is that perfume types changed as the role of women changed - from the intentional, but subtle, seduction fragrances of the first part of the twentieth century to the clean, "office" scents of the end of the century. She mentioned (briefly) the dilemma perfumers face as animal protection laws change what materials they can use to create their scents. The second part of the book described several intellectual and artistic attempts to create and exhibit scents derived solely from human secretions. I was disappointed in the book; I was expecting a more in-depth analysis of her thesis. I did appreciate finding out why my favorite scent - Shalimar -- doesn't smell the way it used to though.

Eric says

I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads.

At first, I thought Barbara Herman's book *Scent and Subversion: Decoding a Century of Provocative Perfume* was just a collection of notes on various scents, nothing more than a catalog of perfumes or colognes and Herman's reviews of them. But as I read more of the book, I came to understand the context Herman was using for this information, the idea that these scents are an embodiment as well as a subversion of current mores. She focuses especially on how to read perfumes in a feminist light - how perfumes (not only their smells, but their packaging, their ad text & images, and their names) would either uphold the current state of feminism (or lack thereof) or challenge that state outright. When read in this light, the book is both highly informative and enjoyable.

Herman starts the book by introducing herself (she is a writer, perfume blogger, and obsessive scent seeker) and her approach to the topic. She then breaks down 20th century perfume into each decade with a general grouping (1930s = The Dirty '30s, 1980s = Think Big, etc.). The book ends with several essays on the future of perfumes and post-modernist takes on the idea of scents in general. Herman also includes a scent glossary and a list of other recommended books.

Rebecca says

I've been fascinated by scents for years now—not perfumes, but everyday scents: cedar closets, wet earth, cement, tea leaves, tree leaves, fir and pine needles, pencils, basements, matches, old books. When I started learning about perfume, my interest was really more solipsistic than academic: I dreamed of finding the perfect concoction that somehow perfectly expressed my thoughts and moods. Barbara Herman says we can “see perfume as instructive, a bridge between the world and our oft-neglected sense of smell. Like reading poetry to understand the lyricism in demotic, everyday speech, perfume connects us to the olfactory wonderland that is around us.” *Scent and Subversion* moves beyond—way beyond—the personal connection we have to scents and digs into the history, art, and science of perfumery.

Most of the book is like an encyclopedia of landmark vintage perfumes, organized chronologically. For each

scent, the author provides cultural, historical, and social commentary; describes, analyses, and interprets the fragrance; and lists the top, heart, and base notes. We have different taste in fragrances: she favors animalic chypres and I suppose I'm more into minimalist woody scents. But Herman had a knack for imbuing each fragrance with mystery and allure, almost tempting me to bid on decants of Bandit so I could smell "a bouquet of flowers wrapped with a black whip" and Tabu, "the prostitute's perfume."

I was so taken with Herman's descriptions of perfumes that I started a long list of scents I want to sniff or re-sniff. I'm especially curious to smell the perfumes I remember from my childhood and early adulthood now that I know more about them. It turns out that I have memories and associations with many, many perfumes. As a preteen, I had a small sample of Dior's Fahrenheit for men (1988), which Herman describes as "classically masculine." I was surprised that she didn't mention what I've always found so striking and appealing about Fahrenheit—that unmistakable petrol note that rises up out of the fresh, citrusy opening.

Another one on the re-sniff list is Bulgari Black (1998). I've never quite understood the hype surrounding this one, which Herman declares a "masterpiece of twenty-first century perfumery." For me, after the initial blast of rubber, which is so intriguing, the scent charges straight to the dry down. On my skin, the rubber turns into a bland, powdery vanilla and stays there. I want to try it again and see if I can get the complexity. I want to pick out the lapsang souchang in the top notes. The base sounds more dynamic than I remembered, with a blend of cedar, sandalwood, and leather in addition to the vanilla/musk/amber I could detect the last time I tried it.

Throughout the book, Herman rants against the banality of the insipid fruity and shampoo-y clean scents that have dominated the perfume scene for the last two decades. She makes a great case for embracing older, more complex formulas that blend pleasant smells with darker, animalic notes. Though I'm not sure I'd ever grow to love the musky and civety concoctions of ages past the way Herman has, I feel like I get them now—or I could learn to get them. Maybe it's time to give Shalimar and Chanel No. 5 another sniff!

Scent and Subversion is a well-researched, well-written, fascinating tour of modern perfumery (from the 1880s to now). Barbara Herman makes a compelling argument for considering perfume as an art form, "as an aesthetic of pop culture that is worth of analysis, shaped by and shaping the culture in which it is embedded."

Telesilla says

Scent and Subversion is essentially a catalog of vintage perfumes. Herman reviews both the classics--Shalimar, Chanel No 5 and so on--as well as a lot of more obscure perfumes and even some drug store brands like Jovan's Wild Musk. Arranged by decade and then by year within each decade, this is a wonderful look at a century of perfume. The book is lavishly illustrated with gorgeous vintage perfume ads.

Herman's a good reviewer with an obviously well trained nose--obviously no perfume review can possibly come close to smelling the perfume, but she does a good job of interspersing the technical terminology with her own experience of the perfume. There's a glossary of terms at the end of the book; it's fairly basic, but it's a good start.

This is about to turn I to a rant, and in a way, it's not fair to the author or the book. It really is an excellent book and should be on the shelf/kindle of anyone who loves perfume. I'd recommend it to anyone interested in perfumes or even the way trends in style changed during the 20th century.

Herman, of course, has her own preferences, but, up to a point, she manages to be fairly objective. And then she hits the 70s and what was a five star book starts to lose that fifth star. While talking about the perfumes of the decade in which she first became aware of perfume, she becomes very condescending about both the current trends in perfumes aimed at teens and twenty-somethings and the lack of anything good at places like Forever 21 and the drugstores. She seems to forget a few things. One, she's not only an adult, but an adult with a trained nose, so of course most of the mainstream perfumes are going to smell kind of boring. Two, she's not the only one who grew up in the 70s and let me tell you, most of the perfume available in drugstores and places where teens shopped was godawful. I suspect that, just like then, there are a few gems buried in the aisles of your local CVS these days. Third, when they're at that age most people want to fit in, so if your friends are all wearing Flowerbomb, you might not want to wear Cuir de Gardenia and smell like leather and gardenias.

Finally, there's nothing wrong with a nice "frutichouli". You can do a lot worse than something sweet and fruity that's grounded by a darker, slightly dirty, woody note. Sure, some of them are awful, but I've smelled some godawful niche perfumes too. Herman's also got a beef with the 90s "clean" trend, even while explaining that things like CK One were a response to stuff like Giorgio. It's not that I mind her preferences; in fact they match a lot of mine. It's that, like a lot of food snobs, she forgets that sometimes you get tired of the complexities of single sourced, 78% cocoa content dark chocolate and just want to snack on a handful of M&Ms.

In her look to the future, she mentions some cutting edge, niche perfumers and a couple of scent-based art installations, but she completely ignores all the indie brands like BPAL run largely by women who started blending perfume in their kitchens because they too were tired of the same old, same old. Is Beth at BPAL or are the perfumers at Nocturne Alchemy coming up with anything as unusual or cutting edge as Antoine Lie at Etat Libre d'Orange? I have no idea. But the trend should be in the conversation the same way the food truck trend should be in a conversation about the future of cooking and food trends.

Alysa H. says

I received this book through Goodreads First Reads.

First of all, the hardcover version of this book is a beautiful thing to behold. With its 'femme fatale' (Marlene Dietrich?) dust jacket, its purple boards, and plenty of full-color images of vintage perfume ads, the book as an object is as seductive as some of the perfumes it endeavors to describe. I half-expected it to smell like a Dior concoction itself! Kudos to Lyons Press for this presentation.

Now for the contents. Herman, as a perfume blogger, has committed herself to the difficult task of describing scent. Not having smelled the majority of the perfumes that she covers, and not being a seasoned "perfumista" at all, I don't know whether I'd agree with all of her assessments, but I certainly appreciate them, and this book has certainly given me the language with which to begin decoding perfumes myself, should I decide to do so.

On her blog, Herman posts about different scents individually. She will of course mention other perfumes if they have relevance to the one she is reviewing in any given post, but I imagine that it was not until she compiled this that she fully grouped everything in true chronological order. The majority of this book indeed comprises Herman's collected notes on what must be hundreds of perfumes, ordered by year of first release.

Some entries are quite sparse, and others comparatively long and including more details on things like production history. I prefer the latter type of entry and wish there were more of them. Coming to this book explicitly from a "cultural studies" perspective, that's more the kind of thing I'm looking for.

Perfumes are grouped by decade (e.g. The Dirty '30s), and Herman briefly introduces each decade/section with some context in order to help identify patterns. I really wish that these introductions were more fleshed out, in part because at times the omission of some details might actually undermine the main argument. For example, Herman mentions the well-known fact that during the 1940s, WWII resulted in many American women working outside the home, and the end of the war saw their oft-ambivalent return to it. Herman tries to show that this ambivalence is reflected in the popular fragrances of the time. Now this is all well and good, but what Herman does not mention is that almost every single perfume that she covers (from the beginning up through about the 1970s), was created and produced in France. The situation in France was quite different in WWII, and it would have been interesting to know more about whether French fragrances popular in America were also a hit there, how production may have been affected by the Nazi Occupation, whether the producers were consciously inventing scents that they thought would appeal to the American market and thus possibly *manipulating* the trends of the American market. This is but one example of the kind of rigour that is beyond the scope of Herman's book.

Speaking of the 1970s, that chapter is HUGE. By far the longest. Is it because the 1970s saw the first large boom in perfume production and purchasing due to a rise in middle-class disposable income? A rise in affordable Ready-to-Wear designer brands and thus a parallel interest in branded perfume for the masses? Is it because the 1970s are the earliest decade from which Herman has been able to obtain larger numbers of samples, due to relative price and/or lack of scarcity? I imagine it's all of the above but Herman simply never confirms it. This omission doesn't point to a lack of rigorous research, but simply one of many points in the book at which additional context would have been welcome, and probably easy to provide.

Finally, I should mention that I read this book cover-to-cover. Since the bulk of the book is the chronological collection of perfume notes, it can be used -- and would perhaps better be used -- as a reference guide. But reading it all did help me to see patterns. The only real downside is that, much like when your nose gets tired and confused after smelling dozens of different bottles at Sephora, *they all start to seem exactly the same*. Which is quite the opposite of what perfume-lovers want, right?!

To conclude, I liked this book a lot. It made me think about perfume in a new way. It made me think about scent and smell in a new way (especially the short essays at the end, about the future of scents and some of the artists who are working in the medium of smells!). But I would have liked to read more about cultural and historical context, how politics affects perfume production, how perfume can queer gender identity -- this is hinted upon, but never covered in a satisfactory way. There just isn't *quite* as much for the non-perfumista in this book as I was hoping for.

And yes, I am experiencing an urge to sniff out some vintage Passion (1988), which my mother used to wear when I was a kid, before it was reformulated...

Porkpie says

If you're a serious 'fumehead, a word of warning about Scent and Subversion: it will make you insane from craving what is reviewed in this book.

It will make you stay up late at night, hitting refresh on eBay looking for the perfumes listed, and for the gorgeous artwork this book includes as illustrations.

It will make you don black clothing and mourn the state of perfumery today, compared to what it once was in the 20's, 30's and 40's.

It will make you realize with sudden clarity that blowing 40 bucks on a half-milliliter of stink from 80 years ago is not only the right thing to do with your money, but an act of moral courage.

For the rest of you, there's always Acqua di Gio and the mall is open at 10am - 9pm Monday through Sunday. Good luck and God Bless.

Joyce says

THIS IS THE MOST INTERESTING,FUN BOOK I HAVE READ ALL YEAR!LOVE THE OLD ADS AND QUOTES. I LIKE THAT THE BOOK DESCRIBES THE ELEMENTS THAT MAKE UP EACH PERFUME. I CAN SMELL THEM IN MY MIND. I ALSO ENJOYED THE INFO. ABOUT THE PERFUMERS WHO MADE EACH PERFUME. I FOUND PERFUMES INCLUDED THAT I WORE,MY MOM WORE AND EVEN MY GRANDMOTHERS FAVORITE! I SHARED THIS BOOK WITH SOME FRIENDS AND WE DISCUSSED THE MEMORIES THE SMELL OF OUR FAVORITE PURFUMES BROUGHT BACK. THE BOOK WAS VERY WELL WRITTEN AND INCLUDES ANYTHING YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT PERFUME INCLUDING WEBSITE LINKS. I WILL REREAD THIS BOOK MANY TIMES. I GIVE THIS BOOK 6 STARS!

Patricia says

I was so lucky to win a copy of this book from Goodreads. If you are a perfume lover, or if you know someone who is, this is a must-have book. It is a work of art, with wonderful descriptions of vintage fragrances, along with original, colorful print ads throughout the book. i have a passion for fragrance, so I love reading about them. I am finding myself lost in the pages of this wonderful book!

GooseberryCompote says

Scent is an art form, which makes this an art history of the 20th century through scent.

Great essays, great reviews, great understanding of each decade's priorities for beauty, eroticism, gender etc. through what the decade wanted and avoided in scent.

K. says

I vacillate between wanting to construct a shrine to this book that is filled with violet posies and clove-studded pomanders, and wanting to buy all remaining copies so I can bury them in a 60-ft. deep pit so the peasant Osmothèque in my linen cupboard can grow and grow and grow and grow forever and ever and ever unimpeded.

DragonFrog says

I really wanted to love this book, since I love vintage perfume and Barbara Herman's blog, "Yesterday's Perfume." But, I found this book quite disappointing. Many (most?) of the perfume descriptions are taken straight from the blog. I don't have a problem with that; it would be fine to have a hard copy of the information in the blog, and support the author.

But, the book's descriptions of perfumes are shorter and less in-depth than the blog posts! IMO, many of the most interesting anecdotes and descriptions are missing. The book is pretty and fun to look at, but the blog has more depth and is a better resource.

Saatwik Katiha says

A major part (part II) of the book is constituted of the idea of reviewing select fragrances in a decade wise manner. This structure is attractive but the reviews themselves are often verbose to the point of boredom. Notes fly thick and fast in the descriptions, making many scents seem over-analyzed. That said, the smaller parts I and III are much more insightful and digestible.

RNOCEAN says

If you are a fumehead like myself, you owe it to yourself to read this book! I had to keep a little notebook next to me to add all of the new scents that I wanted to try!

A very well-written and lighthearted review of fragrance that is documented throughout with those gorgeous vintage perfume ads. I thought I knew a great deal about fragrance but I learned even more from this book.

There is also a chapter for vintage fragrance lovers that is so on target for newbies that I would highly recommend buying the book just to read this section. It explains how to go about what seems an impossible mission!

JuJu says

So, I never complain about the price of books. Books are magical and necessary and I would no sooner

complain about the price of them than complain about the price of a critical medication.

Having said that, I'm a little irritated that I paid \$18 dollars for this on Amazon (the cover price is \$24.95!!) There just isn't enough to it to justify the cost. Herman analyses (briefly) 20th century perfume trends, from 1910ish to 1990. She lists maybe a dozen perfumes from each era with a brief description (a mix of concrete detail; basenotes, ingredients, etc and her own subjective analysis) There is a little bit of advice about how to start a vintage perfume collection, nothing I couldn't learn for free on the internet. The biggest value here is the color advertisements for some of the perfumes. Those are cool but still not enough to justify the cost.

Here's what you should do if you want an good analysis of perfume trends and glossary of some popular or "important" scents. You can get a used copy of "Perfumes: The A-Z Guide" by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez on Amazon for about 5 dollars. You can get a new copy for \$15. Where they may not discuss as many "out of production" scents as Herman they do refer to many of them and they discuss ten times as many scents with better descriptions (and greater wit).

Want to start a vintage perfume collection? Go onto Fragrantica.net or some similar site and read the excellent advice that other collectors offer for newbies.
