

The sweet smell of success

If you are at all interested in perfume, one of life's greatest sensual pleasures, this is an essential possession

SUPER-opinionated, highly informed reference-books I treasure. Whatever the subject, they all have a common tone — not just delivering the facts but ordering and ranking them with a vengeance.

In every field, there's one of these — Hugh Johnson on wine, say, Hans Keller on Mozart and Haydn ... On trees, for example, you can't beat Alan Mitchell's guides for swingeing opinion. He says of *Robinia pseudoacacia*, widely planted around London, that it's a good foil to grimy Portland limestone and nothing else. "In no other circumstances is there any use for this tree. It is graceless, rough and brittle; it is very late into leaf and early to shed without noticeable change of colour; it fails to flower more often than it succeeds ..."

There we have the true note of exasperated expertise, expressed alternately in passionate enthusiasm and contemptuous dismissal. You find it in such great works as David Thomson's *Biographical Dictionary of Cinema* (so much better in the earlier editions) or Jane Grigson's books on *Fish, Vegetables and Fruit*.

These are all writers who really know what they are talking about and urgently want to share the conclusions they've drawn from years of study. Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez join their company with this brilliant survey of



BOOK OF THE WEEK DAVID SEXTON

Perfumes: The Guide
by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez
(Profile, £20)

perfumes. It's at once a great read and a startling education.

Turin, 54, is a biophysicist at MIT who originally published a guide to perfumes in French in 1992 and went on to develop an entirely new theory of the sense of smell, based not on the shape of molecules but their vibrations. A book explaining his work by Chandler Burr is called simply *The Emperor of Scent*. Sanchez, 31, another perfume freak in her own right, met Turin after emailing him via his blog; they recently married. Their contributions to the

Guide are signed separately — occasionally they disagree slightly — but they are equally zippily written.

A 50-page introduction answers some FAQs. What scent really drives men wild? "Bacon," says Sanchez, moving briskly on.

A 300-page alphabetical gazetteer of perfumes follows, briefly describing and star-rating them all. It's endlessly browsable, partly because the writing is funny, partly because it is so extraordinarily illuminating. Trying to convert scents into words is notoriously difficult — but their combination of scientific and industrial expertise with offbeat evocation hits the spot every time. You can look up a perfume you've known for years and after three sentences understand more about it than you ever have before. It's that good.

The put-downs are lethal. Creed's *Love in White*: "If this were a shampoo offered with your first shower after sleeping rough for two months in Nouakchott, you'd opt to keep the lice." (The house of Creed fares badly altogether.) *Dolce & Gabbana's Light Blue pour Homme*: "Probably the worst masculine in production today, a combination of, it seems, only two armour-piercing notes that happen to be the most unpleasant in perfumery, marine and woody amber: plague and cholera at once." *Cartier's Pasha*: "I'll bet it's big in Brunei."

But the enthusiasms are just as wild. In an appendix, they list the 10 best feminines, 10 best masculines, the best feminines for men and masculines for women, the best florals, chypres and orientals, the best quiet fragrances and the best loud fragrances (trying out Dior's *Poison* is "like road-testing an Abrams M1 tank in the rush-hour — people just seem to get out of your way ...")

Turin tells us he himself wore New York, an "orange amber" from *Parfums de Nicolaï*, for a decade — and he's a huge admirer of this small house altogether: "Patricia de Nicolaï, owner and perfumer, is one of the unsung greats of the fragrance world, and her superb creations survive in spite of inept marketing ..." I'll say. I went last week to the tiny shop they have in the Fulham Road to check it out and found that, so superbly French is it, it closes for lunch every day. Now Turin wears just *Caldey Island Lavender*, made by Cistercian monks in South Wales, "simply the best lavender soliflore on earth" (Manufactum sell it for £9 — and it is delectable). There are lots of scents cited here they make you want to try and so far I've not found a bad recommendation among them — *L'Artisan Parfumeur's Timbuktu*, a "woody smoky" which Turin adores, previously unknown to me, is just as stirring as he says.

Naturally, the pair both rate *Guerlain* high (four of the top 10 feminines —

Après L'Ondée, *L'Heure Bleu*, *Mitsouko* and *Shalimar*) but they remain highly selective about which ones they admire. They are very sharp on which great names are now degraded versions of the product, and precise about which perfumes are derivative of which originals. Nor are they label snobs, putting at the very top rank such relative cheapos as *Davidoff's Cool Water* and *Tommy Hilfiger's Tommy Girl*.

To be sure, there are plenty of ways in which it could easily be improved in another edition. There should be an index listing the perfumes by their brands. There should be some indication of relative prices, a question they mostly ignore. And there are a few odd omissions, such as any entry for the great Viennese fragrance *Knize 10*, though they discuss it reverently in passing (again, *Manufactum* sells it — the *Manufactum* catalogue itself being another of these superbly opinionated and informed references in my view).

But if you are interested at all in perfume — and since it's one of the great sensual pleasures, who, man or woman, is not? — this book is nothing less than an essential possession. Most books that are called life-changing don't make the least little difference to anybody whatsoever. In its own field, this one deserves the name.