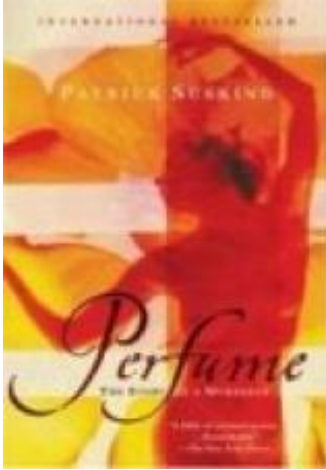


# Perfume

by Patrick Süskind

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## About the Book

An acclaimed bestseller and international sensation, Patrick Süskind's classic novel provokes a terrifying examination of what happens when one man's indulgence in his greatest passion-his sense of smell-leads to murder.

In the slums of eighteenth-century France, the infant Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is born with one sublime gift-an absolute sense of smell. As a boy, he lives to decipher the odors of Paris, and apprentices himself to a prominent perfumer who teaches him the ancient art of mixing precious oils and herbs. But Grenouille's genius is such that he is not satisfied to stop there, and he becomes obsessed with capturing the smells of objects such as brass doorknobs and frest-cut wood. Then one day he catches a hint of a scent that will drive him on an ever-more-terrifying quest to create the "ultimate perfume"-the scent of a beautiful young virgin. Told with dazzling narrative brilliance, *Perfume* is a hauntingly powerful tale of murder and sensual depravity.

## Discussion Guide

1. Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is born in a food market that had been erected above the Cimetire des Innocents, the "most putrid spot in the whole kingdom" [p. 4]. He barely escapes death at his birth; his mother would have let him die among the fish guts as she had her four other children. But Grenouille miraculously survives. How would you relate the circumstances of his birth to the life he grows up to live?

2. When the wet nurse refuses to keep Grenouille because he has no smell and therefore must be a "child of the devil" [p. 11], Father Terrier takes him in. But he is exasperated. He has tried to combat "the superstitious notions of the simple folk: witches and fortune-telling cards, the wearing of amulets, the evil eye, exorcisms, hocus-pocus at full moon, and all the other acts they performed" [p. 14]. In what ways can **Perfume** be read as a critique of the eighteenth century's conception of itself as the Age of Reason? Where else in the novel do you find rationality being overcome by baser human instincts?

3. Throughout the novel, Grenouille is likened to a tick. Why do you think Süskind chose this analogy? In what ways does Grenouille behave like a tick? What does this analogy reveal about his character that a more straightforward description would not?

4. Grenouille is born with a supernaturally developed sense of smell. He can smell the approach of a thunderstorm when there's not a cloud in the sky and wonders why there is only one word for smoke when "from minute to minute, second to second, the amalgam of hundreds of odors mixed iridescently into ever new and changing unities as the smoke rose from the fire" [p. 25]. He can store and synthesize thousands of odors within himself and re-create them at will. How do you interpret this extraordinary ability? Do you think such a sensitivity to odor is physically possible? Do you feel Süskind wants us to read his novel as a kind of fable or allegory? Why do you think Süskind chose to build his novel around the sense of smell instead of one of the other senses?

5. What motivates Grenouille to commit his first murder? What does he discover about himself and his destiny after he has killed the red-haired girl?

6. Do the descriptions of life in eighteenth-century France--the crowded quarters, the unsanitary conditions, the treatment of orphans, the punishment of criminals, etc.--surprise you? How are these conditions related to the ideals of enlightenment, reason, and progress that figure so prominently in eighteenth-century thinking?

7. The perfumer Baldini initially regards Grenouille with contempt. He explains, "Whatever the art or whatever the craft--and make a note of this before you go!--talent means next to nothing, while experience, acquired in humility and with hard work, means everything" [p. 74]. And yet Grenouille is able to concoct the most glorious perfumes effortlessly and with no previous experience or training. What do you think the novel as a whole conveys about the relationship between genius and convention, creativity and destruction, chaos and order?

8. The narrator remarks, "Odors have a power of persuasion stronger than that of words, appearances, emotions, or will. The persuasive power of an odor cannot be fended off, it enters into us like breath into our lungs, it fills us up, imbues us totally. There is no remedy for it" [p. 82]. Do you think this is true? Why would an odor have such power? In what ways does Grenouille use this power to his advantage?

9. Some reviewers have claimed that the Süskind's writing in **Perfume** is "verbose and theatrical," while others have described it as "sensuous and supple." Clearly, the writing is more extravagantly imaginative than the pared down minimalism of much recent American fiction. How do you respond to Süskind's prose? How do you respond to the critical reactions outlined above?

10. Grenouille is introduced as "one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages" [p. 3]. Does Süskind manage to make him a sympathetic character, in spite of his murders

and obsessions? Or do you find him wholly repellent? How might you explain Grenouille's actions? To what extent do his experiences shape his behavior? Do you think he is inherently evil?

**11.** When Grenouille emerges from his self-imposed seven-year exile, he is brought to the attention of the marquis de La Taillade-Espinasse, whose theory that "life could develop only at a certain distance from the earth, since the earth itself constantly emits a corrupting gas, a so-called fluidum letale, which lames vital energies and sooner or later totally extinguishes them" [pp. 139-140] seems to explain Grenouille's sad condition. This theory also contends that all living creatures therefore "endeavor to distance themselves from the earth by growing" upwards and away from the earth [p. 140]. What attitudes and beliefs is Süskind satirizing through the character of Taillade-Espinasse?

**12.** Grenouille becomes, toward the end of the novel, a kind of olfactory vampire, killing young women to rob them of their scents. "What he coveted was the odor of certain human beings: that is, those rare humans who inspire love. These were his victims" [p. 188]. Why does he need the scents of these people?

**13.** In the novel's climatic scene, just as Grenouille is about to be executed, he uses the perfume he's created to turn the townspeople's hatred for him into love and to inspire an orgy which collapses class distinctions and pairs "grandfather with virgin, odd-jobber with lawyer's spouse, apprentice with nun, Jesuit with Freemason's wife--all topsy-turvy, just as opportunity presented" [p. 239]. Grenouille is revered and regards himself as godlike in this triumph. Does he enjoy this moment, or is it a hollow victory? What is the novel suggesting about the nature of human love? About order and disorder?

**14.** After Grenouille leaves the town of Grasse, where he has caused so much death and suffering, his case is officially closed and we're told, "The town had forgotten it in any event, forgotten it so totally that travelers who passed through in the days that followed and casually inquired about Grasse's infamous murderer of young maidens found not a single sane person who could give them any information" [p. 247]. Why do the townspeople react this way? Why isn't it possible for them to integrate what has happened into their daily consciousness?

**15.** How do you interpret the novel's ending, as Grenouille returns to the Cimetire des Innocents and allows himself to be murdered and eaten by the criminals who loiter there? What ironies are suggested by the narrator's assertion that Grenouille's killers had just done something, for the first time, "out of love" [p. 255]?

**16. Perfume** is set in eighteenth-century France and tells an extravagant story of a man possessed with a magical sense of smell and a bizarrely destructive obsession. Do its historical setting and fantastic elements make it harder or easier to identify with? What contemporary issues and anxieties does the story illuminate?

## Author Bio

Patrick Süskind was born in Ambach, near Munich, in 1949. He studied medieval and modern history at the University of Munich. His first play, *The Double Bass*, was written in 1980 and became an international success. It was performed in Germany, in Switzerland, at the Edinburgh Festival, in London, and at the New Theatre in Brooklyn. His first novel, *Perfume* became an internationally acclaimed bestseller. He is also the author of **The Pigeon** and *Mr. Summer's Story*, and a coauthor of the enormously successful German television series *Kir Royal*. Mr. Süskind lives and writes in Munich.

## Critical Praise

"A fable of criminal genius.... Remarkable."

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