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The Perfume Collector

by Kathleen Tessaro

About the Book

London, 1955: Grace Monroe is a fortunate young woman. Despite her sheltered upbringing in Oxford, her recent marriage has thrust her into the heart of London's most refined and ambitious social circles. However, playing the role of the sophisticated socialite her husband would like her to be doesn't come easily to her --- and perhaps never will.

Then one evening a letter arrives from France that will change everything. Grace has received an inheritance from a mysterious benefactor, Eva d'Orsey, whom she's never met.

So begins a search that takes Grace to a long-abandoned perfume shop on Paris's Left Bank, where she discovers the seductive world of perfumers and their muses, and a surprising love story. Told by invoking the three distinctive perfumes she inspired, Eva d'Orsey's story weaves through the decades, from 1920s New York to Monte Carlo, Paris and London.

But these three perfumes hold secrets. And as Eva's past and Grace's future intersect, Grace must choose between the life she thinks she should live and the person she is truly meant to be.

Discussion Guide

1. The book is described as a secret history told in scent. The three perfumes Andre Valmont creates for Eva mark significant turning points in her life and changes in her identity. Do you have a secret history in perfume? What three perfumes best describe different turning points in your life? Discuss the significance that perfume plays in your own life to alter mood or trigger a memory.

2. Each of the main characters is not quite what they seem to be upon first meeting. How do they appear originally, and how do they change? What do you consider to be the significance of this in the story and how does it alter your opinion of them?

3. Should perfume always be pleasing?

4. Grace?s story is based on a real woman?s story. She was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family and only discovered she was actually the child of another man in adulthood, when he left his Paris apartment to her in his will. This woman was never able to reconcile her true history. In the novel, Grace?s discovery profoundly alters who she is and, more importantly, who she might become. Discuss how she?s affected, how it changes her view of herself and what possibilities are open to her now that weren?t before.

5. Do you think Eva a good mother? Point to examples as to why or why not.

6. In the novel, it?s not clear if Grace?s husband has been unfaithful or not. Why do you believe this is kept ambiguous?

7. Imagine you discovered that your parents were not biologically related to you. What part of your identity would change as a result? What personal backstory about who you are and who you ought to be would you feel free to let go of? Would it alter your values or place in the world? Or would it not make any difference to you?

8. Again and again, the phrase ?le droit de choisir? or the right to choose is echoed through the book. It forms the principal legacy that Grace inherits. Why is choice so important to Eva d?Orsay? How does she pass on that legacy?

Ideas:
Try bringing your own three favorite perfumes to your book group and sharing how they relate to your history.

Take a perfume outing with friends --- walk around favorite perfume shops together. Encourage each other to try different scents. Enjoy lunch at a French restaurant.

List your favorite smells.

If you were to have a bespoke perfume made for you, what would the keynotes be and what would it be called?

Author Bio

Born in Pittsburgh, Kathleen Tessaro emigrated to London where she worked as an actress in films, television and theater, while training to be a drama teacher and voice coach. She is the author of the novels ELEGANCE, INNOCENCE and THE FLIRT. Kathleen currently lives in Pennsylvania.

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