

'Perfume' shows author has nose for bizarre

Smell. Of all the ways humans encounter the world, this is perhaps the most mysterious and yet the most natural. Animals, of course, rely on smell to live and hunt, to carry out the most basic activities. But man has relegated his nose to a second-class status, using instead vision and hearing to deal with and define external reality. We disguise bodily scent with roll-ons and sprays, trying to hide what can be described as our most personal attribute.

For Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the dark hero of Patrick Suskind's splendid new novel *Perfume*, such attempts at camouflage are meaningless. For him, scent is both everything and nothing.

Grenouille is born in 1738 in Paris, to a fishmonger who previously had four "stillbirths or semi-stillbirths, for the bloody meat that had emerged had not differed greatly from the fish guts that lay there already, nor lived much longer." From that inauspicious beginning, Grenouille rises to become one of the great monstrous characters of all literature.

The instrument of that rise is, quite simply, his nose. For Grenouille's genius — or more aptly, his gift — is a total sense of smell. His nose serves as the ultimate detective, reaching to the core of reality and enabling Grenouille to sense the verities ordinary men miss. Everything is open to him.

With a sniff, he can sense the composition of any scent, the past and future of any object. He is the world's greatest perfumer, able to create odors that captivate the world, but that when he wears them, shape the world around him. He comes to view the world with disgust, as a seething mass blinded to the world, chained by their narrow view of existence and thus easily deceived.

Grenouille is Faustian in conception, unable to love, with hate the only emotion he ever really knows and fulfillment of his desires his only concern. Yet, unlike Faust, he does not sacrifice his soul for his wants, because in a way, he has no soul to lose. Words like community, responsibility, justice and God are meaningless to him. They are part of a world he does not know, a world unattached to the sensual, a world of abstractions, a world that therefore does not exist for him.

Grenouille is self-obsessed. After he murders a girl to culminate his quest for the very scent of life, he whispers to himself, "I thank you. I thank you, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, for being what you are." The novel traces his life, and his is a life dedicated only to himself and his gift. He grows up in a children's boarding house and is forced to take a job working for a tanner. From there, he wheedles his way into a Parisian scent shop and resurrects the perfumer's failing career with his magnificent ability to create enchanting scents.

Eventually, Grenouille leaves the City of Lights and heads south, searching for the techniques to enable him to extract scents from humans, thereby capturing their essences. But on the way, he becomes infatuated with himself, with the beautiful feeling of being alone, free from the olfactory effluvia of people crowded together.

Grenouille seeks a truly solitary existence, the chance to separate himself from the humanity he finds so repulsive. He finds a place high

when he discovers this he finds he cannot deal with it alone. So, he returns to society.

It is after this return that Grenouille realizes that if he has no scent of his own, then he can use his talent to create scents for himself. And he creates scents that differ according to occasion and need. He has a perfume that makes him inconspicuous, one that makes him seem in a hurry, one that makes old ladies feel sorry for him. He creates a scent with an odor of semen and sweat for when he wishes to be noticed. He controls people's reactions to him by the perfume he chooses to wear.

But all these scents are merely the prologue to his greatest creation. As Suskind paints him, Grenouille is fascinated with two things. The first is himself. The second is his search for the perfect scent, a scent he encounters only twice in his life, a scent that comes from the body of a particularly beautiful virgin just becoming a woman. It is a scent that, just as a master jeweler cuts a perfect diamond and sets it in a diadem to enhance it, so Grenouille, the master perfumer, sets in a crown of odor.

The novel is subtitled "The Diary of a Murderer," and so it is, as Grenouille murders a succession of beautiful virgins and steals their scents, creating the setting in which he puts the ultimate aroma, that which he calls the scent of life. This scent gives him ultimate power, the power to command the love of mankind, to make him the object of ultimate desire. It is the scent that Grenouille imagines will finally gain

him. Of course, when he finally uses the perfume in a brilliantly devised denouement, he does not find what

the beat of Oskar Matzerath's tin drum and the footsteps of Faust on the road toward his own fall. He is sensual in a way that few characters are, an admirer of things beautiful, bathing in a world we do not know but come to envy, a realm of scent.

This is a realm where language is inadequate, where sensation dominates. Grenouille's wickedness comes not merely from his misanthropy, but from his absolute dedication to his own pleasure at the cost of all else. In the end, though, he is unable to conquer himself, unable to live with the fact that he has no scent. For Grenouille, scent is everything. It is what defines a person or an object, what separates one from another. As he has no scent, he has no true identity, no true humanity, and that, ironically enough, he cannot accept.

James Surowiecki

Books

on a mountain top, a kind of burrow deep in a rock where he is completely alone, and revels in his own created world, a world of scent. Happiness is not found there for him, but sensuality and satisfaction are.

So Suskind writes, "He had withdrawn solely for his own personal pleasure, only to be near to himself. No longer distracted by anything external, he basked in his own existence, and found it splendid. He lay in his stony crypt like his own corpse, hardly breathing, his heart hardly breathing — and yet lived as intensively and dissolutely as ever a rake had lived in the wide world outside."

Grenouille's mental experiences while in the mountain are exquisitely described. He selects odors as if they were wines in his cellar or as if they were fine books in his library. Each scent recalls a place, a time, an experience. And Grenouille drinks from the scents passionately and erotically. Throughout the novel, he never once makes love to a woman. But he makes love to his scents, caressing and using them as intensely as anyone ever did a lover.

But, if he goes to the mountain to find himself, he leaves the mountain in flight from himself, from a nightmare born of the fact that he, alone in the world, has no odor. For that is Grenouille's curse, a curse inseparable from his gift. He is the world's greatest perfumer, and the world's greatest loser.

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