

# Perfume: A scented identity

For many, wearing a perfume on a daily basis means wearing an extension of the self, one that remains in the rooms we've passed through, on our clothes, on our pillow. For some, perfume is an invisible signature of their presence, but also a protection, a talisman. Sometimes, this impalpable olfactory envelope supports the body like a prop.

## **Musc, or the scented signature**

*Interview with Percy Kemp,  
Writer, England*

Novelist Percy Kemp has taken this logic to its logical extreme, presenting a character who literally cannot live without his perfume. Percy Kemp is British, was born in Beirut and writes in French. A prolific author of spy novels, with the most recent, *Les Cinq Sœurs*, published in January 2023 by Éditions du Seuil, he explores the notion of perfume as an extension of the self in his 2000 novel *Musc*.

**In your novel *Musc*, the hero, Monsieur Eme, considers his scent as his signature; it is an olfactory transposition of his personality. So, when someone tells him that his smell has changed, due to a reformulation, he is upset, to the point that he frantically tracks down bottles of his original perfume all over France, in a tragic quest. How did you come up with this**

**idea? Is it a deep conviction in you, the power of smell in interpersonal relationships?**

Even leaving aside the importance of pheromones and smells in the reproduction process in the animal kingdom (attraction versus repulsion), the profoundly social dimension of scents and fragrances is vouched for by the very genesis of the novel. When I initially set out to write what was to become *Musc*, I did not have a perfume in mind but rather a sweet. Rowntree's Fruit Gums, to be more precise. The day I found out that the recipe of this favorite confectionary of mine had been slightly altered by Nestlé after it had taken over Rowntree's, I was so upset and incensed that I decided to write about it.

I soon realized, however, that writing about a flavor was no easy thing. It isn't easy because our sense of taste is a personal rather than a social matter. No one will ever reject you, or feel attracted to you, because you like salty or spicy food. Inversely, you would not reject or feel attracted to someone because they happen to have a sweet tooth. Our sense of taste is a matter between us and us

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alone. Not so with our sense of smell. Whereas we might delude ourselves into believing that we wear a perfume for ourselves, we in fact wear it for others, in the same way as we pick and wear our clothes for others. Do we not say that one "wears" a perfume? We wear our fragrance as we wear our clothes. Not only that, but it appears to me that in the process of seduction our fragrance is a far more powerful tool than our suit, our skirt, our blouse, our tennis shoes or our bespoke shoes will ever be. This is because our garments will never be more than external phenotypes, separate from us and always likely to be taken away from us. Whereas by sticking close to our skin and impregnating it, our fragrance turns into our own smell: It becomes an integral part of us.

**What does perfume mean to you in your life? Are you very attached to yours?**

Putting on my fragrance is the finishing touch in a daily process which, every morning, from showering to shaving to dressing, turns my private persona into a public persona. It is, in a way, what in

French painting parlance is called the *vernissage*: the moment when a personal creation and private work of art enters the social fray and turns into a saleable, negotiable and cashable piece of goods. And yes, I'm quite attached to my perfume, which I've been wearing for years and years. Though I'm not really fooled by it, it still gives me the illusion that whereas my world is changing, and whereas my own body is also changing (and not for the better!), with "my" fragrance on, I remain somehow unchanged.

**Since the publication of your book, have you received many testimonials from readers who are viscerally attached to their perfume?**

I did receive a few such letters. And a couple, too, from perfumers, telling me that they often get letters similar to the one Monsieur Eme wrote to his own perfumer. Letters sent to them by clients protesting because their perfume was terminated, or else complaining that their fragrance has been arbitrarily modified and adulterated.

### EXTRACT

Despite its name, his eau de toilette was part and parcel of his sartorial panoply rather than his toiletries. Once he had applied it to his cheeks and clothes, it seared him, as it were, like burning heat searing red meat, and it was as though it suddenly bestowed on him a coherence he had been missing until then. It enveloped him, serving as an outer garment, giving more volume to the movement of his body and tracing the contours of his energy, possibly not visual but certainly sensual. Whatever the case, without his fragrance, Monsieur Eme would have felt naked.

Percy Kemp, *Musc*, Albin Michel, 2000, pp. 15-16.