



# The Emperor of Scent: A True Story of Perfume and Obsession

By Chandler Burr

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The **Emperor of Scent** tells of the scientific maverick Luca Turin, a connoisseur and something of an aesthete who wrote a bestselling perfume guide and bandied about an outrageous new theory on the human sense of smell. Drawing on cutting-edge work in biology, chemistry, and physics, Turin used his obsession with perfume and his eerie gift for smell to turn the cloistered worlds of the smell business and science upside down, leading to a solution to the last great mystery of the senses: how the nose works.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nobody knows for sure what makes our noses work the way they do, not even the \$20-billion-a-year perfume industry's legions of chemists, whose jobs depend on appealing to those noses. So what happens when Luca Turin, a likable scientist who happens to possess an unusually sensitive nose, proposes a new theory of smell that promises to unravel the mystery once and for all? That's what readers find out in this often funny, picaresque exposé of the closed world of whiffs, aromas and odors—and the people who study them. Burr (*A Separate Creation: The Search for the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation*) narrates in depth Turin's efforts to publish in the journal *Nature*: the maddening peer review process lasts more than a year and ends with smug dismissals by scientists who don't understand his work. Turin, whose urbane personality carries the book, runs into similar brick walls when he tries to sell his ideas to the "Big Boys" of the secretive and byzantine perfume industry. Burr, who is skilled at parsing complex science and smart turns of phrase, enters the story in the first person to describe his own difficulties as a journalist writing about Turin: critics clam up and get hostile when asked about Turin's theory. Burr concludes that the hysterical, often incoherent resistance portrayed here "embodies the failure of the scientific process." Grim words for a book so full of wit.

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From Library Journal

While waiting for the Eurostar, Burr, a regular contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly* and author of *A Separate Creation*, met Dr. Luca Turin, the titular emperor. A biophysicist at University College of London, Turin believes that the nose deciphers smell by using not the shape of molecules but their vibrations. He also possesses a unique gift for scent and the ability to write about perfumes as few can. From their chance meeting, Burr set out to write "the simple story of the creation of a scientific theory" by chronicling Turin's work over several years. Having quickly discovered that his subject's story was much more complex, Burr ends up taking readers into the perfume industry and the scientific publishing world. The view is not flattering (the ugly side of peer review is depicted here in all its backstabbing glory), but thanks to Burr's sensible and honest reporting, it is an accurate portrait. Burr is also straightforward about the difficulties of working with a brilliant and eccentric man like Turin. His fascinating book is highly recommended for all collections.

--*Michael D. Cramer, Schwarz BioSciences, RTP, NC*

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From [The New Yorker](#)

A French perfumer, asked to describe a particular scent molecule, declares, "It smells of the woman who neglects herself." It's precisely this pungent leap from chemistry to metaphor that Burr negotiates so well in his fascinating and lucid book about the sense of smell. No one really knows how the nose works. For the person who figures it out, a Nobel prize surely waits, along with the lucrative gratitude of the multinational perfume companies. Burr's candidate is Luca Turin, a London-based research scientist whom he presents as a Continental rogue, unfettered polymath, and pure sensualist. Turin is good company, and his "vibrational" theory of smell neatly upends conventional thinking, by claiming that the nose is the body's spectroscope and analyzes molecules by electron bond rather than by shape. As both the author and the subject admit, the evidence is still preliminary, but the details of Turin's work unfold like a revelation. For his part, Burr does a fine job of turning both the science and the academic jockeying around a possible publication in *Nature* into a pulse-racing affair.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Ellen Weiss:**

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