



## HAND-PICKED HEDIONE

*We don't define musical instruments or  
books by their material make-up, yet when  
it comes to perfume, we love to list.*

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WORDS BY  
**PIA LONG**

PHOTO BY  
**FARIS ALGOSAIBI**

Imagine this: you read a review of a new band, “Sport Noir has an impressive line-up of two electric guitars made from endangered East Indian sandalwood and lovingly hand-painted by artisans in Switzerland. Their drum membranes are specially treated black panther leather and the kit features a long-lost illustration by Marc Chagall. The singer is from a long line of professional musicians and studied at the Juilliard School of music in New York.”

Do you now know whether you’ll like their music? Whether their music is average or brilliant? Will it move you to tears? Would you pay more for their album?

Or this: You walk into a bookshop and see tables and shelves laid out with the latest releases and bestsellers. There are little promotional cards next to each tome, which carefully describe the contents, “The cellulose for this paper was processed in Finland by blonde maidens during the long nightless nights of Nordic summer. The glue in the spine came from the bones of steeds which once served in the Household Cavalry. We have used all 26 letters of the alphabet.”

Will this inform you about the story the author intended to tell? Will it become your favourite book? Does it explain the price?

The absurd reductionism of perfume regarding its ingredients has to stop. Alas, it can’t because we are so woefully lacking with means in which to convey even a hint of the story contained within a scent. When so much of our communication about fragrance occurs between those who have smelt and those who have not; online, in books, magazines and product catalogues. When our perception of odour is as unique as a fingerprint – our olfactory system and our previous scent experiences align to create a unique way of interpreting the volatile molecules wafting up from our skin or other surfaces. Depending upon which genes have been expressed and what sort of associations you have with smells, everyone simply experiences odourant molecules differently to each other. Someone’s soapy scent is another’s herbal dream.

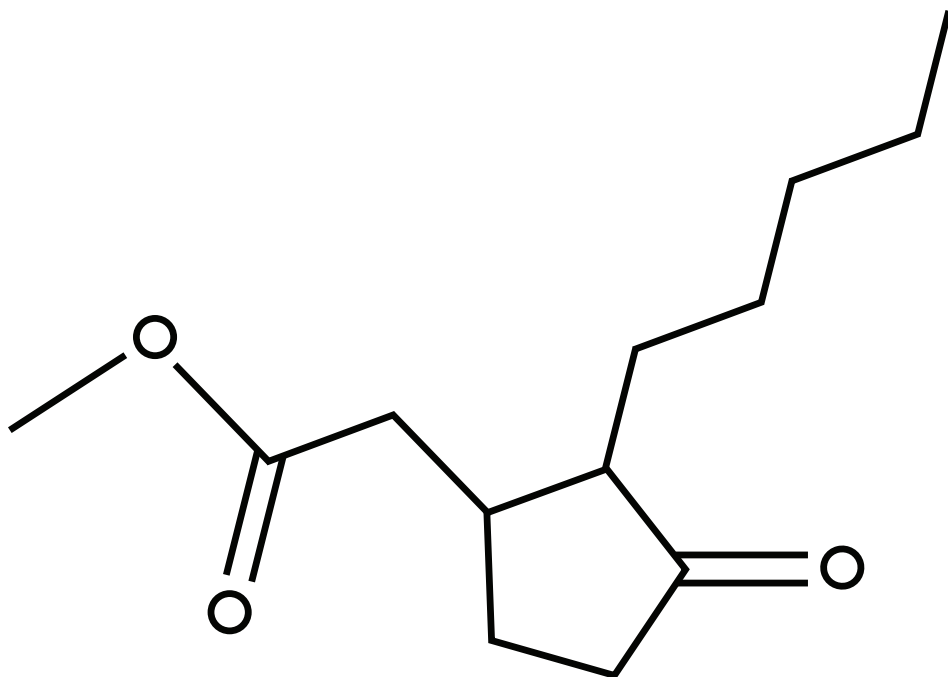
In spite of this, we just can’t seem to get away from listing ingredients when describing them. Not only that, perfume note lists accompanying fragrances have always been created with quite a bit of artistic license. Most of the materials have been omitted. Sometimes these lists are closer to a verbal moodboard than reality. Does it matter if a perfume lists “*angel feathers*” or “*flint*” as notes? Not unless you further insist that a large part of the value of perfume should be measured by its ingredients.

That bottle on the perfume counter is the result of experience, teamwork, artistry, science, vision and marketing. If the juice within was made by a large fragrance supplier, it may have benefitted from a library of hundreds, if not thousands, of existing fragrances and accords, teaching each new generation of perfumers and allowing them to build on existing work. Why should we begrudge a re-imagining when all the stories in the world have already been told (and distilled into handy writing guides like the Seven Basic Plots by Christopher Booker)? Does it mean each new author’s interpretation of old themes is redundant and are unable to thrill us? Do we bemoan the number of new book launches because we already own one detective story? Of course not. We like to return to familiar themes for one good reason: they work. That doesn’t mean they can’t be re-told in new and exciting ways and that we don’t crave to hear the “*The Quest*” again and again in different forms.

Even an indie band will have been influenced by the big names and will use familiar melodies; known techniques to produce an agreeable sound (or in the case of death metal... Let’s not go there). Amateur musicians can, depending on their skill and dedication, outshine a mainstream artist who themselves may be too predictable and over-produced (or a completely fake front, barely held together by the power of rhinestones and Autotune).

Perfumery is an art, science and a craft which can, even in its most banal forms, bring joy to its wearer. Do we always have to read Dostoevsky? Some days a glossy magazine is just the thing.

There has definitely been a change in how



fragrances are brought to market and what that means for the industry and consumers. For a couple of decades, an extra layer of “perfume-as-disposable-merchandise” has been emerging which wasn’t really there before. Even in the 80s and 90s perfume launches were a bigger thing than they are now. There were fewer of them and the ways in which to get them under the noses of the right consumers (read: the ones who will fall in love and keep coming back for more) was an expensive but known game.

The Internet – blogs, social media and online shopping – has made the game much harder and less predictable. Thirty years ago, when you created an expensive TV ad, you could almost guarantee that it would be seen by a huge audience. Not so today. People consume media differently and many people record programs and skip ads entirely. Similarly, print is in decline. No longer will that magazine spread captivate a large proportion of your target market as before. They’re off reading *MakeupAlley* and watching hair tutorials on YouTube.

The cost of the entire process to create a new fragrance can be very high: expert perfumers and evaluators, consumer panels, advertising, sales staff, press launches, custom bottles, packaging... Sadly the budget for the juice is sometimes squeezed for extra short-term profit purely because there is no confidence in the product lasting very long out there. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy born out of the need to have something new all the time to keep abreast of new media. A great perfumer can make cheap ingredients smell expensive and an inexperienced perfumer can make expensive ingredients smell cheap. There is a breaking point though: all the perfumer can hope for is to create a captivating top note with most of their budget and cross their fingers that what remains is inoffensive.

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It’s also a little bit of a myth that only natural raw materials are expensive. There are many synthetic materials which cost hundreds of pounds a kilo, too. Some of them are so potent that only a drop will do, but the same can be said about many natural materials. In reality the juice diluted in alcohol inside that bottle represents a small fraction of the total cost of producing the fragrance. It seems rather cruel to perfumers that this should be the area squeezed but that is largely because in mainstream perfumery the juice is produced by a fragrance house and sold onwards to a brand. At this juncture, the brand will want to get a good deal. This is where independent perfume lines can afford to shine. They can afford to give their perfumers more room to manoeuvre. I would still argue that leading with a story about how hand-picked your hedione is won’t say anything about the artistry and skill of the perfumer.

Nor will it inform the consumer about whether that particular fragrance will speak to them.

Perfumery itself flies in the face of ingredient-led marketing; it has been shown that when we smell a combination of odours, the resulting olfactory impression is not a simple sum of one ingredient added with another. It becomes a new smell altogether. This is the foundation upon which good perfumery rests.

If the aim is to capture as many beauty journalists, bloggers and vloggers as fast as possible, new launches are required. Everything moves at a fast pace and there is a constant hunger for breaking news, exclusives – a new story.

According to *Fragrances of the World*, in 1990, there were approximately 70 new perfume launches. In 2014, there were 1,620. The shift from creating a few dozen scents which must be worth all the effort and carry themselves commercially for a few years to perfume-as-clickbait has been fast. I am

not claiming that every scent in the 80s and 90s was remarkable, neither am I claiming that every scent launched now is unremarkable. Nor is the demand for new the only thing affecting perfumes these days – the regulatory pressure on manufacturers of new materials is enormous and limiting creativity; similar pressures are felt within the perfume labs where overdoses and experimentation have to fall within strict guidelines.

The strategy has changed from heavy investment into one perfume launch and hoping it will stand the test of time – to trying to monetise brands ever more aggressively; trying to create something which will please as many people as possible just enough for them to buy at least one bottle.

Endless flankers (re-mixed fragrances, carrying the name of an original) ensure that there is something new to talk about, even if they don't necessarily always offer anything new to fans of the original. Some flankers may lead new generations towards older, established scents or houses. Some flankers seem to be peculiar attempts at marketing and should really have been launched as their own thing. There have even been cases where a perfectly good perfume has been discontinued when the expectations from the fans of the original didn't match the flanker, even though the scent would have been accepted as a new launch.

What are we really expecting from a perfume? If we are happy for it to be “a nice pong” and don't give it much thought, its function is simply to fragrance us and possibly to make us seem more attractive to potential partners. Many people buy fragrance, accept them as gifts and wear them without much thought, and there is nothing wrong with that. For these consumers, picking up a bottle of scent might be as casual as choosing a new shower gel.

For a number of people, fragrance represents something more. Nowhere did this demand manifest itself more clearly than when Tania Sanchez wrote a passionate polemic for fragrance to be viewed as an art in the introduction for *Perfumes: The A-Z Guide*:

“...this stuff is worth loving. As with the tawdriest pop melody, there is a base pleasure in perfume, in just about any perfume, even the cheapest and most starved of ideas, that is better than no perfume at all. It decorates the day. It makes you feel as if the colors of the air have changed. It's a substitute for having an orchestra follow you around playing the theme song of your choice.”

When framed like that, the expectations even for that “tawdriest pop melody” are raised. We look for meaning, entertainment, joy and parts of our identity in a bottle.

Perfumes have traditionally been thought of as a luxury product and the way in which they are marketed chimes with this, even when the range of prices and types of scent have vastly broadened. This is where some of the cognitive dissonance originates; our unease about buying what seems to be simply scented air and the need to justify the cost. Perfume is a uniquely troublesome product to attach value to. Marketers can exploit this by attaching status to the perfumer, brand, house, heritage and yes, even to magical ingredients. They should tread with care, though. In our current era of transparency and curiosity, telling authentic stories about products and elevating perfumes to an artform seem like better ways to keep the romance in fragrance marketing and continue to fuel imaginations.

**Pia is Finnish and moved to the UK in 1992. She is a council member of the British Society of Perfumers and works for Orchadia Solutions, a fragrance industry consultancy and training provider. While at Lush, she created some of their best-selling product perfumes, including HQ “the smell of a Lush shop in a bottle.” You can find her at [volatilefiction.co.uk](http://volatilefiction.co.uk)**