

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HENNA ARTIST

ALKA JOSHI

The

PERFUMIST

of

PARIS

A NOVEL



BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Reader,

Bonjour, Namaste, Welcome, as the parakeet Madho Singh says in all three novels of the Jaipur Trilogy. With *The Perfumist of Paris*, I wanted the trilogy to come full circle. I've been living with these characters for fourteen years. I know their strengths, their foibles, their insecurities and still, I love them all. They've grown with each novel, come to know themselves and each other better.

Radha, the willful thirteen-year-old girl in *The Henna Artist*, had a baby out of wedlock, yearning for a boy who didn't love her. She ended up destroying her sister Lakshmi's business as a celebrated henna artist. Now Radha lives in Paris's sixth arrondissement in a tony flat with her husband and two lovely daughters. She's an aspiring perfumer. Has she atoned for the wreckage she left behind? Or did she escape. Do some of us pay for our sins while others escape penance?

For *The Perfumist of Paris* I interviewed master perfumers and visited fragrance labs and factories in New York, Paris, Grasse and Lisbon. What a delicious surprise to find that the majority of ingredients in the world's fragrances come from India! Cardamom. Jasmine. Rose Centifolia Lavender. Sandalwood. Myrrh. Why else would European traders have traveled such distances to return with these treasures for their buyers? This novel, and indeed the entire trilogy, is my love letter to my birth nation to thank her for her enormous contributions to the world.

For thousands of years, India has been perfuming our bodies, our homes, our beloved bath soaps and cosmetics. While many of these scents are now being manufactured in labs as their labor-intensive production fails to meet demands of the West, Indians value the authentic. I step into a tuk-tuk perfumed with the coconut hair oil of the driver. I admire the aroma of spices shaped into perfect cones. Later, they'll be sauteed with onions and garlic to prepare the evening meal. I sip falooda, a lovely drink scented with rose and sweet basil seeds to refresh myself on a sizzling summer afternoon.

That's the scent of India. The cacophony of life lived as nature intended. The essence of *The Perfumist of Paris*.

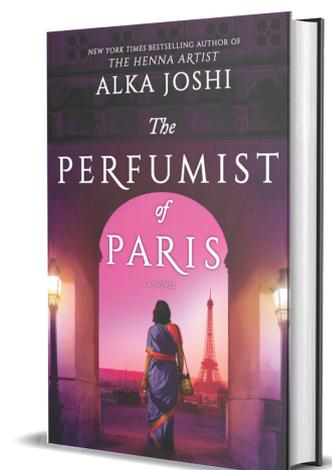
A bientôt,

Alka



Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of Radha's reaction to her son's adoption when she was a teenager? How did you feel about her reaction when confronted by the teenage Niki? What do you think of Niki's reaction to his birth mother?
2. Have you any personal knowledge of adoptions and the feelings of the people involved?
3. Fragrances evoke memories. What are the memories that different scents evoke in Radha? What are some scents that recall a certain time, or event, or a certain person in your life?
4. What did you learn about the fragrance industry and the ingredients that are blended to create scents? Was it surprising to learn how many natural fragrance ingredients come from India?
5. What did you learn about the women's movement in France in the 70s? Do you think of French women as liberated as American women?
6. Do you think Radha should have told Pierre about her illegitimate child before they married? What would have been the consequence?



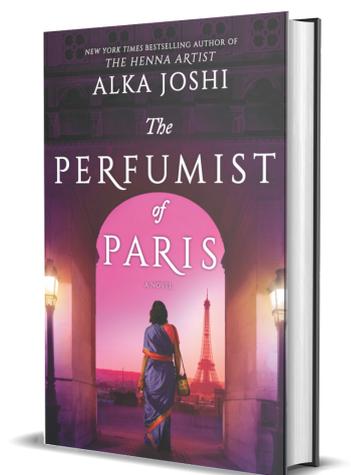
7. What's your reaction to Radha and Pierre's separation? Could they have stayed together? If they had, what compromises would they have had to make?

8. How did you feel about Mathilde's betrayal? Were you surprised that a best friend would do that? Do you think she and Radha will ever be able to resume their friendship?

9. When she learns of Mathilde's betrayal, Radha feels compassion for her friend rather than anger. Why?

10. Radha says that perhaps some people are only meant to be in your life for a certain period of time. What do you think of that?

11. Radha tells Mathilde that in Hinduism, there is a belief that the people in your current life were also in your past life but in different relationships with you. For example, your father in this life might have been your daughter in another life. What do you think of the idea that you're always trying to understand those closest to you in various lives?



The Master Perfumer

Before meeting with perfumers in the US and Europe, I assumed master perfumer was a designation awarded after the completion of a certificate, like a doctorate or a master's degree. Not so. It's an earned promotion within a fragrance house. After the commercial success of several scent creations, a degree in the field of chemistry (or at least a profound knowledge thereof), and skill in helping clients realize their vision, a perfumer can be recognized as a master perfumer by her executive team. It may take anywhere from seven to ten years. She is then referred to as *Le Nez*, which I'm told is preferred in France to the English translation, The Nose. In meetings with French perfumers, I was told that as of 2021, a master perfumer's salary could be ten times higher than that of a perfumer.

Why are master perfumers held in such high regard? Because they must learn to discern over 3000 scents and store them in their memory bank. *Les Nez* create formulas for a project brief purely from memory. Those formulas are then sent to lab assistants who will blend the specified ingredients and return samples for the master perfumer to evaluate. That process could be repeated several times until *Le Nez* feels some of the trials can be presented to the client for consideration. It may take hundreds of trials and a few years to find the perfect note. When the client chooses one of the formulas presented, it is sent to a compounder so a larger quantity can be produced.

Bottles—an essential part of the brand identity—and labels will be designed and sent to a bottling plant where “the juice” will be packaged. Houses like Fragonard, Guerlain and Houbigant used to be the main purveyors of perfumes. Later, fashion houses like Donna Karan, Halston and Givenchy, who wanted to market their own branded scent, commissioned the established houses to create one for them. Soon, celebrities joined the fray.

Today, three large companies produce most of the fragrances in the world: IFF (International Flavors and Fragrances), Givaudan and Firmenich. In 1970, the first perfume school was founded in Versailles by perfumer Jean-Jacques Guerlain. It's called ISIPCA, and it's a world-renowned institution today. Its mission is to teach technical, scientific, marketing and business principles of the world of perfume. A degree in chemistry is de rigueur. According to Fortune Business Insights, as of 2020, the global perfume market was almost \$30 billion. Which means there is always room for niche fragrance houses, and many young designers around the world have founded boutique firms to make a name for themselves in this exciting, enticing and exceedingly competitive industry.





A Perfume Primer

Perfume. The very word conjures an image of Cleopatra seducing Marc Antony in a bathtub filled with rose petals. Evidence of the use of scents in religious ceremonies, palaces and mosques, as well as descriptions of the production process of fragrances, exists in ancient texts from Cyprus, India, Mesopotamia and the Islamic world. Not until the fourteenth century did Europeans begin using scents in daily life—primarily to mask body odor created by poor sanitary habits. But the process of making scent was laborious and the raw materials from faraway lands were so expensive that only the royal courts, like those of Catherine de' Medici and Louis XIV, could afford such extravagance.

The French coined the word *parfum*. From the Latin *per* and *fumus* meaning “by smoke,” the word perfume actually describes just one of many processes by which scent is extracted from plants and flowers. Demand for fragrances grew. Soon enough, plants like jasmine, tuberose, orange blossom and lavender were brought from the Middle East, India and the Mediterranean and planted in southeastern France, in the city of Grasse, because of the city’s temperate climate. That made it possible to produce fragrances more affordably. Quickly, Grasse became the new epicenter for perfume production.



Most perfumes contain anywhere from seventy-five to eighty percent denatured alcohol, which dilutes the intensity of the essential oils. As a rule, Westerners prefer these lighter scents. In the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East, the fragrant oil derived from raw materials is mixed with a base oil like sandalwood and applied directly to the body; alcohol is never used. The intense, concentrated result is called *attar*, preferred by Eastern cultures. Kannauj, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, is considered the *attar* capital of India. Because extracted directly from a handful of plants, flowers, roots and other natural materials, *attars* are considered purer, closer to the source, by those who use them. (By contrast, today’s Western perfumes may contain more than a hundred ingredients.) A little goes a long way, and that means attars can be less expensive to use than brand name perfumes. Many European and American fragrance houses buy pure essential oils from Kannauj for their formulas.

Perfume Party Recipe

We're making a simple perfume today for a group of 10 friends! Most of the ingredients below can be sourced from Amazon or a perfume store online. The essential oils are designed to release their liquid drop by drop to keep you from accidentally pouring too much of any of the scents in your blend. So have patience.



- Essential Oils. Pick a brand with a wide range that includes a floral like rose or lavender, a fruit like bergamot or cherry, a wood like cedar or sandalwood, an animal note like musk or patchouli.
- 10 Beakers (plastic is okay but glass can be reused)
- 10 Pipettes (plastic is okay but glass can be reused)
- Packet of Round Cotton Pads
- 16 oz. Perfumer's Alcohol
- 10 Empty Glass Perfume bottles (the amazing Neha Assar, celebrity artist extraordinaire, hand painted my bottles with a henna design in white paint. Gorgeous!)

1. Select 3 essential oils you like. Try to mix a floral with a fruit or wood with a spice or a musk with a floral scent. Most perfumes today combine up to 150 scents from different groups, but we're working on a smaller scale.
2. Pour one drop of each of the 3 scents you've chosen on a cotton pad, one on top of the other.
3. Sniff the cotton pad and ask yourself:
 - a. Which scent do is the strongest? Do you want it to be that strong?
 - b. Which scent stays with you the longest? (Perfumes have a top note that lingers for 15 minutes; a middle note that lasts for up to 8 hours; a base note that lingers all day. You're trying to identify the top note.)
 - c. Do you like that layered combination or do you want it to smell woodier? Fruitier? Less sweet?
4. Pick another scent you want to try. Pour a drop of each on top of the other scents on the cotton pad you used before. Wave the pad around. Sniff.
5. Repeat with 5 to 6 scents or until you like the smell.
6. Now pour 10 drops of each scent into your beaker and stir.
7. Use a pipette to pour that mixture into your perfume bottle
8. Top off the bottle with perfumer's alcohol.
9. Shake and try some on your wrist.

What do you think of your creation?



Photo credit: Garry Bailey

Alka Joshi is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Henna Artist*. Born in India and raised in the United States since the age of nine, she has a BA from Stanford University and an MFA from California College of the Arts. She lives in Pacific Grove, California, with her husband.