



The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume

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“Who knew that such a tiny bottle housed so many secrets?” —Michael Tonello, author of *Bringing Home the Birkin*

Tilar J. Mazzeo, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Widow Clicquot* (an Amazon Best of the Month book in October 2008) returns with a captivating history of the world’s most famous, seductive, and popular perfume: Chanel No. 5. Mazzeo’s sweeping story of the iconic scent (known as “le monstre” in the fragrance industry) stretches from Coco Chanel’s early success to the rise of the seminal fragrance during the 1950s to the confirmation of its bestseller status in today’s crowded perfume market.

“Here is the life of one of the 20th century’s most interesting and deeply complicated women, a fascinating cultural history, and the story of an extraordinary perfume.” —Chandler Burr, *New York Times* scent critic and author of *The Perfect Scent*

The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume Details

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From Reader Review The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume for online ebook

Whitney says

A fantastic introduction to the science of scent! It focuses on the arguably most famous perfume in history. Called *le monstre* by industry insiders, Chanel No. 5 lived her own life; she freed herself from her creators. She became famous despite a basically non-existent marketing campaign, ridiculously expensive ingredients, and questionable political affiliations. And, yes, I am referring to the perfume as "she."

This book traces the twin trajectories of both Coco Chanel and her trademark perfume, and it's fascinating to watch the perfume take on more character and depth than its creator. While Chanel the person matured from ruthless business woman to vindictive old bat, her perfume remained unchanged, not unlike Dorian Gray.

Chanel No. 5, according to this book's author, still remains as living history. The employed "nose" at Chanel's laboratories is only the third since the original chemist made the sample that won Coco's approval in 1920. The formula has retained its integrity as closely as possible, while conforming to modern safety and conservation regulations.

And believe it or not, I have never knowingly smelled Chanel No. 5. I am just dancing for the opportunity now to visit a department store and meet *le monstre* for the first time. In essence, this is Coco's soul.

BrokenTune says

The reason I picked up *The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume* is that I really enjoyed Mazzeo's book *The Hotel on Place Vendome: Life, Death, and Betrayal* at the Hotel Ritz in Paris.

One of the stories told in *The Hotel on Place Vendome* provides an insight into the life of Coco Chanel and a brief glimpse into the history of her famous perfume - both left me interested enough to want to read a little bit more about both subjects - even tho I am not impressed by either Chanel or her perfume.

The Secret of Chanel No. 5 is a very detailed account of how the perfume was created, the people involved in the process, and the myths and legends associated with it - such as its origins. Somewhat surprisingly, Coco Chanel herself only seems to play a relatively minor role in the story of the perfume which predates the rise of Chanel as a fashion icon.

Unfortunately, there were two aspects that just did not work for me with *The Secret of Chanel No. 5*:

For one, whilst some of the writing reveals details of Mazzeo's research in an engaging style, she lapses into what seems to be a fictionalised or hypothetical account when describing the motivations of some of the people involved in the story. As this is supposed to be non-fiction, it grates on me when Mazzeo describes what individual people have felt or thought or sensed when it is doubtful that any of this could be corroborated by factual sources. I'm sure Mazzeo has done a lot of research when writing this book. However, when she presents her own interpretations or hypotheses as the thoughts or emotions of the people she writes about, she diminishes the credibility of her work.

The second aspect that did not work for me was the repetitious nature of some of Mazzeo's over-blown descriptions of the subject matter. In essence, some of the descriptions of the perfume read like they could have come straight out of an advertisement. This is in contradiction to the effort of the book, which is to demystify the legendary status that this particular product has achieved over the decades.

However, I must admit that it did make me smile to think about how the book was trying to deconstruct a the brand of Chanel No. 5 but using generic "sales-speak". I'm just not sure that the irony was intended by the author in this case.

Mary Ronan Drew says

The perfume industry calls Chanel no 5 "le monstre" and rightly so. It is and has been for most of its 90 years the best-selling perfume in the world. Marilyn Monroe wore it (and nothing else) to bed. Andy Warhol made a silk screen of it along with Campbell soup.

So what's the secret? It's an unusually sophisticated perfume that, unlike many other luxury products, has not compromised over the years. What I wear today (you knew I wore Chanel No 5, of course) is pretty much what Chanel envisioned in 1923 when it was introduced. There is the essence of 1,000 jasmine flowers in my little 1/2 oz bottle, and getting those flowers from Grasse where they are grown to Hackensack, NJ, where Chanel was manufactured during World War II was a matter of black market buying and smuggling at tremendous risk, not to mention the cost.

Chanel signed away the rights to the perfume to the Wertheimer family in the 1920s and she regretted it almost immediately. The company had to keep an attorney on the payroll solely to deal with the many lawsuits Chanel bombarded them with. During the occupation of France she tried to use the Nazi law forbidding Jews to own property to regain control. (Not a nice lady, Chanel. Not a lady at all but a demi-mondaine really.) Fortunately the Wertheimers had sold the company to an "Aryan" before they fled France for the United States. After the war when they bought their company back they decided to give Coco a larger share in the profits in order to avoid a court battle that would have made Chanel's collaboration public knowledge and destroyed the glamour of the name, Chanel.

So if the book is so fascinating why only 4 stars? Alas, the book is in dire need of a good editor. It is sometimes rambling, constantly repetitious, and written in that breathless manner where every little fact and surmise is "secret" and is tied into the development and fame of the perfume, whether it fits or not. Nonetheless, if you are interested in perfume, or if you read the recent Justine Picardie biography of Mademoiselle and want to know the other side of the story, this is a good place to go. It really is a fascinating story.

2011 No 1

Margitte says

FROM THE BLURB

A blend of evocative history and thoughtful research, here is a glittering account of where art and sensuality

mingle with dazzling entrepreneurship and desire: Chanel No. 5.

When was the first time that you became aware of Chanel No. 5? I can't really remember. But I do remember my reaction when I first received it as a birthday gift. The first moment I smelled it, I was blown away. Really knocked off this planet. Suddenly all the hype around it made perfect sense. I remained in a state of wonder until the last drop was sparingly used. Since then I'm nostalgically thinking back and hope I can one day buy it for myself again. It's expensive. We all know that.

I can understand the culture around this perfume. Like Coco Chanel's *haute couture* fashion designs, this perfume brought liberty to women to be themselves, to free themselves from social constrictions forced upon them, but to celebrate their natural beauty and self confidence. Coco brought several firsts unto the world scene: lipstick in bullet casings, boy-like haircuts for women, bathing suits, sun tan, short dresses, slacks for women and comfortable elegant clothes. Who does not admire or own that little black number dress? or the famous Chanel jacket that still seduces millions of women to own one? Her designs of 1921 and beyond are still popular today, and no other perfume ever surpassed No. 5 in popularity after its introduction to the world. There is simply no comparison.

I stopped reading this book after chapter eight:

1) I did not want to know more than I already read. Let me explain. When I first smelled the perfume, I experienced emotions of joy, of excitement, like smelling the first pheromones in the air in Spring. The joy of being feminine, the secrets of flowers, the subtle undertone of ylang ylang, and all the other unknown elements in that bottle, which elevated me into a world of heavenly happiness. I just stood there, mesmerized. I felt like the most beautiful woman in the whole wide world. I had a smile right around my head. I was speechless. I became an instant goddess and acted like one. While a whole range of perfumes adorn my dressing table, nothing ever inspired this reaction before or after.

How it was made, and the history behind it, did not matter to me at that moment. And honestly, it doesn't really matter now, although I have a tremendous admiration for Mademoiselle Chanel. In 2021, this perfume will be one hundred years old, and still selling one bottle every thirty seconds around the world. "No.5" became *a narrative which was as much culturally universal as it was deliciously private until this day.*

How perfumes are made is interesting, but information dumping for another couple of hundred pages won't quite work for me, although it is really a good docu-drama of the whole saga. It covers the historical period between 1900 until now, well more or less, in detail. And then repeat it over and over and over again until this book becomes 200 pages too long.

2) What I wanted to know about the history, was already explained. The repetitive nature of the text just started to bore me to tears.

I briefly ventured off onto the internet, watched a few Youtube documentaries, and read some articles on Coco Chanel's life. Some of the information in the book, as well as elsewhere, are verbatim quotes from the same sources. Which explains the limited resources available and the speculative nature of some of the information used for various purposes. The bibliography provides numerous sources to pursue. The author did extensive research.

This book is an *unauthorized* biography. *Coco Chanel: The Legend and the Life* by Justine Picardie is an *authorized* biography. Since I haven't read it, I don't know if it addresses the history of the perfume, developed by the perfumer, Ernest Beaux for Coco Chanel, in so much detail as this book by Tilar J. Mazzeo. *The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume* is all about

perfume; how it is made; and how Chanel No. 5 fits into the the picture. This book is about that scent. Fascinating for sure!!!

Coco Chanel was an amazing person. A woman with more insight into the psyche of women and men, than most people on earth. She created a perfume that will forever speak the language of our souls. It tells her own story in fragrances. She was an innocent girl and a worldly woman; she understood us more than we will ever know. "*Share the fantasy*", says her slogan. We smile and do what she says. Billions of us. It will forever be our story too.

She started a revolution on many fronts, used masses of pearls and perfume as her weapons, and changed the world. It was the first time that American GI's flocked in lines around the block to her Paris boutique to take home this magical potion for the women in their lives.

No.5 was not only a perfume, it was a phenomenon, provided by a phenomenal woman. It became an icon of the twentieth century. A culture on it's own. It defies logic. Advertising did not sell this perfume. That's what makes the story so much more intriguing. People instinctively reacted to it. Coco Chanel found the formula for feminine eternal.

Although this book did not work for me, Coco Chanel's story is important.

A great video to watch about this perfume:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRQa3...>

Tinav says

How did the Imperial Russian court and the revolution, cabaret clubs, a breakthrough in molecular chemistry, a convent in the South of France, the flower fields of Grasse, American GIs and German troops in World War II, contribute the to creation and worldwide popularity of this iconic fragrance? Mazzeo tells all in this fun slice of history.

Knowing there are more definitive biographies of Coco Chanel already written, Mazzeo wisely gives us just enough of her background to show how and why she developed the fragrance, and what she meant to convey with it. The author also dispels a lot of old myth and rumor about the famous fragrance.

I really enjoyed the background information on chemistry, perfume categories and development, and the rich feel of the 1920s and 1930s that Mazzeo captured and conveyed.

Recommended.

Topher says

The book reads like an overwritten book version of Behind The Music, the author tends to repeat herself a lot (as if she was getting paid by the word...or if she didn't trust her audience to read straight through and actually retain the information), and the writing is just plain klunky in some places. Although the book seems

meticulously researched (at least there are a gazillion notes so one assumes), I never feel safe with the theses that she makes. Bottom line: Mme. Chanel doesn't seem to be a very nice person (or actually even a good businesswoman)...not that that really matters. What does matter, though, is the human decisions that she makes (even if we don't agree with them like literally sleeping with the enemy during the Nazi occupation of Paris in WWII). I just wish there was more depth to the rationale given for her decisions. Admittedly this may not be my bag (get it?), but I was surprised to hear myself talk about Coco Chanel and her iconic fragrance to anyone who would listen. I appreciated thinking about her connection to the abstract art movement and the bold step she took with her vision to "abstract" perfume by taking it from the realm of the real to the realm of the synthetic with use of aldehydes. She may not have been the first (she was the third actually), but she was the difference maker. After her, perfume was not a fragrance, it was an emotion, an experience, a touchstone for personality. That, I think, is visionary and cool. You go, Coco.

Angela says

The book was good. The Perfume, better.

Eva says

What a wishy-washy story for non-fic. The first 70 pages were kind of a recollection of some hazy dream. I just couldn't with this book. No concrete facts, dates, or story. I didn't like the organization of the book and it was incredibly repetitive. Yes, we get it Chanel No.5 is sexy and seductive, that was repeated at least every other page. I think this story overall would have been better served as historical fiction, that way the author gets the liberties to expand on the myth that is Chanel, otherwise there is not enough facts, concrete dates, and details to make this a strong work of non-fiction.

Inspired by the book, I did go to Macys to smell "the monster" and it's just not for me. Reminds me of old people. Thanks but no thanks.

Jennifer says

Well, I do have to admit this is an enjoyable and fascinating read about Gabrielle Chanel. What I am enjoying the most about this book is how the perfume itself came into existence. Starting with the background of Gabrielle's youth(life in the convent) and then the serendipitous meetings with the cousin of the last Czar of Russia and the perfumer Ernest Beaux is compelling. The idea that it could be the ill fated perfume of the late czarina is remarkable!

I have had a fascination with flowers and perfumery since I was quite young. So, far it has been fantastic. I am curious to see how much it dovetails with the biography I have previously reviewed on Mme. Chanel, *Sleeping with the Enemy*.

A says

Should really be 2.5 stars. A fascinating concept -- the biography of a scent, arguing that Chanel No. 5 is quite literally the distillation of the life, times, loves, fears, and memories of Coco Chanel and her heady 1920s *années folles* era -- pretty much ruined by atrocious writing, mindless repetitions, historical inaccuracies, factual contradictions, and other sins against nonfiction writing. This would have made a great *New Yorker* article, but there's clearly not enough information out there -- and definitely not enough intellectual heft or nuance in Mazzeo's writing -- to sustain an entire book. I upped to 3 stars only because, when I wasn't cringing and/or skimming through the mess of the prose, I was thinking about the stature of Chanel No. 5 and breathlessly sharing its provocative premise and ideas with friends.

Narrative Muse says

Read this if: You're someone who can delight in couture and fine art.

The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume is a deep dive into the life of Coco Chanel and her famous perfume, No. 5. It's a detailed account of the history of the scent and speculation as to why it remains the world's most beloved fragrance. At times the writing is very repetitive and reads like a history lesson. But for those fascinated by women fashion designers, this is another read to add to the collection.

Sarah Lachance says

I really wanted to love this book. I did learn about the stories behind Chanel No. 5 (and I say stories because much of this book remains speculative), my main issue with 'The Secret of Chanel No. 5' is with the writing style.

Mazzeo has a tendency to repeat phrases. For example, between pages 12 and 15, she makes reference to the idea that Coco Chanel had "not yet thought of" becoming a fashion or fragrance designer no less than seven times over the course of three pages. While I get the reason for emphasizing these ideas, the technique is clumsy.

This repetition of phrases extends to repetition of whole ideas, paragraphs, sections of chapters. Each and every chapter was written as if the reader hadn't read any of the previous chapters. So much of this already-slight book was spent summarizing, re-summarizing and re-re-summarizing. It's the literary equivalent of the air in your bag of chips. I'm all for ensuring that a reader is oriented to the material, however, Mazzeo could have done it more sparingly.

Continuing on a theme, the author is unable to resist this tendency to re-summarize even after the book-proper ends. The tacked on afterword re-summarizes the entire book and offers no new insights. I wish she'd just let the writing stand (and end) as it was.

All in all, while the subject matter was interesting, the story might have been better suited (in depth and edited-length) to a Vanity Fair-style feature.

Melany says

In addition to learning more about Coco Chanel's life, this is a good insight into a woman running her own business in a misogynistic world, and the walk through my old neighborhoods in Paris was really great.

Amelia says

Was an incredibly interesting and informative read. Some of the concluding statements however left me, I guess, cringing, by the way they drew conclusion with no clear, hard and recorded evidence. So as a historical text I feel it was challenging because I was often left saying "based on what evidence?" But in the same breath, the author is very talented that she has created a novel looking at the truthful possibility of the rumors and scandals that were associated with Chanel No.5 making an intriguing and entertaining read. It just has to be taken in with a little grain of salt, so to speak.

C says

Like a high school essay turned into a book. I learned nothing, and came away with a deep seated feeling of violation. Shame.
