

Night-Scented

Reading group notes

Synopsis

If you haven't read the book, you should think twice before reading this synopsis, which reveals some key plot points.

It's the Ephémère fashion show, one of the highlights of Paris Fashion Week. Backstage a *haute couture* evening gown is ruined by a spot of spilled bleach. A trail of it leads to a storage area and a dead body which has been drenched in the stuff, not to mention shot dead-centre in the forehead.

The victim is Alain Perrin, the head of an arms company known for its high-precision weaponry. He also happens to be an investor in an upstart fashion house created by Isabelle Arbaud, a young woman as abrasive as she is talented. Arbaud's plan is to overturn the leading players in *l'industrie du luxe* with a revolutionary new perfume. In order to develop it, she has poached Louis Halphen, the industry's leading perfumer, from her former employer, the regal Francesca Craveri, who has kept Ephémère at the head of the fashion pack for twenty years.

Franck Guerin catches the case, and soon discovers that Alain Perrin was not the first investor in Arbaud to have died in suspicious circumstances. Nathalie Chautard, an acclaimed but controversial French industrialist, had been killed in a traffic accident a few months previously, run off the road by a truck stolen from her own firm. When forensics indicate that Perrin was probably killed by a gun manufactured by his own company, it begins to look like some kind of poetic justice is in play.

Which is not what Franck's former boss from the DST – the national security agency – seems to think. She is convinced that Nathalie Chautard was slain by Gabriel Agostini, a Corsican terrorist who escaped capture in a bungled operation run by Franck before he was seconded to the Paris police force, awaiting the result of an official enquiry into the incident.

With Isabelle Arbaud insisting that she is the victim of a conspiracy to starve her fledgling enterprise of funds, Franck finds himself being courted by Francesca Craveri of Ephémère and hounded by the DST, all of whom seem intent on pulling his strings. He, on the other hand, is left uneasy by an encounter with the ascetic perfumer Louis Halphen, who insists he will let no one interfere with his project for Arbaud, which he sees as the culmination of his life's work. When it emerges that Arbaud's investors had been using their financial weight to influence the development of the perfume, Franck begins to lose count of the potential suspects.

This noxious cocktail of ambition, resentment and menace claims another victim, whose corpse – shot and steeped in bleach – looks all too familiar. But with each killing, Franck's focus begins to move to the opposite end of the social spectrum from the dizzying luxury of fashion houses, high finance and industrial dynasties. In the course of the investigation he keeps stumbling across a homeless man named Michel, an enigmatic and charismatic vagabond who has the unnerving gift of always being present when he should be absent, and absent when he should be present.

Unsure of exactly where he's going, Franck forges ahead, stubbornly resisting all attempts to manipulate him. Almost too late, he realises that the very absence of evidence which handicaps his enquiry is in fact the key to solving it. Which leaves him convinced he can establish guilt, but not prove it. Not a comfortable situation to be in, when it turns out that the killing isn't over.

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About the author

David Barrie is a Scot who has lived in contented exile Paris since 1992. Having dragged out studenthood for as long as he could (commencing and abandoning two PhDs on the way), he eventually stumbled into management consulting. Thus began a twenty-year career in the UK and France that allowed him to become a partner in a mildly prestigious international audit and consulting group. He ended up founding his own consulting firm (neither prestigious nor international) in Paris and trying his hand at writing. *Night-Scented* is his second novel featuring Franck Guerin, a character introduced in the previously published *Wasp-Waisted*.

A short interview with the author

This is your second book. Was it easier to write than the first?

How to explain this? When writing *Wasp-Waisted*, my first book, I was full of hope; when writing *Night-Scented* I was full of anxiety. As a lad I was frequently disappointed by the second albums of recently-emerged bands. First albums were the fruits of years of budding creativity and frustrated ambition – they had a lot to say, even if they had problems articulating it musically. Second albums, on the other hand, had to be churned out within a year of the band's breakthrough hit, and were often anaemic in comparison. A second album seemed to involve some kind of diabolical pact by which the band gave up the vitality and spirit which had marked its first effort in return for a more polished sound.

I kept rereading *Night-Scented* as I wrote it, worrying about spotting signs of this second-album syndrome.

There's a lot about perfume and the art of the perfumer in *Night-Scented*. How do you write about a sense as intangible as that of smell?

Ask Patrick Suskind. His *Perfume* does as good a job as you can of describing the life of the nose (with and without a capital 'N'). I didn't even try to describe the sensation of smell in *Night-Scented*. Although there are frequent references to the captivating qualities of the new perfume being developed by Arbaud, at no point is there any attempt to say what it smelled like. Frankly, I don't think I was up to the job. I focused instead on the creative process, on the way a perfumer goes about his work. That's a subject that really interests me, and you could say that a fascination with the creative mind is a common theme to both *Night-Scented* and *Wasp-Waisted*.

***Wasp-Waisted* was dominated by strong female characters. *Night-Scented* less so. Would you care to comment on this?**

Are you sure? I doubt very much Isabelle Arbaud would agree with you. Or Francesca Craveri for that matter, although she'd be more tactful about it. That said, there are a lot of men out there, and they're not all puppets desperate to have their strings pulled. It's only fair to represent the full spectrum of masculinity.

Although it's his second outing, Franck Guerin is still rather unknowable. When's he going to open up?

It's a fair cop. The way Guerin is depicted probably is a crime against the genre. To a large extent contemporary crime fiction is all about the personal lives of its detectives: David Robicheaux and his love affair with the bottle; Harry Bosch and the phantoms of his past; Charlie Parker and his demons (quite literally); Kurt Wallander and the (non-existent) contents of his fridge. I suppose I'm rather more discreet

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with regard to Franck Guerin. Things trickle out, but slowly. In this, I hope I'm following the example of John le Carré with the early Smiley books. We learn a fair bit about George Smiley in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* – a book I revere – but the intrigue definitely comes first.

Are there really homeless people camping out underneath the Alexandre III bridge?

Go and have a look for yourself.

Suggested topics for discussion

- How successful is the author in depicting the two extremes of Paris: the wealth and luxury of the fashion houses and the fragile lives of the homeless?
- Is Franck Guerin – who has been in the Brigade Criminelle for less than a year – a good detective? Would he be best advised to go back to his old job in the DST?
- *Sire Fox, whom its odour did please, let these words float up on the breeze. Sire Crow, good day, how your beauty makes me stay.* At the end of the day, which, if any, of the characters of the book resemble Sire Fox or Sire Crow?
- For a long time the working title for the book was not *Night-Scented* but *Bleached*. Would *Bleached* have been a better title?
- What, exactly, is going on between Franck Guerin and Sonia Delemazure? Or with Sylvie Thomas, for that matter?
- How do you rate Marco Chiriotti as a designer?
- *“Catherine thinks I’ve fallen under Agostini’s spell.”* confesses Franck at one point. Is Catherine Vautrin right?
- *Franck knew Paris well, but did not have the encyclopaedic knowledge of a taxi driver. Indeed, with the arrival of GPS, fewer and fewer taxi drivers had it either.* Do you feel you know Paris better, having read *Night-Scented*?
- *“I’d kill for that.”* Are Sonia’s closing words the moral of the tale?