



Essence and Alchemy: A Book of Perfume

Mandy Aftel

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An artisan perfumer reveals a lost art and its mysterious, sensual history.

For centuries, people have taken what seems to be an instinctive pleasure in rubbing scents into their skin. Perfume has helped them to pray, to heal, and to make love. And as long as there has been perfume, there have been perfumers, or rather the priests, shamans, and apothecaries who were their predecessors. Yet, in many ways, perfumery is a lost art, its creative and sensual possibilities eclipsed by the synthetic ingredients of which contemporary perfumes are composed, which have none of the subtlety and complexity of essences derived from natural substances, nor their lush histories. *Essence and Alchemy* resurrects the social and metaphysical legacy that is entwined with the evolution of perfumery, from the dramas of the spice trade to the quests of the alchemists to whom today's perfumers owe a philosophical as well as a practical debt. Mandy Aftel tracks scent through the boudoir and the bath and into the sanctums of worship, offering insights on the relationship of scent to sex, solitude, and the soul. Along the way, she imparts instruction in the art of perfume compositions, complete with recipes, guiding the reader in a process of transformation of materials that continues to follow the alchemical dictum solve et coagula (dissolve and combine) and is itself aesthetically and spiritually transforming.

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