

**Project Title: *Scent and Literature***

**Research Team:**

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## Section 1. Abstract

We ran a one-day workshop with Sarah McCartney, the award winning perfumer and founder of the cult perfume company, 4160 Tuesdays. The workshop was open to Westminster students and the goal was to create a perfume inspired by a short story called *Delhi* by Vandana Singh. Collectively we learned much about the perfume industry and we were taught basic mixing and smelling skills. We discussed the history of scent and its relation to literature.

Finally we created a brand new perfume 'Delhi' that reflected our response to the content and themes of this short story.

## Section 2. Background and Aims

*Background:* Perfume and literature have long been entwined, each one referencing or seeking to summon the other. Patrick Suskind's best-selling 1985 novel *Perfume* foregrounds this relationship but there are countless works of fiction in which scents become key plot points, establish atmosphere, evoke memory or emotion, are intrinsic to character development and so on. Perfume makers (especially Sarah McCartney) are often directly inspired by literature; many perfumes are based on specific authors or characters, or more general ideas of literary eras and history, or on the imagined scent of books and libraries themselves.

As perfume enthusiasts we wanted to learn more about the relationship of literature and scent. After learning that Sarah McCartney had started her award winning business through actually writing a novel and trying to create the perfumes she had described in her writing, we were delighted when she agreed to work with us.

*Aims:* Both writers and perfumiers seek to transport the wearer to a different time or place, a memory or an imagined history and we wanted to explore these links – to discover how storytelling can work through the evocation of smell. We were also curious about the business and marketing side of the industry. We wanted to think about what naming and packaging as well as concocting smells might have to say about contemporary cultural preoccupations and the power of storytelling? We were also curious to understand how flexible an English degree can be and to ask whether scent can enhance student learning?

### *Objectives:*

We organised a group discussion before the workshop to decide which piece of fiction would be suitable to begin working on in order to create a perfume. The result was that we chose a work of post-colonial science fiction which offered the opportunity to examine issues around diversity and history

### *How this research will impact learning and teaching*

The workshop threw up many ideas. We discussed how scent can be used in theatres or embedded into a play. We discussed other works of fiction which could be taught on a literature or creative writing module that specifically explores this topic. We concluded that working with scent can enhance student learning and so would love to pursue the idea of having Sarah McCartney working with us on a Wellbeing project, or Artist in Residence, or Anne starting to develop a new module *Perfume in Literature*

### Section 3. Methods

Initially we set up a Blog and WhatsApp group with core members  
Collectively we chose the work of fiction, agreeing upon a postcolonial sci-fi story, *Delhi*, by Vandana Singh. We arranged a date for the workshop and invited interested students (20)

The workshop structure is attached below :

#### **Fragrance: how it fixes a time and place.**

##### 1. How we smell.

We were invited each to smell different perfumery materials and to try to describe them.  
What do they bring to mind?

##### 2. Smells in the story.

A discussion of the different aromas which are mentioned in the story

Questions. How do they evoke responses in readers?

How do we describe aromas which don't have a name?

What if we misunderstand them?

What if we aren't aren't familiar with them?

e.g. how would you describe:

Freshly mown hay, for city dwellers.

Urinal cake, for women.

Mumbai, for Europeans.

Do these descriptions help conjure smells if we don't know them. How can we use them in writing?

Other examples.

"Musk" in Brighton Belle.

Bergamot, cedar and opoponax in Shadowscent.

##### 3. Making a fragrance.

We each choose a moment from the story.

Select materials.

Blend them.

##### 4. Fragrance to fix this time and place.

We let everyone loose on the materials to bottle their own aroma which will always remind them of this day.

### Section 4. Results

We discovered some of the ways in which our subject area impacts upon the creative industries, the advertising industry, and the retail marketplace, indeed one of our group, Mudd, impressed Sarah McCartney to the extent that she was offered a job and is now employed by her.

### **Section 5. Group Reflection**

Overall, the workshop was successful. The olfactory experience allowed students to deploy different parts of their brain when analyzing literature and opened up discussions of memory, association, and location. A useful discussion that emerged from the workshop was how to incorporate smell into modules in the Humanities department at large, and what it would look like for a university to have a resident perfumer. We created a perfume called Delhi at the end of our workshop. The possible limitations for this were that none of us had actually traveled to Delhi, so we had an experiential gap in our collective sensory knowledge. However, since we were creating a fragrance rooted in a science-fiction story, there was more room for the creative interpretation of smells rather than a factual one. We were limited to the materials that Sarah McCartney brought with her to match the story, and she was limited by the materials already available to her in her studio. The materials available were mentioned somewhere in the story (jasmine, ghost milk, cumin, or otherwise known as the scent of sweaty bodies), but there might have also been other scents that would have mirrored the story better. Lastly, scent is such a highly subjective and relative experience that it can be difficult to collectively agree on what story a fragrance tells. It was hard to create a scent as a group of people working with different combinations of materials, given that everyone had a different interpretation of the smells. We ended up calling the workshop a few hours early because everyone's noses were tired and we had all created our own perfume. I think it would be helpful next time to split into small groups and have each group come up with the Delhi fragrance and then rank them as a collective. But there is only so much smelling a person can do before their brain gives up. Overall, I thought that our workshop was a success.

### **Section 6. Conclusions and Future Work**

We concluded that working with scent can enhance student learning and so would love to pursue the idea of having Sarah McCartney working with us on a Wellbeing project, or Artist in Residence, or Anne starting to develop a new module Perfume in Literature.

### **Section 7. Lessons Learned**

That working collectively across staff and students is difficult but ultimately rewarding. Sarah McCartney has a business model, which is in her own words ultimately based on love and being able to bring academic rigour to this idiosyncratic commercial model had reciprocal benefits: Sarah was able to think critically about her outlook while the students could examine an imaginative process translated into a commercial business, something which would normally be beyond the scope of normal study.