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BOOK: Floating Gold A Natural (and Unnatural) History of Ambergris

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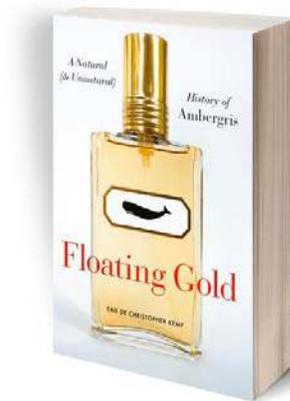
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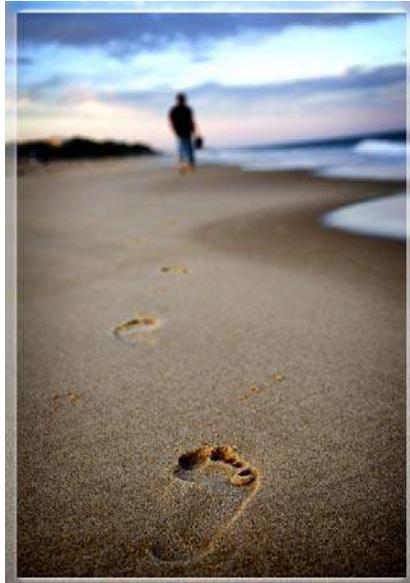
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Hanging out at the beach this summer? Did you ever think that a lump of beach flotsam at your feet might be worth a fortune? Something that a whale pooped out? Is it a summer dream or a nightmare? Well, that might depend on your financial and/or feelings about things “distasteful”. Well, some use this whale poop in food or drink – so all bets are off when it comes to this stuff!



[Floating Gold](#) author [Christopher Kemp](#) is a scientist, the type who is interested in all part of the puzzle of the living world. From childhood, he explored first in books, then on walks on the shoreline, the marginalia of the animal world. Odd creatures and bizarre bits and pieces of them, stripped down to the bone or cartilage, became objects of collection, earning a place on a shelf in his room.



Then, years later, a newspaper article on ambergris, the "floating gold" expensive whale poop, valued in the perfumery industry, caught his attention. Down the rabbit hole of sometimes-surreptitious investigation he went, desperate to smell the valued lumps of excreta, trying to pop open the secret world of ambergris dealers, fables and commerce.

A little historical perspective is dished up first like a wine cordial infused with grains of this aged coprolite. Well, coprolite is stretching the aging process a bit far—a coprolite is a fossilized turd, and ambergris is just well-aged, hardened by years of floating on the salty waters of the ocean, crusted hard and smooth by the sun. Ah, the lovely romance of perfume, how far you go to find a great raw material.

You look up synonyms for "turd" in the freethesaurus.net website (because dictionary.com's thesaurus doesn't admit the words turd or shit exist in their world) you'll find (edited to remove references to humans):

*BM, bowel movement, buffalo chips, bugger, ca-ca, coprolite, coprolith, cow chips, cow flops, cow pats, crap, defecation, dingleberry, droppings, dung, fart, feces, feculence, guano, heel, manure, movement, night soil, ordure, pill, sewage, sewerage, shit, shithead, shitheel, stinker, stool, toad. **But no ambergris.***



Prized ambergris have been given as gifts to royalty, such as those sent by Holland to King Charles II when his daughter Elizabeth was born in 1689. There is an appreciation for this nugget of historical information that Kemp provides, and a speculation if the trend toward such gifts remains to this day. Well, at the very least it gives the natural

perfumer something to add to their bank of knowledge, and a fun talking point to pull out when a customer crinkles their nose when the explanation of aged whale turd being a transcendent ingredient in their perfume.



The famous “Yeti” golden ambergris, the source of many contemporary legends
photo copyright Frans Beuse, [Ambergris Essentials NZ](#)

Sperm whales move around a lot, and so their ambergris can be found on beaches from Scotland to New Zealand, from Somalia to Long Island, New York. Many beachcombers walk with their head down, eyes looking for the precious lump, hoping to find a fortune. Some exult to the local press that they’ve found a grand piece, which upon examination turns out to be coagulated plastic or some other fool the eye *tromp l’œil*.

The historic record that Kemp relates will surely satisfy the most inquisitive of readers who wish to delve into the cultural, financial and often dastardly shenanigans that have been documents since ambergris’ smelly promise and profit was first discovered.

However, it is as a perfumer that I review this book. Granted, I learned a lot about how a bull sperm whale feeds, lots about its anatomy and how the ambergris “boulder” (much nicer than turd, don’t you think, but not as precisely descriptive) forms. In some cases, like a cat with an expanding hairball that can’t be removed/coughed up, the whale will die. The ambergris, freed from the gut by the scavenger sharks and others seeking a whale meal, will bob up to the surface of the ocean, beginning its long “curing” process. Now we’re ready to move into the perfumery realm, and look at the various grades of ambergris.



Guy Robert, *photo from 1000fragrances.blogspot.com*

My ears and nose perk up when [Guy Robert](#), Chanel and Dior's names appear on a page. Seems Robert (as related by Luca Turin to Chandler Burr in [The Emperor of Scent: A Story of Perfume, Obsession, and the Last Mystery of the Senses](#)) was presented a huge chunk of black ambergris, the lowest grade, to evaluate. Supposedly it was worth half a million (British) pounds. As any good perfumer would, it is related that they would never buy black ambergris.

Kemp recalls that Stirling and Poucher classified ambergris grades in the 1930s, and black ambergris is reminiscent of sheep dung. I have been shown how to age black ambergris to make it into something resembling ambergris by dessicating it with a harmless substance to age it—but I won't. As Kemp says, it lacks the complexity and true antiquity and aging that higher grades have.

Will Lapaz, the former owner of [Eden Botanicals](#), was contacted by a woman from North Carolina in 2005 who claimed to have found several kilos of ambergris washed up on a beach there after the hurricanes. I'm one of those contacted by Will to help authenticate the piece. I had been working with ambergris for several years, and had seen it in the grey, brown and black forms. I immediately got back to him and said "get that piece" and I also informed several natural perfumers about it. Most of us bought 100 to 200 grams. Who wouldn't grab a piece of American ambergris?



The North Carolina ambergris, distributed by [Eden Botanicals](#)

My ambergris tinctures are made in the classical manner, updated using some modern tools: the ambergris is ground in a mortar and pestle (or shaved with a microplane for a 21st century take on making fine particles). It is then made into a 4% tincture with 190 proof alcohol, by weight. I then designate one of my magnetic stirrers into action for six months, with the lowest setting and a Teflon stir bar agitating the mix. I do not filter my tincture, but allow it to age on for years with the ambergris. When I start a new tincture, I always put some of the previous tincture into the bottle, much like some whiskey or wine makers do.

Historically, the French have the process for making tinctures down pat: a device was created that holds huge glass *valeuses* (testicles) and a motor gently spins them around for the six-month aging and what I like to call the beautification period.



A photo, perhaps from the 1940s, of a blissed-out perfumery employee sniffing the product of a “valseuse” (from *The Book of Perfume* by Elisabeth Barillé, and Catherine Laroze 1995).

Luca Turin did more to illustrate what ambergris does to a perfume more than anyone else. In 2005, he posted:

“OK, simple experiment: back of right hand, Yardley's lavender, 2 spritzes. Left hand, Yardley's lavender 2 spritzes +1 spritz ambergris. Result: the left hand still smells like lavender, but much stronger, more complex and in 3-D. Like switching from little speakers to big electrostatics. Small wonder people value the stuff!”



Classified as an animal note—of course!—ambergris has transformative powers that elevate a perfume in the way Turin described. No synthetic ambergris concoction can do

the same. The synthetic ambergris may mimic a bit of the ambergris scent, but different ambergrises have different scents—from marine, warm body, fecal, hay.

Quoting perfumer Tony Morris in *Floating Gold*: "Animal notes—which include musk and a few others, civet and castoreum, which comes from the beaver—these animal notes, they've been used in perfumes because the animal note gives warmth and complexity to a perfume. It's rather like if you have some wines, some of them have animal notes, and it gives this warmth and complexity; and that's the key element of why ambergris and civet and these other materials were used."

Morris goes on to detail the complex world of ambergris trade amongst the big houses and their middle men and suppliers. The flow of the "gigantic boulders" in the kilos and tens of kilos is something an artisan perfumer only knows by, well, reading a book such as this.

The ability of ambergris to transform a perfume through some sort of synergy is only one aspect of the material. It also has fixative powers, helping the perfume, or any object scented by it, such as clothing, retain the scent for years. Now, in a perfume, it's not just the scent of the ambergris, it's the ability of the ambergris to "anchor" some of the middle and base notes. It's more tenacious all by itself, when infused into clothing, or smouldered in a room in the form of incense.



Fumee d'ambre gris by John Singer Sargeant

One of the most fascinating bits of information in the book caught my attention:
Ironically,

“Since Pelletier and Caventou first isolated ambrein in 1820, chemists have deconstructed it even further, dismantling it atom by atom to find the source of its complex odor. Ironically, ambrein is odorless. But it holds within its structure all the necessary building blocks to make other aromatic compounds, each with unique and individual odor profiles.”



I'm always surprised when I tincture various grades and colors of ambergris. Some of the tinctures are refined and silky, others floral with some barnyard funk, others with a touch of fruitiness. That's what I love about ambergris—all the surprises it holds in its waxy, often-misidentified bits, chunks and boulders.

[Adrienne Beuse of Ambergris Essentials](#) is quoted in the book as she and her husband Frans are well-established traders in ambergris and a trusted source also to the smaller buyers, such as artisan perfumers who can only afford 10 or 20 grams at a time. Adrienne posted a contest in the natural perfumery group I host on Yahoo. The contest was a lot of fun, and informative, too. A photo was posted with 24 objects identified only by number. Entrants were to guess what the real ambergris chunks were in the photo. In the end, Adrienne did not ID all of the objects, but the fun was still there, from lumps of coal to driftwood and amber fossil resin from the pine tree (often mistakenly confused with ambergris).

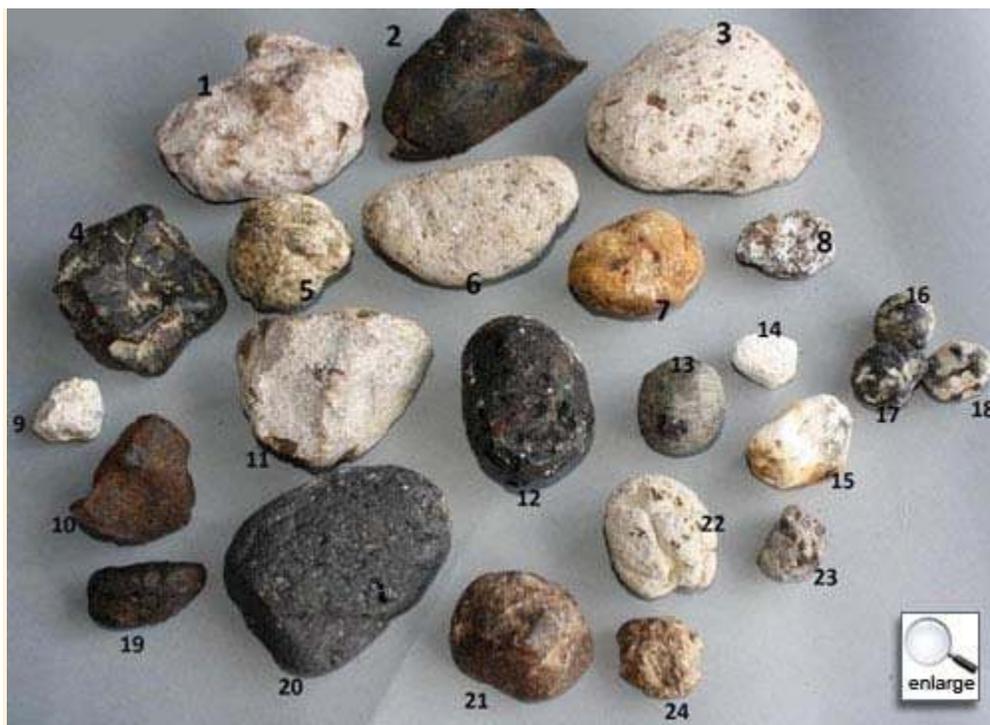


photo copyright Frans Beuse, [Ambergris Essentials NZ](#)

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|---|--|
| 1 – dried wood with an item visible on the surface which looks like an embedded squid beak (fooled a lot of people) | 13 – plastic – mottled surface fools a lot of people |
| 2 – fat | 14 – limestone |
| 3 – pumice | 15 – tallow/fat |
| 4 – kauri gum (natural amber) | 16 – nuts |
| 5 – ambergris | 17 – nuts |
| 6 – pumice | 18 – nuts (all the nuts were in the ocean a long time) |
| 7 – natural tree amber | 19 – ambergris |
| 8 – ambergris | 20 – coal |
| 9 – ambergris | 21 – wax |
| 10 – oil | 22 – pumice |
| 11 – resin | 23 – stone |
| 12 – coal | 24 – ambergris |

The remaining chapters of the book are probably the most detailed, informative narrative of the search for ambergris I've ever read. The various characters, including the author, could have used Adrienne's photo to suss out the real stuff. Going into caves, getting almost stuck in quicksand, taking puddle-jumper planes and just being at the ends of the earth, Kemp sweeps you along with his quest. Sweeps the reader, as, well, I could be swept away, as comfortable as I was, in a soft chair, with air-conditioning on, far removed from the sometimes frantic fray to find ambergris.

Scientists are inquisitive by nature, that is their personality that brings them to science, and Kemp has a good measure of the adventurer, too. That combination is what makes this book so valuable. It's the journal of a scientist on a quest, and the modern-day historic record of the ambergris hunters and traders. Every time I sniff my ambergris chunks and my aged, beautiful tincture, I'll thank folks like Kemp and those who came before him, the ambergris-obsessed, for their additions to the body of knowledge on an odd artifact from a whale, one that covers scatology and the sublime.



Author: Anya McCoy

Perfumer

Anya McCoy is a natural perfumer, the creator of the [Anya's Garden natural perfume line](#). Anya's Garden Perfumes have won awards from perfume bloggers since the beginning of the awards in 2009. Light, MoonDance, StarFlower, Kewdra and Royal Lotus were chosen for these honors.

Anya is the President of the [Natural Perfumers Guild](#), which launched on June 1, 2006.