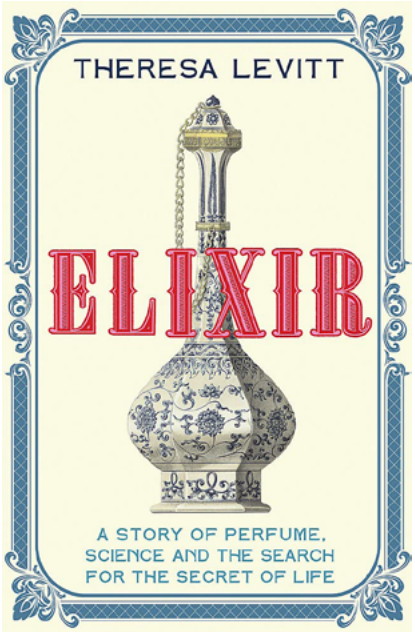
A Tale of Two Perfumers in Nineteenth Century France

Laura A. Macaluso



Elixir, A Parisian Perfume House and the Quest for the Secret of Life by Theresa Levitt, who held a Fulbright IIE Graduate Research Fellowship

Scholar-author Theresa Levitt reveals in her Acknowledgments that while she was writing *Elixir*, a book about the history of perfume, she lost much of her sense of smell from Covid-19. The experience provided unexpected insight into olfaction—the action of smelling—the subject of her book. As Levitt found firsthand, the sense of smell is the "most direct and intimate way we interact with the world." Thus, her book *Elixir: A Parisian Perfume House and the Quest for the Secret of Life* is a story about olfaction, but a story that goes far beyond the sense of smell into the laboratories of perfumers and chemists who worked to identify scent at its source and determine its life-giving properties.

In *Elixir*, the reader enters a time and place obsessed with smell—creating, wearing, and selling it. It was France in the early nineteenth century, and scent creation was profitable. Essences were believed to provide health and life by revitalizing, rejuvenating, and preserving life. They could cure chronic diseases. For example, camphor, created by distilling it from the bark of a camphor tree, was used to prevent or treat cholera. Considering that, as Levitt reports, cholera killed half of the citizens of Moscow in 1830 and

then arrived in Paris to claim more victims, scent creation for health was a serious business. Thus, the goal of the chemists and perfumers was to discern scent composition—the make-up of its chemistry that creates and sustains the world of the living.

The result for those obsessed with delineating between the natural and synthetic worlds—which included the protagonists of the story, Édouard Laugier and Auguste Laurent, at the perfumer Laugier Père et Fils in Paris—could be anonymity or fame, respect or derision, wealth or poverty.

In a fluid, engaging, and confident style, Levitt uses a narrative nonfiction framework to introduce readers to a time and place long gone. *Elixir* is a rich evocation of mid-nineteenth-century Paris and the people who inhabited these places, traveling from country to city and moving from neighborhood to neighborhood as Europe transitioned into the modern age, passing side characters from Marie Antoinette to Napoleon to Louis Pasteur. Levitt has a granular approach to sharing this history. She weaves together a fantastic assortment of evocative historical details—for example while playacting the country life in her garden, Marie Antoinette doused her sheep in perfume—which threatens to overwhelm the pursuit at the heart of the story. But, my goodness, who knew that Marie Antoinette's perfume trunk alerted the Revolutionaries of Paris to her planned escape, thus contributing to her capture? In other words, there's a lot here to satisfy those hankering for the unusual ways perfume intersects with history—or helped to shape it.

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Levitt demonstrates that the quest for scent was indeed about the quest for the secret of life—hence the title of her book—a journey that went down two paths: the investigation of substances in nature and the creation of synthetic substances in the laboratory. As one would imagine, the power struggle birthed a feud between chemists and perfumers, outlasting their lives. But Laugier and Laurent, and others were bound to be unsuccessful in their quest because, even today, the very beginning of life in atoms, particles, and molecules is yet to be fully understood.

Today, Paris is a clean, modern city with a sleek style and gleaming and buffed historic architecture. There is no horse manure in the streets, the Seine—still needing revitalization—is getting cleaner, and the air is no longer choked with smog from industrialization. France leans green. Almost two centuries ago, somewhere between a superstitious and profoundly religious past and a scientific, technology-infused future, perfumers began their quest for the "chemistry of life" (1). Two hundred and sixteen pages later, readers understand why Levitt ends with the sentiment that "chemistry was no discipline for the faint of heart" (217). Disciplines of perfume have been burned, bruised, diseased, and forgotten.

And, so, we live in the duality of this world, where humans attempt to balance the man-made with the natural or, if you are so inclined, the divine. There is a reason why, even in the twenty-first century, people still gravitate towards the perfumes perfected by the French. Perfume isn't just a scent we put on to attract a mate or make ourselves feel good; it is a ritualistic act of memory, of an escape from the inevitable (disease and death). With a list of the "Cast of Characters," 50-page Notes, 33 Illustrations, and an Index, *Elixir* is a robust package of information written by a historian comfortable inhabiting the past but writing for the present. A historian comfortable with offering that we don't know the answers to all of life's secrets just yet.

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Biography

Laura A. Macaluso, PhD, MFA, researches and writes about monuments, murals, and material culture. She was a Fulbright Scholar to Eswatini (in southern Africa) in 2008-2009 and a Peer Review Panelist for the Fulbright US Scholar Program through the Institute of International Education (IIE) in Arts Management, Museum Studies, and Preservation. See more of her work at www.lauramacaluso.com. She can be reached at monumentculture@gmail.com