



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

Christopher Kemp

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“Preternaturally hardened whale dung” is not the first image that comes to mind when we think of perfume, otherwise a symbol of glamour and allure. But the key ingredient that makes the sophisticated scent linger on the skin is precisely this bizarre digestive by-product—ambergris. Despite being one of the world’s most expensive substances (its value is nearly that of gold and has at times in history been triple it), ambergris is also one of the world’s least known. But with this unusual and highly alluring book, Christopher Kemp promises to change that by uncovering the unique history of ambergris.

A rare secretion produced only by sperm whales, which have a fondness for squid but an inability to digest their beaks, ambergris is expelled at sea and floats on ocean currents for years, slowly transforming, before it sometimes washes ashore looking like a nondescript waxy pebble. It can appear almost anywhere but is found so rarely it might as well appear nowhere. Kemp’s journey begins with an encounter on a New Zealand beach with a giant lump of faux ambergris—determined after much excitement to simply be lard—that inspires a comprehensive quest to seek out ambergris and its story. He takes us from the wild, rocky New Zealand coastline to Stewart Island, a remote, windswept island in the southern seas, to Boston and Cape Cod, and back again. Along the way, he tracks down the secretive collectors and traders who populate the clandestine modern-day ambergris trade.

Floating Gold is an entertaining and lively history that covers not only these precious gray lumps and those who covet them, but presents a highly informative account of the natural history of whales, squid, ocean ecology, and even a history of the perfume industry. Kemp’s obsessive curiosity is infectious, and eager readers will feel as though they have stumbled upon a precious bounty of this intriguing substance.

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

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Jennifer says

This was one of those really well written non-fiction books that had me enthralled. More about the history than the science of Ambergris...possibly because by the sound of it apart from the perfume companies no one has been able to investigate it much. Fascinating, will keep an eye out next time I'm up the 'beach that will now remain nameless' incase I find some!!!!

Jay says

A very interesting topic, ambergris, which is an extremely valuable item that continues to be created and can be found, but not through big industry. Ambergris collectors tend toward the secretive, as many imply in the book that there are ways to make things easier when searching. It seems that one way is mentioned a few times in the book – to use dogs. This points up the issue I saw in the book – the author wrote this as a combination of narrative of his search for ambergris and the story, along with the history. The narrative, though, has been re-ordered to leave the most interesting interview, which contains most of the meat of the book, such as it is, in the last few pages. It's a bit of a let down because the author has already described almost everything in the interview, except for the use of cars and motorbikes to rapidly beachcomb for ambergris. The use of trained dogs is mentioned, but this is not explored like most other topical cul de sacs he describes (including eating some). This loose thread was odd given the limited information that is actually presented – there is a lot of repetition because of the secrecy around the product. I know a lot more about ambergris than I knew before reading the book. It was just an OK experience getting there though.

Juno says

A story of an obsession and window into a strange world. Perhaps a bit long in the middle but overall I found it well written and a fascinating sidebar to what I know of the art and science of perfumery

Marion says

Learned more about the spermatozoa whale.

B says

Enjoyed reading about the history of ambergris and the science involved, along with details about the writer's own journey to find his own little piece of smelly gold. There are really great excerpts from books, newspapers, letters and journals from the past that are just fascinating. Some great photos the author took of ambergris samples are there as well.

Margaret Sankey says

Whale bile with rotting shrimp beaks. Who'd have thought that this, barfed up and washed ashore would become one of the world's most sought-after luxury goods, priced per ounce comparably to gold. Kemp became interested after riots on a beach where suspected ambergris washed up and New Zealand residents fought over it, only to find out it was lard that fell off of a shipping container vessel. Real ambergris is hunted by a very strange crew of territorial beachcombers and people who crawl in whale carcasses, brokered by even odder people who subvert the Byzantine laws on export (legal in New Zealand, but not in Australia), and purchased by the elite perfume makers who use it as a fixative in brews like Chanel No. 5.

Edited to add that the author contacted me immediately on Goodreads to scold me for the first two sentences and to ask if I had even read the book. Okay, ambergris is a product of whale intestines and it is excreted. Jesus. I certainly read your book, but you won't have to worry about me reading any more of them.

Susan Gallagher says

Sadly, I know less about ambergris after reading this than before.

Chris says

A great social/natural history in the vein of Kurlansky's Cod. Very readable. Where are the end/footnotes?

Matt says

While living with his family in New Zealand, Christopher Kemp becomes obsessed with ambergris, a rare substance that is essentially the byproduct of a fatally constipated sperm whale that occasionally washes up on his local beaches. Thusly, he begins a quixotic pursuit to discover a smelly piece of ambergris of his own while regaling the reader with the history of man's relationship with these pricey fickle feces. The subject matter is fascinating as well as Kemp's journey into the shadow world of the international ambergris market, yet the book's occasionally random organization doesn't do itself any favors. In addition, Kemp mentions that ambergris also plays a role in rituals within the Arab World and is used in traditional medicine in East Asia, but he never pursues background on either of these applications, preferring instead to focus on ambergris' uses amongst Western cultures in perfume and in cooking. Though it has its faults and omissions, Floating Gold is a completely amusing read, and, since I am unaware of any other material on the subject, if you're interested in ambergris, this is the place to start.

Randall Wallace says

excellent book. i've read a few books on plain things like salt, and the color red and they were pretty good, they kept you excited about the subject. but i read this book on copper last year that was terrible. the guy decides to write a book on copper and after reading it you just don't care about copper anymore because he made it so boring. he wanders and around and finds nothing. zzz..

but why was this book good? i knew NOTHING about ambergris but keep hearing the word bandied around over the decades and always wondered what is that? kinda like frankincense, myrrh, ...or even diplomacy. these are words few people use anymore. so the author mr kemp tells you what he learned and when he walks around all over the place looking for ambergris it's not so boring that you fall asleep. ambergris is not an easy topic. it can look and smell like many things to many people, so it's hard to write about. but this was a very good job.

sometimes you go to a party where you have to entertain others apolitcally and you need an interesting non-charged subject to keep the conversation from lilting. this book would be perfect for that.

i read this book because of peak oil. soon we will have to do without fossil fuels and so basic things not made in a chem lab will become important - like ambergris, salt, pepper, natural dyes, etc. it's a good time to learn about all the natural things that will be needed soon as we all travel less and use less and create more community while our economy localizes.

Jennifer Heise says

I dragged myself through this to learn everything I could from it about ambergris-- and the big nugget of how ambergris is formed in whales was (mostly) worth it.

But I also spent most of the book going "GROW UP AND GET A LIFE!" to the author. There's nothing wrong with the current trend of 'guy becomes a father and starts researching a non-fiction book at the same time' memoirs, some of them are quite good. But this was a stretched out New Yorker casual, in which the obsessed writer pursues some manly dream treasure... Compare to *Moby Duck* or *A Thousand Days of Wonder* and you'll see what I mean.

Bea Lathrop says

Interesting book. Now I know more than I ever did before about ambergris and where it comes from. The author was quite tenacious in his research (I was rooting for him).

UChicagoLaw says

"A fascinating, if slightly self-indulgent, history of what the author learned about this valuable product of the digestive system of sperm whales in the course of trying (unsuccessfully) to find some. The subject claimed

a separate chapter in Moby Dick, and this new book brings readers up to date." - R.H. Helmholtz

Dennis McDonald says

A meandering and personal exploration of the history and industry surrounding ambergris. Says a lot about the people still touched by this odd whale generated substance. History and a personal journey are intermingled with profiles of ambergris seekers and those involved in the highly specialized and sparsely populated industry on the periphery of the perfume industry. It's an oddly touching book. Unusual.

Donna says

Mildly interesting book about a fairly fascinating subject--ambergris, the substance that still today is almost as valuable as gold. It forms in the impacted intestines of a small percentage of sperm whales and has to float around in the ocean for several years before it's worth much. You can really only come upon it by chance, which contributes to its rarity. It has been used by the high-end perfume industry for hundreds of years and can't be duplicated synthetically. All that is fascinating stuff. Endlessly repetitive descriptions of the author walking along a beach futilely looking for ambergris are not.

I very much enjoyed learning about ambergris which I knew nothing about before reading this book. However, the book seemed rather disorganized and I was losing interest at the end. You can only read so many descriptions of a chunk of ambergris before your eyes start skimming the page.

Two stars for the writing but I'm bumping it up to three for the subject matter.
