



# The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume

By Tilar J. Mazzeo



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Tilar J. Mazzeo, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Widow Clicquot* (an Amazon Best of the Month book in October 2008) returns with a captivating history of the world’s most famous, seductive, and popular perfume: Chanel No. 5. Mazzeo’s sweeping story of the iconic scent (known as “le monstre” in the fragrance industry) stretches from Coco Chanel’s early success to the rise of the seminal fragrance during the 1950s to the confirmation of its bestseller status in today’s crowded perfume market.

“Here is the life of one of the 20th century’s most interesting and deeply complicated women, a fascinating cultural history, and the story of an extraordinary perfume.” —Chandler Burr, *New York Times* scent critic and author of *The Perfect Scent*

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Mazzeo's (*The Widow Clicquot*) cloying and repetitive history of Chanel No. 5 finds the perfume's phenomenal success to have occurred in spite of its creator's efforts. Mazzeo reveals that the now instantly recognizable scent of heavy jasmine, rose, and musk combined with a good dose of "unblemished whiteness" produced by synthetic aldehydes was not actually invented by Coco Chanel in 1920, at the height of her fashion fame. In fact, she and her lover at the time, dispossessed Russian aristocrat Dmitri Pavlovich, recreated the scent from a perfume that had originally been fashioned for a Romanov dynasty celebration in 1914, *le Bouquet de Catherine*. According to Mazzeo, the newly fashioned Chanel No. 5 (Coco's lucky number) embodied the saintly mysteries of her childhood orphanage at Aubazine, the heady sensuality of her early career as a demimondaine, and the bracing clean lines of her modern design. A woman "should smell like a woman and not like a flower," she famously declared. In this fascinating story, Mazzeo depicts painstakingly how signing away her rights to the industrialist Wertheimer brothers in 1924 prompted perfume sales to soar worldwide, especially when the brothers were able to remove production to New Jersey during WWII. (Nov.) (c)

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From [Booklist](#)

In this "biography of a scent," Mazzeo (*The Widow Clicquot*, 2008), painstakingly follows the scattered breadcrumb trail left by the illustrious Chanel No. 5 (somewhere in the world, a bottle is sold every 30 seconds). So doing, she takes readers all over France, to the U.S., Germany, and Imperial Russia, to explain the far-flung origins and unprecedented success of the perfume the author calls a "cultural monument." In something akin to revealing the man behind the curtain in Oz, Mazzeo carefully uncovers the revered designer Coco Chanel's complicated relationship with her creation, at once very personal yet belonging to women the world over, and exposes the tenuous (and, during WW II, downright scandalous) business partnership she maintained with her colleagues at Les Parfums Chanel. Readers may find themselves wishing the volume came accompanied by the endlessly described fragrance in its enigmatic art-deco bottle, but this is one case where historical fact eclipses the legend and lore of the object itself—there's much, much more than meets the nose to discover in these pages. --Annie Bostrom

Review

"[Mazzeo] explores interconnections between designer and perfume, teasing out the relationship with delicacy." (New York Times Book Review)

"[In] the skilled hands of cultural historian Mazzeo, [the perfume] becomes a magnificent window through which to understand [Coco Chanel] and her milieu... Impeccable research and crafting make a seemingly narrow topic feel infinitely important." (Kirkus Reviews)

"This is one case where historical fact eclipses the legend and lore of the object itself—there's much, much more than meets the nose to discover in these pages." (Booklist)

"Engaging." (Wall Street Journal)

"Mazzeo's lush prose...never bogs down in the details—despite the extensive research showcased in the bibliography—and a smooth pacing keeps it moving along at a fast clip. This work is definitely

recommended to lovers of 20th-century cultural history, Coco Chanel, and, of course, the world's best-selling perfume." (Library Journal)

"Mazzeo has written an account of the rarest of things—an international olfactory icon—that fairly rushes off the pages. Here is the life of one of the 20th century's most interesting and deeply complicated women, a fascinating cultural history, and the story of an extraordinary perfume." (Chandler Burr, *New York Times* scent critic and author of *The Perfect Scent*)

"The true brilliance of *The Secret of Chanel No. 5* is Tilar Mazzeo's ability to take a subject one would never have thought possible to think very deeply about and then cover it so captivatingly. Who knew that such a tiny bottle housed so many secrets?" (Michael Tonello, author of *Bringing Home the Birkin*)

"Anyone who's ever dawdled in front of a perfume counter will love Tilar Mazzeo's fascinating history of the perfume known simply as No. 5; her rich and witty account is as compelling as the fragrance itself." (Karen Karbo, author of *The Gospel According to Coco Chanel*)

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