



## The Perfumer's Secret: A Novel

**Neroli Lacey**

She Writes Press (Feb 13, 2024)

(304pp)

978-1-64742-764-1

*A filmmaker and her subject push past their cynicism to form an intoxicating bond in the international novel The Perfumer's Secret.*

In Neroli Lacey's novel *The Perfumer's Secret*, a documentary filmmaker makes tough decisions between journalistic truth and loyalty to her love interest.

Zandy, a steely, thirty-year-old New Yorker, spends her free time boxing and self-presents as a practical minimalist. She's determined to advance in her career with a new climate change story. Her boss has other ideas: he assigns her to profile a French perfume house in a televised special. She thinks the project sounds like a frivolous advertorial. In France, she is at first all about business. Still, she makes note of the picturesque setting, admiring its luxuries and fashionable people even as she questions their impact on the climate.

In France, Dominique is the heir to a centuries-old perfume empire at risk of financial ruin. His sister sees Zandy's story as a marketing opportunity, but he worries that the documentary will become an exposé. He tries to micromanage Zandy's work, even as she bristles over his take-charge attitude. Zandy seeks her own interviews and wonders whether Dominique is trustworthy, and tension arises because of their mutual skepticism, raising questions about how their relationship might unfold.

It takes an outsider's influence for duo's true romance to begin: Dominique's lead perfumer hints to him, and later to Zandy, that they should soften their stances toward one another. The text becomes more seductive as their entanglement deepens. Questions about whether it's wise to cross professional boundaries are kept to a minimum; instead, the book's alternating perspectives reveal depth-giving facets of Zandy's and Dominique's private lives. Both are vulnerable; each has a few family memories they'd rather not address. Some of Zandy's memories are used to explain her present behavior, suggesting that she hungers to reveal the truth as a roundabout means of atonement. When a damaging secret about Dominique's company surfaces, their new relationship is imperiled.

Details about perfume-making enrich the book's background. The inspirations behind signature scents are covered, as is the cultivation of flowers specific to the terroir. In a gradual manner, Zandy comes to appreciate all that goes into Dominique's family's work. The book's references to Zandy's work are more glancing, used to highlight her passion and skill. Her documentary choices raise questions about the nuances of telling the truth. Despite the fallout of her choices, the novel's satisfying ending is hopeful and conciliatory.

In the idealistic novel *The Perfumer's Secret*, a headstrong filmmaker and a harried perfumer begin a complicated relationship.

KAREN RIGBY (August 6, 2024)

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