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For Want of Wonder

By Jeffrey M. Barnes

A review of *Floating Gold: A Natural (& Unnatural) History of Ambergris,* by Christopher Kemp (The University of Chicago Press, 2012)

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> [One] "continually finds [one]self shimmering between wondering *at* (the marvels of nature) and wondering *whether* (any of this could possibly be true). And it's that very shimmer, the capacity for such delicious confusion . . . that may constitute the most blessedly wonderful thing about being human."

So wrote Lawrence Wechsler in his deliciously wonderful book *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders* about David Wilson's phantasmagorical Museum of Jurassic Technology in L.A. The same thing might be written of Christopher Kemp's *Floating Gold: A Natural (& Unnatural) History of Ambergris* published in May by the University of Chicago Press. In fact, it is the very "shimmer" that Wechsler identifies in the oscillation between our capacity to wonder *at* and our capacity to wonder *whether* that Kemp captures so engagingly in the "Natural (& Unnatural)" aspects of his book.

Throughout this short history as well as the long course of human history from at least 700 A.D. to the present, ambergris (the word is mistakenly based on the French for gray amber) has been a substance invested with the kind of myth and mystery usually reserved for the objects of quest tales. Not unlike Melville's *Moby Dick,* which actually devotes two chapters it, *Floating Gold* charts an alternating narrative course between the molecular biologist-author's quest for knowledge of a general, scientific and historical nature and his personal quest to see, smell and possess the rare and elusive stuff. In the process,

Kemp spans the globe from New Bedford, Massachusetts to New Zealand's remote Stewart Island, with a stop in Grasse, the ancient perfume capital in the south of France.

The book opens in September 2008 with a highly publicized scene on Breaker Bay near Wellington, New Zealand. A one-ton cylindrical object the color of dirty snow and suspected of being ambergris had washed up on the beach causing a brief national sensation. Kemp and his wife watched the coverage with fascination from Dunedin on the island's southernmost tip, where they had relocated from the U.S. to work at the University of Otago. It was, Kemp claims, the first he'd ever heard of the substance worth an average of $1,000 per pound in today's market.

What is it and why is it so valuable? That is precisely what Kemp then aimed to find out, trawling the Internet for information that seemed almost as elusive as the stuff itself. With the exception of a 2006 monograph entitled "The Origin of Ambergris" by marine biologist Dr. Robert Clarke and various, often inaccurate, newspaper articles, most of what Kemp was able to discover consisted of "an odd combination of erudition, gossip and plain strangeness" written at least a hundred years ago.

For Kemp, Clarke's article sheds the most light. Clarke concludes that ambergris is a very particular type of fossilized sperm whale feces, containing the indigestible beaks and cuticles of the squid and cuttlefish in its diet which can build up pathologically over time in the lower gut of 1% of this species, the deepest diving mammal on the planet. If it is not expelled, *de profundis* as it were, by the animal, it often becomes impacted, blocking the rectum. This may cause death, sometimes by explosion, after which the impacted fecal matter is finally released, floating on the sea's surface for months, years or even decades (if trapped in one of the world's five major oceanic gyres) before washing up often on remote beaches in New Zealand, India, Maldives, the Philippines, Somalia or Madagascar.

It is in descriptions like the following, while examining ambergris samples in a hotel room in Aukland with the mysterious and secretive dealer Adrienne Beuse, that the alternating brilliance of Kemp the molecular biologist and Kemp the boyish adventurer truly shines:

> It has taken decades to become the substance I am holding in my hand. In its complex odor is reflected every squall and every cold gray wave. I am smelling months of tidal movement and equatorial heat – the unseen molecular degradation of folded compounds slowly evolving and changing shape beneath its resinous surface. A year of rain. A decade spent swirling around a distant sinuous gyre. A

> dozen Antarctic circuits. In that moment, I finally understand why someone would be compelled to travel across the world to collect ambergris, and why it has been so highly valued throughout history.

The lengthy curative process, reminiscent on a much smaller scale of that which produces a diamond from coal, serves over time to transform ambergris from its original fetid state to the rare and costly material valued by perfumers. Kemp discovers that it is graded differently depending on the length of time it has been cured, usually evident in its color and texture and ultimately reflected in the price. The densest and lightest colored pieces are the most highly valued for two reasons: (1) as "a powerful fixative, stabilizing fragrances so that they last much longer on the skin;" and (2) for an "indefinable odor," described as "a sweet pleasant earthy rush of tobacco and old wood that lingers in the nostrils, accompanied by a faint tang of the ocean and the slippery mud flats at low tide."

It may be this distinctive scent that links its ancient reputation for being a tonic and an aphrodisiac with its significance as an animalic base note in modern perfumery. Despite the *New York Times*' perfume critic's assertion that only less costly, standardized, synthetic substitutes for ambergris are used in today's perfumes, Kemp uncovers a different story. Bernard Perrin, the perfume industry's pre-eminent ambergris dealer in Grasse, France, tells Kemp that the highest quality white ambergris can still sell for prices of up to $8,000 per pound in Europe, despite it being illegal in many countries, including the U.S. This may explain much of the secrecy surrounding it. What's more, Perrin insists it is still used by big French perfume houses like Guerlain and Chanel as well as in custom-designed perfumes like those of the founder of the Natural Perfumers Guild, Mandy Aftel, who describes its effect for Kemp.

> Some of the really magical essences in perfume have a magical quality not just in their aroma profile but in the way that they affect the other essences that you have in the perfume. Ambergris is an absolute star in that department. It creates an almost, if you can stretch your mind to imagine this, a kind of shimmery, sparkly effect on the other essences. It moves around inside them and changes the way they smell, and it makes them more beautiful.

While it may be valued for its "shimmery sparkly effect" in perfume, like *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* it is its monetary value, Kemp observes, that even more dramatically changes the way people behave. One example is the story of Robbie Anderson, a 10-year-old New Zealand boy who, in May of 2006 after discovering a piece of ambergris worth $10,000 on a

beach near Dunedin, becomes a virtual recluse with his dad, perhaps in order to avoid pursuit by New Zealand's notorious ambergris mafia. Another is that of a late nineteenth century Jonah, the Tasmanian fisherman known as "Black Louis," who crawled up inside the eight-ton carcass of a beached sperm whale, "corkscrew(ing) and slipp(ing) his way through the slowly disintegrating intestines until he found the boulder of ambergris that was stuck there."

There is no denying that, like generations before him, Kemp fell under the spell of a substance the exact nature of whose power to fascinate, attract and inspire still remains, considering where it comes from, inexplicable. Perhaps ambergris is such a captivating subject because it is both literally and literarily a floating signifier, with a tremulous power to embody the paradox of light and dark implicit in nearly every aspect of its production and use. Whatever its mysterious attraction, Kemp has been able to penetrate in-depth the slippery, secretive precincts of that mystique, and has done so with considerable imagination, humor and scholarly insight. My only complaint is that *Floating Gold* lacks an index and also a bibliography of works cited. This, however, may be a virtue in disguise, as it forces a reader (or reviewer) in search of specific information to undertake a similar, seemingly haphazard and sometimes frustrating search within its densely packed pages. Perhaps that is Kemp's intent: to replicate his own meandering journey in some way.

In the end, like the *Wunderkammern* so prevalent in the period from which Kemp finds the most prodigious material on his subject, the book is at once the product of and the inspiration for a kind of reflection that might properly be characterized as wonder. Whether describing its unique flavor when combined with eggs or chocolate (as in the favorite dishes of historical figures as diverse as Elizabeth I and Casanova) or "a tangled, Texas-size accumulation of marine trash in the central North Pacific Ocean" known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, Kemp's narrative nearly always shimmers.

The End.