

# Study Guide:

## Jehanne Dubrow's *throughsmoke*

### General Questions for Writing, Discussion, and Review

1. Near the start of **throughsmoke**, the narrator offers a definition of perfume that comes from the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Originally: a substance which emits a pleasant smell when burned; incense.” What associations do you bring to the word “perfume” and to the invented word “throughsmoke?”
1. **throughsmoke** begins with this sentence: “In a dark time, I am in love with something frivolous.” In fact, the phrase “in a dark time” appears repeatedly throughout the book. What kind of darkness does **throughsmoke** explore?
2. At the end of **throughsmoke**, Jehanne Dubrow includes a lengthy works cited section. What is the effect of referencing so many disciplines and so many writers from different eras? What does this tell readers about the nature of scent?

### Questions About Form

1. **throughsmoke** is labeled an “essay in notes.” How do understand the structure of the book? Is it one long essay divided into hundreds of tiny pieces? Or is it a collection of hundreds of tiny essays?
2. Throughout **throughsmoke**, the narrator describes different perfumes, explaining the aromatic notes that these fragrances contain while never naming the perfumes themselves. Why do you think Jehanne Dubrow chooses not to name the perfumes? What is the purpose of keeping their identities anonymous?

## Questions about Imagery & Themes

1. Pop culture plays an important role in *throughsmoke*. How do these references to television, movies, and music function at different places in the book?
2. The narrator in *throughsmoke* examines different kinds of losses and griefs, such as the death of her dog Argos, her mother's breast cancer, and large-scale traumas like the Holocaust. Why is smell useful as an entryway into these emotions?
3. The poems of French Symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire, play a prominent role in *throughsmoke*. What purpose does Baudelaire's depiction of scent serve in the book? What does the use of another language within the essay tell the reader about scent's ability to cross borders and boundaries?
4. Because scent is so difficult to describe or characterize, how does Jehanne Dubrow use the other four senses (i.e. sight, sound, touch, and taste) to speak about perfume? By the end of the book, do you think she has found a solution to the challenge of writing about smell?

## Questions about Voice & Point of View

1. In *throughsmoke*, Jehanne Dubrow interviews a wide variety of people, including poets who love perfume, scientists, and a woman who runs a scented soap company. How do these outside voices expand the reader's understanding of the art, science, and commerce of perfumery? How do their areas of expertise impact the reader's emotional reaction to perfume?
2. In one of the notes, the narrator explains, "Writing a recollection of scent—the vetiver of my husband's neck when he was in college, the air from last winter on my puppy's fur—I use the present tense. Each moment a perfume exists on skin, it is changing, receding or altering its shape, going perhaps from fruit to flower. But, whatever its ghostly metamorphosis, the perfume itself remains always *right now*. And if I smell a distant aroma again, it wafts memory into the present too, real as a childhood madeleine with all the texture and solidity of sensory information." All of *throughsmoke* is written in present tense. Memories, current experiences, excerpts from literature all take place in the now. How does this flattening of time impact the reader's experience?