

The context of the novel

When studying this novel it is important to consider why Suskind chose to set his novel in eighteenth century France and the significance this has on the plot, characters and narrative voice.

1. Do some research on Patrick Suskind, the author, and find out the following information about him:
 - His nationality;
 - The date of his birth;
 - Where he grew up and lived;
 - World events which he has lived through and might have influenced him;
 - Any other works he has written;
 - Any other useful information about him (such as awards received; his lifestyle etc)
2. Now research the period in which he sets his novel – eighteenth century France and investigate the following:
 - Society – population; living conditions; class system; crime;
 - The monarchy (the narrator of the novel mentions the anniversary of the King's coronation – the reference is to Louis XV);
 - Political situation;
 - Historical events during and just after the period in which the novel is set.
3. Now look at all your research for points 1 and 2 above and see if you can draw any comparisons or links between the two periods or see any similarities in the times and then discuss what you think might have influenced Suskind to set his novel in eighteenth century France.
4. Look at the opening lines to the novel:

'In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages. His story will be told here. His name was Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, and if his name – in contrast to the names of other gifted abominations, de Sade's, for instance, or Saint-Just's, Fouche's, Bonaparte's, etc. – has been forgotten today, it is certainly not because Grenouille fell short of those more famous blackguards when it came to arrogance, misanthropy, immorality, or, more succinctly, wickedness, but because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent.'

Discuss how important you think history will be to the novel, bearing in mind these opening words. Think about the way Suskind places the century as the very first words, his naming of famous people and his comment about scent leaving 'no traces'.