



The Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History

Phil Baker

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La Fee Verte (or "The Green Fairy") has intoxicated artists, poets, and writers ever since the late eighteenth century. Stories abound of absinthe's druglike sensations of mood lift and inspiration due to the presence of wormwood, its infamous "special" ingredient, which ultimately leads to delirium, homicidal mania, and death. Opening with the sensational 1905 Absinthe Murders, Phil Baker offers a cultural history of absinthe, from its modest origins as an herbal tonic through its luxuriantly morbid heyday in the late nineteenth century. Chronicling a fascinatingly lurid cast of historical characters who often died young, the absinthe scrapbook includes Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Aleister Crowley, Arthur Machen, August Strindberg, Alfred Jarry, Vincent van Gogh, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Allais, Ernest Hemingway, and Pablo Picasso. Along with discussing the rituals and modus operandi of absinthe drinking, Baker reveals the recently discovered pharmacology of how real absinthe actually works on the nervous system, and he tests the various real and fake absinthe products that are available overseas. The Book of Absinthe is a witty, erudite primer to the world's most notorious drink.

The Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History Details

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From Reader Review The Book of Absinthe: A Cultural History for online ebook

Denny says

I wish there had been more about the drink and less literary gossip.

Cheryl says

This book was very entertaining, how the author wrapped the history around this intoxicating drink. From Oscar Wilde to Paul Verlaine, Ernest Dowson, etc. I enjoyed this book immensely.

Trina says

Not a very smooth read, this one's more of a survey of where absinthe is referenced in art and literature. It jumps around from the late 19th century to the late 20th and briefly touches on references/cultural significance, historical provenance, the resurgence of absinthe in the contemporary U.S. and the U.K., the science of absinthe and its effects, and includes a neat little section reviewing a handful of current brands. There's also an appendix of writings from the late 19th century that feature absinthe prominently. The author also indulges in some extensive descriptions of visual art pieces that feature absinthe, but unfortunately does not include the images themselves.

The Book of Absinthe is potentially a treasure trove for the absinthe enthusiast. I am not an absinthe enthusiast, but I still learned some neat stuff and added a couple of fin de siecle French and British poets that I'd not previously encountered to my reading list.

Steph says

This book examines the history and culture behind the mystery of the quintessential "green fairy," and explains the stigma behind the wonderful concoction. It makes me want to grab my glass, sugar cube, and slotted spoon right now!

Denise says

Just watching QI and I could answer all of the questions about absinthe. Then I remembered why! I'd read this book!

P.J. Kelley says

A good tangential review of French poets and poetry, pretty well referenced. This isn't a money grab, snippets of Google research. Absinthe itself is for poseurs now, but was probably better back when it was a stronger drink. According to the book, the absinthe now is much weaker.

With Flowers and With Woman
Charles Cros

With Flowers, and with Women,
With Absinthe, and with this Fire,
We can divert ourselves a while,
Act out our part in some drama.

Absinthe, on a winter evening,
Lights up in green the sooty soul;
And Flowers, on the beloved,
Grow fragrant before the clear Fire.

Later, kisses lose their charm
Having lasted several seasons;
And after mutual betrayals
We part one day without a tear.

We burn letters and bouquets.
And fire takes our bower;
And if sad life is salvaged
Still there is Absinthe and its hiccups..

The portraits are eaten by flames..
Shrivelled fingers tremble..
We die from sleeping long
With Flowers, and with Women.

Kiki-chan says

Geniální! Jsem se použila, pobavila a udělala si trošku pořádek v různých věcech z doslechu :) Škoda, že už se nedá sehnat :D

Alexander says

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Christina says

I'm glad I didn't allow my initial discouragement about this not being a big collection of absinthe short stories discourage me. In the end there was a few tales and poems about the subject and once I got over the authors cheeky style it was really just purely informative and i'm glad I read it.

Nancy Oakes says

Every time I go to my favorite liquor store I eye the beautiful green bottle of absinthe sitting near the counter, but have never given in. I still probably won't give in, but I can tell you that while reading this I kept thinking about trying it.

Baker's book explores the fascination and lure of absinthe among influential artists, poets and authors since the 1800s, as well as on the public at large. Many of the names are familiar: Van Gogh, Lautrec, Wilde, Rimbaud; the accounts of these celebrated artistes and their experiences with absinthe make for great reading, and serve as a commentary on the Bohemian lifestyle. The book also discusses the ban on the spirit after the French government decided it was detrimental to the health and well being of its people; then goes on to look at its resurgence. Baker also provides a glimpse of the deleterious effects of wormwood on the brain of the user, likening it to a 1940s-era cocktail known as the "Mickey Slim," which added the extra little touch of DDT to provide the extra kick. Hmm.

This is a very well-written account that could be read and understood by anyone. I was surprised to find out that absinthe is totally verboten to any US servicemen while overseas, or any government agents, but wait! There's Hillary Clinton sipping it in Prague (or did she just drink it without swallowing?)

I think I'll stick to my Campari and soda, thank you very much....

Melissa says

the green monster!

Aaron the Pink Donut says

A nice wittily written 300+ page book about Absinthe. Covers the historical and cultural aspects of the drink in great detail. A great read.

Tony says

Pretty entertaining. If you know the art and literature/poetry of the times, then you definitely need to check this out. The book humanizes these artists that have gotten away with becoming quasi-martyrs. Many of their lives were filled with psychoactive drugs and young boys. If this was bohemian culture, I find it hard to believe that they were the only segment of French and British society that was caught up in their selfish exploration of "self".

There are connections between this counterculture and the counterculture of the 1960s. Same selfish exploration under the false perception of "figuring out the world through mind expansion". The hippies of the 1890s are discussed here.

Sarah says

I'd never even heard of absinthe when I first read this book, but that was quickly remedied by this quirky, informative and well-written book. Stock full of mind-boggling facts (especially about the tragic and talented absinthe addicts) and interesting anecdotes, Baker creates an all-encompassing narrative of the cultural effects that this seemingly innocuous, yet highly addictive and dangerous, beverage.

Nick Black says

It actually doesn't deserve more than two stars, but absinthe is so fucking fantastic that I gave it one more just for exquisite taste in subject matter. The fourth star is because Marcus Kwok, the best person in the world, gave it to me; it is thus full of love.

As opposed to reading this admittedly overrated claptrap about absinthe, just go drink it until you're blind in a gutter. Two weeks later, you won't remember either experience anyway.
