



# THE SMART SET

FROM DREXEL UNIVERSITY

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## First Person

### In Defense of Stink

*Is hippie hygiene a serious problem? Not if we can all embrace our natural odors...*

By Lockie Hunter

My grandmother, like an older bottle of wine, had a complex odor. She was heady. A mix of underarm odor, baby powder, sour milk, and vine ripe tomatoes. It was lovely. It was one of the things that made her memorable. My mother disagreed.

I teach creative writing at a college where students can major in environmental studies and outdoor leadership. These majors draw a mix of outdoorsy types. Mountain-biking-kambucha-drinking-patchouli-wearing students sit among computer science majors. Every semester I assign an idea generation assignment, meant to prompt topics and themes for essays, and every year at least one pupil brings up the topic of stinky students. Here is the recent entry.

*Working title: Hippie Hygiene*

*Topic: Why some students chose not to keep a clean hygiene at College.*

*Theme: Since I've been here, I've noticed girls who chose not to shave and have smelled the most horrible body odor. An opinion piece on what others and I think about this.*

The odd thing is, though each semester one student comes up with the idea... no one ever writes the essay. The topic feels taboo, fun to discuss during class, but difficult to address seriously. If the student brings up the topic, then what is the solution? One student told me that though the stink "disturbed her" she was unable to write about it for fear of sounding prejudiced, as if the stinky were a protected minority.

This problem seems unreal as celebrities continue to release scents (no pun intended) to capture their personalities. A January 1st 2012 blog post titled "Kim Kardashian Perfumes Let You Smell Like a Reality Star" seemed like a gag line until I saw that it was written in earnestness. The post highlights Kardashian's latest offerings (she released three different scents in 2011) and ends with the tag line of, "Are you a fan too? Make sure you smell like one with Kim Kardashian perfume."

In February 2012, one month after Kardashian's latest release, a student in Newfoundland was pulled from the classroom and was sprayed with Febreze. The teacher was put on paid leave.

A May 2010 KIRO news story reports that in Seattle an eight-year-old girl was removed from her elementary school classroom ostensibly due to the way her hair smelled. According to the family's attorney the teacher "told the child that she was afraid that the child was going to make her sick and that she was allergic to her hair and the product in her hair." The attorney further claims that the school was not capable of coming up with a solution, and was "unable to articulate a plan at all."

The problem is not new. A 2006 chronicle of Higher Education web forum finds the topic being volleyed. The original post was from an academic adviser, who met with one student who was "seriously stinky." He asked the forum how best to approach the student. This set off an explosion of answers from "Put some Vicks under your nose and advise him quickly" to "So daily showering and Irish Spring are cultural universals?" One Ozarks professor pointed to his rural students' "impressive home-grown BO" while another argued that western culture's insistence on bathing daily has an impact on the



To stink?

Or not to stink?

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environment and ended with "It's not like a little body odor is going to hurt anyone."

Professors noted the difference in cultural norms between western and other cultures. One noted that an inexperienced International Student Advisor mentioned body odor in a newsletter that was meant to help international students settle into the American culture. And that he "got hell from all the international students for the rest of his short-lived career." Another poster added, "the Japanese think Americans are smelly. The British think the French are smelly."

A February 2009 UPI story tells the saga of a student winning a decade long legal battle to reinstate himself in a university in the Netherlands. He was originally asked to leave due to foot odor. The judge's official ruling was for fellow students to "hold their noses and bear it."

Napoleon preferred it if his women didn't wash.

Malcolm X said that white people smell funny.

So, what do we do? Do we "hold our nose and bear it?" Do we dismiss the elementary school child from the class, leaving her to learn her reading, writing and arithmetic at home? Do we move upwind, if such a thing as upwind exists in a classroom? Do we confront the student? The grandmother? I've a better solution. We grip it. We wallow in it.

While living in San Francisco in the 1990s, the printing company for which I worked produced a book titled *smell this*. Produced by Women of Color in Coalition at the Center for Racial Education in Berkeley, *smell this* attempted to build a sisterhood for disenfranchised women. The editor offered up musings on her own scent as an apologia for the natural scents of some women, especially women of color. Embracing natural scents can be *empowering*... even if those scents are *overpowering*.

I'm from a family of mixed and uncertain heritage. Certainly German on my mother's side but my father's claim of his side being simply "hillbilly" as an ethnicity is one I've always embraced. Hidden in that "hillbilly" heritage is a long line of people with dark ruddy complexions, deep black eyes and black hair. Due to my genetic makeup I rarely sweat, and, I admit it, I rarely bathe. My spotty hygiene practices prompted my college roommate to ask, quite seriously, if it was time for my weekly bath. I'm aligned with the stinky masses, and one day someone may be unable to articulate a plan for me.

I wonder if my students posing the essays topics were referring to their professor.

Sometimes I truly stink. In my teens my mix included cigarette smoke. In my twenties I added the ammoniac scent of hair dye. My thirties added lavender wrinkle creams, and today, my scent is most aligned with my grandmother. A mix of underarm odor, baby powder, sour milk, and vine ripe tomatoes. Heady. Lovely. Memorable. My mother still disagrees.

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Lockie Hunter holds an MFA in fiction from Emerson College in Boston and teaches creative writing at Warren Wilson College where she [blogs](#) about her misadventures. Lockie's work has appeared in or is forthcoming in publications including *Brevity*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Quarter After Eight*, *The Morning News* and others. You can read more of her work on her [website](#).

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