

16 April 2003 | [HOW TO](#)

Huff Your Way to a Healthier You



*Turpentine, propane, Marks-a-Lot: Huffers of the world know their poison, and well. Some gourmands, however, see in their hardware store a cellar of fine wines. With little circles around his nostrils, **Garrett J. Murphy** sniffs out some favorite markers.*

The permanent markers of today's supply closet provide the busy epicure with a quick, portable getaway from life's pressures. 'Quick' is a crucial term in any discussion of the pleasures of inhalants, and 'cheap' is another, right before 'headache.' But as anyone who enjoys hanging around gas stations can tell you, the pleasure isn't all in the sound of brain cells asphyxiating: Like fine wines, the best markers are endowed with distinctive characters – a result of their unique combinations of pigments, aromatic esters and alcohols, and saturation and transfer matrices.

Thus, a marker formula originally sprouted from economic necessity – the price, say, of corn byproduct futures on a Wednesday in 1994 – may create a bouquet as subtle and complex as anything out of Bordeaux, Napa, and Milwaukee, combined. And while overregulation leaves the marker aficionado increasingly hobbled in his appreciation of the domestic labels, I understand promising new work is underway in the more permissive atmosphere of the developing world, a world unhaunted by phantoms of 'toxicity' and 'brain damage.' If anyone can produce a sample, I'd love a whiff. Until then, here are a few favorites.

Sanford King Size Permanent

The metal-barreled magnum of markers. Robust, sweet, distinctly petrochemical with an undertone of benzene. A classic of the age of plastics and the standard by which all others should be measured. This one can get you lightheaded even when making posters in a well-ventilated area; for the more dedicated huffer, it produces a quick nose-burning buzz quickly followed by sharply aching temples. This is what the future must have smelled like in 1952.

Carter's Marks-A-Lot

The tapering black barrel and office-industrial label look promising, but the results are disappointing. A thin, paint-like bouquet with hardly any finish. You get higher from the hyperventilation it takes to sniff it than from the few toxins it might contain. A good bet for the kids.

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Berol Marker 8800: Permanent Ink

A light, fruity bouquet wrapped in aromas of vinyl and modeling glue, though it lacks any burn. They've managed to engineer the scent of death out of this one, along with any narcotic potential. Nice for swampy summer days.

Paper Mate W10

This is the marker that came with my desk, which is the only place I've ever seen it. The scent is heavily alcohol, like the swab before the blood test. The high is a low-key warmth moving out from the sinuses and ending with a thudding ache from brow to cerebellum. An excellent standby for just before impromptu staff meetings.

Sanford Sharpie Fine Point

Skunky, sweet, and plasticky. A favorite for responding to bathroom graffiti, but otherwise doesn't offer much mind expanding. Extended inhalation, though, leaves a numb nose and throat similar to that produced by a sunrise coke binge.

Liquid Paper All Purpose Correction Pen

A big favorite in the textbook mills of Chicago's educational publishing industry, and one of the original bearers of the 'intentional misuse by concentrating and inhaling' instruction set. Not technically a marker, of course, but at least it's shaped like one; the main drawback is the ball-bearing tip valve, which makes it necessary to spread it on paper for any sustained whiff. Sweet and bubblegummy, with a cool speedy kick that tingles to the elbows.

Sanford SUPER Sharpie

They've finally let Sharpie's mutant brother out of the attic: the swollen-bodied version of the mailroom classic is about a half-inch longer and twice the diameter of the original. In a side-by-side sniff-off (with an admittedly older Sharpie Fine Point) the odors are nearly identical, though the Super has a slightly more centered nose. The advantage, of course, is in the roughly tripled surface area in the Super tip. But also increased in size is the little banner that confirms what I quietly suspected all along: 'Certified AP Nontoxic by Art & Creative Materials Institute.'

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from the attic

Birnbaum v. Edwidge Danticat

America may believe in its own exceptionalism, but it's also been exceptionally involved in Haiti's history. Our man **Robert Birnbaum** talks to American Book Award-winner **Edwidge Danticat** about the current state of Haiti and the current state of her stories.

Ladies Night Transcript

Every Wednesday, a group of San Francisco women meet to chat over a few glasses of wine. **Margaret Berry** is among them. This week they discuss the mechanics of sticking it to the man.

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