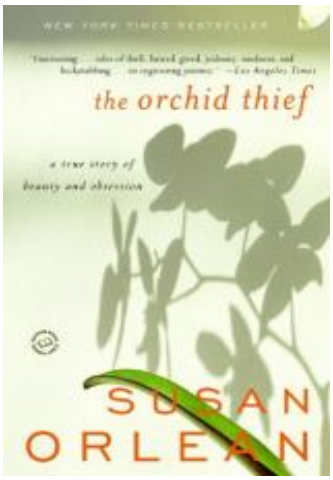
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The Orchid Thief

by Susan Orlean



About the Book

In Susan Orlean's mesmerizing true story of beauty and obsession is John Laroche, a renegade plant dealer and sharply handsome guy, in spite of the fact that he is missing his front teeth and has the posture of al dente spaghetti. In 1994, Laroche and three Seminole Indians were arrested with rare orchids they had stolen from a wild swamp in south Florida that is filled with some of the world's most extraordinary plants and trees. Laroche had planned to clone the orchids and then sell them for a small fortune to impassioned collectors. After he was caught in the act, Laroche set off one of the oddest legal controversies in recent memory, which brought together environmentalists, Native Amer-ican activists, and devoted orchid collectors. The result is a tale that is strange, compelling, and hilarious.

New Yorker writer Susan Orlean followed Laroche through swamps and into the eccentric world of Florida's orchid collectors, a subculture of aristocrats, fanatics, and smugglers whose obsession with plants is all-consuming. Along the way, Orlean learned the history of orchid collecting, discovered an odd pattern of plant crimes in Florida, and spent time with Laroche's partners, a tribe of Seminole Indians who are still at war with the United States.

There is something fascinating or funny or truly bizarre on every page of **The Orchid Thief**: the story of how the head of a famous Seminole chief came to be displayed in the front window of a local pharmacy; or how seven hundred iguanas were smuggled into Florida; or the case of the only known extraterrestrial plant crime. Ultimately, however, Susan Orlean's book is about passion itself, and the amazing lengths to which people will go to gratify it. That passion is captured with singular vision in **The Orchid Thief**, a once-in-a-lifetime story by one of our most original journalists.

Discussion Guide

1. Is there a hero in The Orchid Thief? An anti-hero?

2. Is the book subjective? Objective? Or a different genre altogether? Some people describe this as "literary non-fiction."

Is that how you would characterize it?

3. Susan Orlean resists the temptation to feel possessed by the orchids but she is willing to undergo great trials in order to satisfy her passion for reporting. Is this passion evident in her writing?

4. The passion for collecting is described in the book as a means of infusing meaning into life, subjecting the vicissitudes to some order, acquiring the ability to mold and change the nature of things, i.e. create life itself. What other means do humans employ to achieve the same ends, and how effective are they?

5. John Laroche would not describe himself as an orchid person. To him the orchid is a temporary albeit very intense passion, a means to an end, not an end in itself. How would you analyze the difference between Laroche's motives in collecting orchids and the regular orchid collectors we visit in the course of the book?

6. Laroche wrestles verbally with the thought that acting within what he considered the bounds of the law for his own immediate gain was ultimately an act of altruism. His rape of the Fakahatchee would force the law to be changed and close the loophole that allowed him to poach rare and wild orchids from an Indian reservation in the first place, thus protecting the species in the wild, and securing it for the marketplace at the same time. Is this the thought process of an amoral character? Or is he just an everyday charlatan? Discuss.

7. Laroche makes a very telling statement: "When I had my own nursery I sometimes felt like all the people swarming around were going to eat me alive. I felt like they were that gigantic parasitic plant and I was the dying host tree." Is Laroche playing the role of the victim, the martyr to a (preferably lost, but grand) cause or is he in control of his life by making a living off other people's weaknesses, whether it be a passion for orchids or pornography? Discuss.

8. Orlean seems fascinated by the story of Darwin and the study of the orchid with the eighteen inch nectary and the moth with the eighteen inch proboscis to feed on it: the idea that two totally differentlife forms evolved specifically to serve each other; that neither could have existed without the other. What has the evidence of the orchid's adaptability altered your perception of the theories of evolution?

9. Orlean interrupts her central narrative of John Laroche with stories of the orchid hunters of the past, the contemporary state of Florida and other histories. How does this affect the pace of the work? Is the framework she has devised successful?

10. The Native Americans on the reservation are entitled by one law to remove protected species from their land. Is this law justified?

11. Orlean seems surprised by the abundance of sexual references to orchids in her book. Yet the flower is the prime sexual organ of most plants. Seek out a florist with a good representation of orchids. What alternative descriptions of these exotic flowers can you devise?

12. What is the real core, the central character, of the book: Laroche? Florida? Orchids? Native Americans? Darwin? Orlean?

13. As a reader, what did you expect from a book about orchids? How did your experience of reading The Orchid Thief

compare to what you expected?

14. The working title of **The Orchid Thief** was "Passion." What does that suggest about the themes in the book?

15. What, besides orchids, could generate a book like this? Are there other subcultures or other objects of desire that might be as provocative?

Author Bio

Susan Orlean has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1992. She is the *New York Times* bestselling author of seven books, including THE LIBRARY BOOK, RIN TIN TIN, SATURDAY NIGHT, and THE ORCHID THIEF, which was made into the Academy Award?winning film *Adaptation*. She lives with her family and her animals in Los Angeles.

Critical Praise

"Zestful . . . A swashbuckling piece of reporting that celebrates some virtues that made America great. Here are visionary passions and fierce obsessions; heroic feats accomplished in exotic settings; outsize characters, entrepreneurs at the edge of the frontier, adventurers. . . . Orlean, an intrepid sociologist among the orchid fanatics, is also a poetic observer. "

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