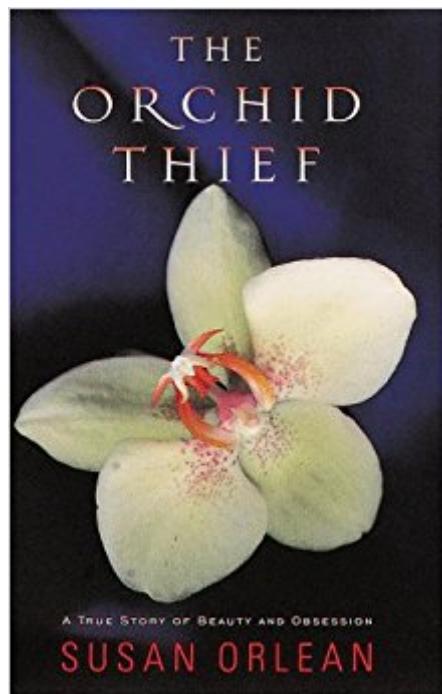


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# The Orchid Thief



## Synopsis

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 American activists, and devoted orchid collectors. The result is a tale that is strange, compelling, and hilarious. A 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Orchidelirium is the name the Victorians gave to the flower madness that is for botanical collectors the equivalent of gold fever. Wealthy orchid fanatics of that era sent explorers (heavily armed, more to protect themselves against other orchid seekers than against hostile natives or wild animals) to unmapped territories in search of new varieties of *Cattleya* and *Paphiopedilum*. As knowledge of the family Orchidaceae grew to encompass the currently more than 60,000 species and over 100,000 hybrids, orchidelirium might have been expected to go the way of Dutch tulip mania. Yet, as journalist Susan Orlean found out, there still exists a vein of orchid madness strong enough to inspire larceny among collectors. The *Orchid Thief* centers on south Florida and John Laroche, a quixotic, charismatic schemer once convicted of attempting to take endangered orchids from the Fakahatchee swamp, a state preserve. Laroche, a horticultural consultant who once ran an extensive nursery for the Seminole tribe, dreams of making a fortune for the Seminoles and himself by cloning the rare ghost orchid *Polyrrhiza lindenii*. Laroche sums up the obsession that drives him and so many others: I really have to watch myself, especially around plants. Even now, just being here, I still get that collector feeling. You know what I mean. I'll see something and then suddenly I get that feeling. It's like I can't just have something--I have to have it and learn about it and grow it and sell it and master it and have a million of it. Even Orlean--so leery of orchid fever that she immediately gives away any plant that's pressed upon her by the growers in Laroche's circle--develops a desire to see a ghost orchid blooming and makes several ultimately unsuccessful treks into the Fakahatchee. Filled with Palm Beach socialites, Native Americans, English peers, smugglers, and naturalists as improbably colorful as the tropical blossoms that inspire them, this is a lyrical, funny, addictively entertaining read. --Barrie Trinkle

"Folding virtue and criminality around profit are [John] Laroche's specialty," Orlean writes of the oddly likable felon who's the subject of her latest book. But what could be virtuous about poaching endangered orchids, which?not insignificantly?are worth a small fortune? If exotic flowers were cloned, everyone could afford them, Laroche would say. It's just such "amoral morality" that compels New Yorker staff writer Orlean (*Saturday Night*) to relocate to Naples, Fla., in order to dig into an orchid-collecting subculture as rarefied as its object of desire. Orlean spends two years attempting to place maverick Laroche in the rigid strata of orchid society, the heart of which is

located in Florida. The milieu includes "Palm Beach plant lovers" and international stars such as Bob Fuchs, a commercial breeder whose family has been in the business for three generations. Laroche, on the other hand, is a self-taught horticulturist, yet one who has enough expertise to convince the nearby Seminole Indians to hire him as plant manager for their nursery. With the promise of big profits, he launches a plan to reproduce the "ghost" orchid, using samples stolen from the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, leading to his arrest. Though she fills in a brief history of the \$10-billion trade, Orlean's account of her orchid-land explorations, which include wading through a swamp in hope of spotting a ghost orchid (she doesn't see one) is not so much an expose as a meandering survey of the peccadilloes of the local orchid breeders. Clearly Orlean is most intrigued by autodidact Laroche, not the world he temporarily inhabits, which unfortunately makes for a slim, if engaging, volume. Author tour. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is an interesting book. It doesn't have a gripping story line, the reader is not on the edge of his/her seat waiting to see what happens, but the history of orchid hunting is engagingly told - and a horrific story it is. The characters don't add a lot, but do provide a connective thread. Yet another window into the European Great White Hunter attitude of ruthless greed - which is unfortunately our environment's inheritance.

Susan Orlean obviously did a lot of research, which is spewed back at the reader. Sadly, the book is a confused cross between local history and cultural analysis. Reads like an extended version of a lesser New Yorker piece. That said, I did learn how to transport orchids after primary bloom.

great read

If you really like reading about every facet of Orchids then you will really enjoy this book. The plant is beautiful but it's just not my DNA to know everything, and I mean everything, about the plant. The writer writes well...it's just the subject.

Interesting enough. Good writing but no real point to the whole story and didn't leave me saying, "wow that was interesting". This was essentially a diary of Susan's encounters and experiences in Florida while following up a story. Not sure why but I expected more compelling details or emotional connection. Just wasn't there for me.

This book is about a real event that happened in a Florida state park where we volunteer each winter. An absolutely amazing place and I am reading everything I can find about this park. I was more interested in the book for the information it contains and an understanding of a place, the writing style could be better but it is an interesting read and a good intro to a place to visit.

Kinda dull in places with pretty much a stream of consciousness flavor. Clearly the subject of the story should have gone to jail but he did not.

I just finished reading the book, and I thought it was a 7.8 on a scale of 10. It was an expanded (really padded) version of her New Yorker article. The expansion consisted mostly of chapters devoted to various aspects of orchid collecting and cultivating history (well told). The characterization of Florida is very nice, and she describes people well. On the other hand, the orchid information is pretty familiar stuff, and can get repetitious (how many times do I need to be told that it takes seven years from seed to flower -- a questionable generalization at that). The biology is specious (she has roots and shoots "evolving" from protocorms rather than developing from them). She also characterizes Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace as colleagues -- an overstatement of the case I think, despite Darwin's gracious and much-deserved sharing of credit with Wallace in his presentations to the Royal Society. The book dust jacket has been bashed for its largely non-resupinate phalaenopsis flower, but it looks to me like a fallen bloom on fabric, so I think that's okay. Pretty good read and, hey, it's about our favorite plants!

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