

# **THE ORCHID THIEF**

**by SUSAN ORLEAN**

(A New York Times Bestseller)

The Orchid Thief is a compelling read about a world within a world.

When I went to the library to borrow the book for this review I couldn't find it, although I knew it was there. I was looking in the fiction section instead of the non-fiction – such was its lasting impression. I was forgetting the old adage about truth being stranger than fiction.

John Laroche, 36, is the main figure – tall and lanky with “...the shape and bulk of a coat hanger...”. He is, according to some, an orchid thief but the tangle of local, national and international regulations governing orchids leads to some unintended consequences. “I'm really on the side of the plants. Is what I did ethical? I don't know...”.

Orlean's investigative writing about Laroche and his world is intriguing, humorous and well researched and leads to her becoming obsessed with seeing the endangered “ghost orchid” (*polyrrhiza lindenii*), known so well to Laroche, in flower. The tribulations of Laroche are extensively interwoven by, and provide the structure for, fascinating accounts of the natural and man-made histories of the Florida Everglades.

The Fakahatchee Strand – seventy thousand acres in the Big Cypress Swamp (????) area of the Everglades - owned by the Seminole tribe, for whom Laroche works, is the centrepiece of the book. “Spooky places are usually full of death, but the Fakahatchee is crazy with living things....Tony called again and asked if I was really ready.”. The end of a hike was always a relief to Orlean “...(I) washed my face for about ten minutes straight, and then stripped off every piece of my swamp outfit and threw it all out.”.

The author writes of flora and fauna encountered in the swamp in the present and in the not so politically correct past “...that night he had a dinner of a fried blue heron and a cabbage palm heart.”. Armadillos, leprosy experiments, swamp pigs, frog hunting, farming, forestry and the invasive Brazilian pepper and melaleuca trees all form the eclectic backcloth to this world. The book is liberally and effortlessly punctuated with regional plant information, making it especially interesting to gardeners.

Orlean brings to life the botanical underbelly of Florida life, away from the beaches, through the orchid world. Weirdness and passion abound in breeders and eccentric collectors. "...You love it even though it's an ugly little runt, Laroche said, ...it's just part of the sickness.". Martin, a BMW driving "Benlate" millionaire and Dewey "His house was on a moth-eaten back road..." both equally occupy this plant obsessed world.

A colorful history of early orchid explorers, "a mortal occupation", makes dramatic reading in one section. Another covers a visit to the ubiquitous orchid show. "I had to take a break ...because I kept seeing faces in the crinkles and spikes...", complete with a running commentary by Laroche.

The book has a modest bibliography and also a Readers Guide consisting of "A Conversation with the Author", Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion and also Susan Orlean on "Adaptation" (see below).

The movie "Adaptation" starring (thank goodness) Meryl Streep was based on the book. Typically, the movie was a poor reflection of the book, with the basic relationship of Laroche and the Everglades being reversed.

Reader discretion is advised as there is some coarse dialogue and profane language in the book.

Reviewed by David Broomhead