



Of Orchids, Obsession & Florida Oddballs

Author Susan Orlean talks about her time in Florida

by **Chelle Koster Walton**

How much did Susan Orlean know or care about orchids before she spent two years in Naples and the Everglades researching her nonfiction bestseller *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*?

“Nothing. Less than zero,” she answers with a small laugh. “No knowledge, very little interest. I didn’t see what the big deal was. I had seen some orchids, but I didn’t think they were very pretty. As it turns out, I saw the most generic of them all. If you would have asked me then if I’d ever write a book about orchids, I would have laughed.”

She still can’t tell you how to grow an orchid and, though she tries, has little success getting the plant to bloom more than once. But then *The Orchid Thief* is not just about orchids. The sometimes

seductive plant was merely the root from which Orlean’s stranger-than-fiction tale of passion and obsession grew and flourished.

It sprouted as an idea for an article for *The New Yorker* magazine, where Orlean has worked as a staff writer since 1992. A wire story about the arrest of John Laroche and three Seminole Indians for filching rare ghost orchids out of Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve—reclaimed wilderness where 45 species of wild orchids grow—grabbed Orlean’s attention. Thinking it would make a good human interest story—the quirky, dissecting kind Orlean likes to write—she left behind New York winter in 1994 for the “warm and gummy” climes of Naples. Two years later, *The Orchid Thief* blossomed.

“I traveled back and forth many times

and would stay for a week or two and then go back up north. I did that repeatedly,” the author said in a cell phone interview in November 2006 en route from Boston to New York City with her husband and 22-month old son, Austin. “It was one of those years when it was one of the worst winters on record, with 17 inches of snowfall. I missed it all. It turned out to be a very good time to do a book about Florida.

“I had never spent that much time with a single subject,” Orlean says. “I was drawn into a world so totally amazing for two years, and it had a very profound effect on me. I suddenly appreciated the nature of passion and I came to the realization that as a writer—I always imagined writers stood at arm’s length from their subjects—I had the realization that that wasn’t true. The whole

point was to become very engaged and passionate about the subject and passionate about being a writer.”

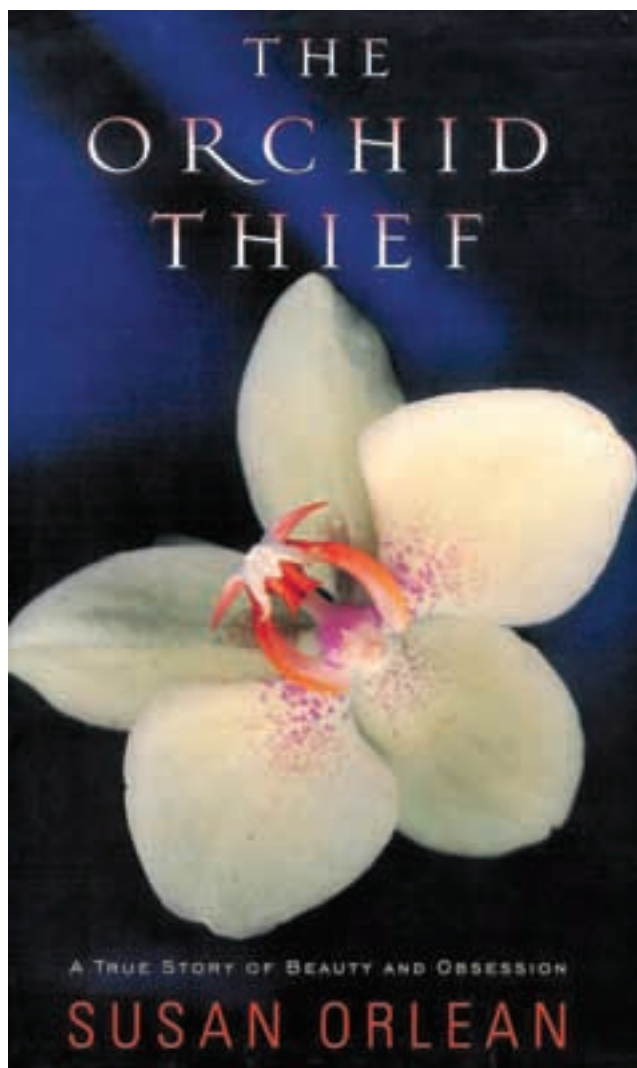
In the course of her intense research, sloshing through swamps, talking to orchid growers, and investigating the lurid underbelly of the orchid and Florida import-export industries, Orlean, a world traveler in the name of chronicling popular culture, encountered some of her most memorable characters, not the least of which was the intellectual, manic, front-toothless Laroche.

“Every place is full of interesting stories and people,” said Orlean, whose latest collection of essays is titled *My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who’s Been Everywhere*. “But Florida is an unusual place that’s drawn people like a magnet. It’s where people go to find their fantasy. The landscape is surreal. It has that quality of something that’s just emerged from the ocean bottom, of something new to the rest of the continent—the transience of the population and the fulfillment of dreams: warm weather and a piece of land. As a result of being cast by so many people that way and advertised that way and actually being that way, it is in a way a fantasy fulfilled. It draws more people with somewhat more eccentric life views [with its] unusual sense that anything could happen.”

The Orchid Thief’s sheer shades of bizarre grabbed Hollywood’s attention and in 2002 it inspired the movie *Adaptation*, starring Nicholas Cage and Meryl Streep. The book provided framework for the story of a screenwriter struggling to turn the real-life saga into a viable film product. Love affairs, alligator attacks, and illicit drugs distilled from the ghost orchid entered the picture, and the bizarre got even wackier. Besides capturing the book’s

sense of the absurd, it stayed in sync with its themes, says Orlean.

“I loved the movie and thought it was incredibly imaginative and funny but also very intelligent in its examination of the nature of creativity, of passion, of an emotional connection to your work, which everybody in the movie is struggling with,” said Orlean. “It was quite a bit fictitious but as far as themes that got explored, it was true to the book. It’s



about how we define ourselves and how what we care about does or doesn’t define who we are.”

Adaptation has not been the only movie spin-off from Orlean’s works. Her *New Yorker* article about surfer girls in Maui resulted in the hit *Blue Crush*. The prolific author has written several books, including *The Bullfighter Checks*

Her Makeup: My Encounters with Ordinary People, a collection of mostly *New Yorker* stories (including “The Maui Surfer Girls”) released in January 2001; *Red Sox and Blue Fish* (1989), a compilation of columns she wrote for the *Globe Sunday Magazine*; and *Saturday Night* (1990), essays that chronicle the Saturday nights she spent in communities across the country.

Orlean, a former contributor to *Vogue* and *Rolling Stone* magazines, has published her “Talk of the Town” column in *The New Yorker* since 1987. She currently is writing for the magazine a series of American pop culture columns called “Popular Chronicles.” In them, she has examined the lives of personalities from designer Bill Blass and Harlem high school basketball star Felipe Lopez, to New York hip-hop radio star D.J. Red Alert and acquaintances of skater Tonya Harding.

In her latest book, *My Kind of Place*, Orlean steps into the world of such disparate personalities, places, and experiences as child beauty contestants in the Deep South, a taxidermist championship in Illinois, baseball culture in Cuba, and climbing Mt. Fuji in Japan.

At press time, Orlean was scheduled to travel to Sanibel and share her adventures researching *The Orchid Thief* in Florida and other life stories at a special “Sanibel Reads” presentation on Jan. 19 at BIG ARTS. For more information on her work, visit www.susanorlean.com. 🐦

Travel Editor Chelle Koster Walton is author of The Adventure Guide to Tampa Bay & Florida’s Gulf Coast and contributes to The Miami Herald, National Geographic Traveler, Away.com, and other local and national publications.