

THE ORCHID THIEF

Susan Orlean, in *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession* (284pp, Ballantine, 1998) guides us through orchid shows, growers' shade houses, Florida's Fakahatchee swamp, the histories of collectors, breeders and thieves – and into the biology of the earth's biggest flowering plant family.

The most highly evolved of all plants, orchids have outlived dinosaurs, and can certainly outlive their owners, to be passed down for generations. Many are epiphytes – plants that live clinging to other plants – a perfect survival strategy in jungles where competition for space and light is fierce.

They've evolved “many perfect contrivances for their fertilization.” Some look like their pollinators, or their pollinators' enemies or mates. Some smell like rotting meat, chocolate, angel food cake, or other flowers – all to attract bugs. Some have “ivory petals and a hot pink lip, maybe, or green petals with burgundy stripes, or yellow petals with olive speckles and a purple lip with a smear of red underneath.” Some look like “butterflies, bats, ladies' handbags, bees, swarms of bees, female wasps, clam shells, roots, camel hooves, squirrels, nuns dressed in their wimples, and drunken old men.”

All, Orlean says, are ugly when not flowering – and flowering takes seven years from germination of the seed.

This doesn't, however, keep fanciers from obsessing over them, perhaps because they're sexy. Named for Latin “orchis” (testicle, from the roots' shape), they were too suggestive for Victorian ladies, though Queen Victoria

loved them, and the “thief” in Orlean’s title went from orchid entrepreneur to purveyor of internet porn – perhaps a coincidence.

A better explanation might be that current international trade in orchids reaches 10 billion a year, and some individual orchids have sold for \$25,000.

By the 19th century orchids had been a high class hobby in China for 3,000 years. Cloning took them out of millionaires’ hands and made most of them affordable.

Nowadays many big fanciers know each other well – Orlean describes their world as having the intimacy and the fights of a family. She calls orchids “perhaps the most compelling and maddening of all collectible living things.”

Orchid imperialism mirrored political imperialism – natives scorned, resources stolen, landscapes ravished. Collecting peaked in the mid 19th century – early 20th century, when nurseries sent out small armies of collectors worldwide, “pursuing beautiful things in terrible places.” Having stripped an area, they sometimes burned it, to thwart rivals.

Florida, “a wet, warm, tropical place, essentially featureless and infinitely transformable” – seems the perfect setting for the bizarre world of orchid fancying. Plant thievery is commonplace, and more wild things (including orchids) are smuggled into Miami every year, in every imaginable way, than through any other port in the U.S.

John Laroche, Orlean’s “orchid thief,” plotted to make a fortune stripping wild ghost orchids from the Fakahatchie swamp, cloning and selling millions of them. Because he worked for the Seminole nation, Laroche believed himself

exempt – as were tribal members – from laws against gathering any wild orchid. He was wrong, but his scheme piqued Orlean's interest, and drew her to the scenes she describes.

We get a rich (and sad) sketch of Seminole history, currently a small tribe with a large income – and still at war with the state of Florida.

And we get an intimate description of the Fakahatchie – hot, wet, full of birds, alligators, snakes, bugs and orchids. This in spite of having been drained, logged, farmed, used as a big game hunting preserve and several bogus real estate developments.

That's where Orlean ends her story, searching fruitlessly for the elusive ghost orchid, moving hip-deep through tepid water and slowed time, temporarily lost, breathing air that smells of mud, leaves -- and flowers.