

The Orchid Thief Study Guide

The Orchid Thief by Susan Orlean

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Orchid Thief Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
The Millionaire's Hothouse.....	4
Chapter Two - Cloning the Ghost.....	5
A Green Hell.....	6
Orchid Fever.....	7
A Mortal Occupation.....	8
Gorgeous.....	10
The Good Life.....	11
Anyone Can Grow Orchids.....	13
Plant Crimes.....	14
Barbecued Doves.....	16
Osceola's Head.....	17
Fortunes.....	19
A Kind of Direction.....	20
Characters.....	21
Objects/Places.....	25
Themes.....	27
Style.....	29
Quotes.....	31
Topics for Discussion.....	33



Plot Summary

The Orchid Thief by Susan Orlean is a story about the world of orchid growing and collecting, its history and the people who are involved in this form of collecting. Susan reads a newspaper clipping about a man named John Laroche and three Seminole Indians who have been accused of stealing orchids from the Fakahatchee Strand. She is intrigued when she reads the story and decides to investigate the situation further.

Susan meets John Laroche and attends his courtroom hearing with the Seminole Indians. While interacting with him, she finds one of the most eccentric, obsessive people that she has yet to come across. Of course, Laroche believes he is the smartest person he knows. Laroche introduces Susan to the world of orchid collecting. It seems that when someone begins to have an attraction to orchids, it will oftentimes become an obsession and they will have an expansive collection of rare and unusual orchids from around the world. Orchids are mutated and grown by collectors in a commercial environment. When an orchid grower successfully creates a new hybrid of the flower, they have a seven year monopoly on the hybrid since it takes the flower seven years to bloom. In the meantime, a grower can have a successful career.

Laroche had been determined to take wild orchids out of the Fakahatchee Strand through the help of Seminole Indians, who are permitted to remove wild things from the preserve. The Fakahatchee Strand is an unusual place filled with living creatures in a unique swamp atmosphere. Susan travels there and hikes throughout the grounds to get a better feel for the environment where orchids flourish in the wild. In addition, she covers the history of the swamp itself and discusses how living creatures flourish in Florida with its one-of-a-kind support system for plants and animals.

Susan meets a number of famous orchid growers and collectors as she researches the history and draw of orchids. Martin Motes, Bob Fuchs and Tom Fennell are just a few of the important and influential orchid growers with whom she meets. She tours their nurseries and attends the orchids shows. All along the way, she hopes to see a ghost orchid in bloom. Despite a number of close calls, she never manages to see one and closes the book by saying that she prefers to not see one now since the idea of it is far too large in her mind.

Laroche is ultimately convicted of his plant crime and fined; he is also exiled from the Fakahatchee Strand for a year. On his release, Susan convinces him to hike the Fakahatchee with her for one last attempt to see a ghost orchid, but instead they end up lost in the wild, hiking their way out after hours and she never sees her orchid.



The Millionaire's Hothouse

The Millionaire's Hothouse Summary and Analysis

John Laroche is introduced as being an eccentric person who is tall, skinny and handsome despite missing some of his front teeth. When he finds an interest, he does not merely admire the thing or subject, he becomes thoroughly obsessed with it. He has been this way his entire life, but until recently, he had been thoroughly obsessed with orchids. He considers himself a shrewd bastard and is essentially self-taught; he also considers himself to be one of the smartest people that he knows.

Susan reads about Laroche in a newspaper article and is intrigued when she sees the words "swamp," "orchids," "Seminoles," "cloning" and "criminal" together in one short piece. She decides to leave New York in the dead of winter to travel to sunny Florida to research more about the piece. She arrives in Naples to witness Laroche's trial. He is accused of trying to steal ghost orchids from the Fakahatchee Strand in order to clone them at the Seminole's new nursery that he would help build for them. His grand plan had been to clone these plants to make the Seminole's extremely rich, while simultaneously teaching them everything he knows about botany.

The judge listens to the case, calls it extremely complex and lets Laroche go on bail. A few days later, he takes Susan to an orchid show in Miami. He tells her about how he had gotten into plants by attending the World Bromeliad Show in Miami in 1990. From there, he was hooked. He had wanted only the best and had begun to create his own nursery, cultivating rare and unusual plants for collectors worldwide. From bromeliads, he had turned to orchids because the cloning and mutation allows a cultivator to create new strains and unusual types. Although orchids have been growing in swamps for centuries, they are now the plaything of the rich and if you can find new and unusual forms, you will make money.



Chapter Two - Cloning the Ghost

Chapter Two - Cloning the Ghost Summary and Analysis

John Laroche has a run of bad things happen to him right before he goes to work for the Seminole Indians, including a car crash that knocka out his front teeth, killa his mother and uncle and puta his wife in a coma for weeks. He and his wife separate shortly thereafter and then a frost kills much of his nursery stock. Benlate, a Du Pont fungicide given to orchids, then kills many of his orchids and Hurricane Andrew hits in 1992, blowing away whatever had been left. Laroche had then given up his nursery business forever, saying that he would die of a broken heart if he ever opened one up again.

The Seminoles are looking for someone to start a nursery since they own thousands of acres of land and there are many successful nurseries already on their property, paying rent to them. Laroche sees an ad in the paper and is thrilled when they pick him for the job.

Although setting up a nursery can be fairly straightforward, Laroche immediately sets off to make it more complicated. He wants to find a ghost orchid, which is impossible to find in any collection or wild terrain but the Fakahatchee, and clone it at the Seminole nursery to make them wildly profitable. Although it is illegal for Laroche to bring a ghost orchid out of the Fakahatchee, it is legal for Indians to do so, which is Laroche's exact plan. He plans that if caught, a judge will excuse his behavior because he doesn't actually collect the plants and the Indians will be forgiven because the law does not apply to them.

A few days after Laroche and Susan go to the orchid show in Miami. she drives to Hollywood to see his new nursery with the Indians. Susan admits that she doesn't really like to spend time with Laroche because they are not natural friends. He decides to take her to another nursery owner to whom Laroche had given some plants a few years ago. Laroche has just spontaneously decided that he wants them back. They quarrel for a bit, but Laroche gives up. The nursery owner asks Laroche if he's collecting anything again. Laroche says he's not, but he feels badly about his dishonesty.

A Green Hell

A Green Hell Summary and Analysis

The Fakahatchee Strand is a unique swamp that is 63,000 coastal lowland acres in the southwestern corner of Florida and is about twenty-five miles south of Naples. Although people live in it, it is an incredibly inhospitable place. It is hot and buggy with cottonmouth snakes, diamondback rattlers, alligators, snapping turtles, poisonous plants and even wild hogs. Whatever parts of the Strand are not covered with water are so hot that they can spontaneously catch on fire; cars driving in this area can make the grass explode into a grassfire from the heat, making the car catch on fire as well.

Susan decides that she wants to go into the Fakahatchee because she wants to see what Laroche wanted so badly. She considers herself a very tough person, but is still terrified of going into the Strand. While many spooky places are filled with death, the Fakahatchee terrifies her because of all the living things that flourish in its environment. Rather than have a handful of plants and animals in various places, there is an overabundance that makes travel in this atmosphere much more dangerous.

She is introduced to a park ranger named Tony who will take her in and be her guide. The day before they are supposed to go in, he calls and asks again if she is certain and she hesitantly assures him that she is ready to go in. They hike in together, although he quickly marches ahead of her. She is up to her chest many times in swamp water and utterly terrified. They see a few roots of a ghost orchid, but never witness the real thing in bloom. Susan is mesmerized with the idea of seeing a ghost orchid. This will ultimately be one of her driving forces throughout her research — to see this elusive flower in bloom. She hints that she is willing to travel "mile after miserable mile" in the hopes that she might see one of these orchids. Despite her constant and active fight to become entranced with the orchids and become a collector herself, the draw of the ghost orchid bloom is strong enough to capture even Susan.

When Susan asks Tony why he thinks that so many people hike incessantly and strive to see something as weird as the ghost orchid blooming, he shrugs and says that he thinks it is the mystery, beauty and unknowability that keeps people going for them. Ultimately, however, Susan does not see her ghost orchid. She calls Laroche when she leaves to tell him the bad news and he dismisses her, telling her she should have waited to go in with him and then she would have seen one.



Orchid Fever

Orchid Fever Summary and Analysis

There are more than thirty thousand known species of orchids and potentially thousands more that have yet to be discovered. Orchids are considered the most evolved flowering plants on earth and have an array of unusual looks. The wild orchids often have names based on their looks, including brown, twisted, shiny-leafed, lipped, snaked, rat tail, water spider, etc. The smallest ones are microscopic, while the biggest ones have flowers as big as footballs. They have always been considered freakish.

Orchids are cross-pollinating plants, which means that they are more complex and rely on other living things to pollinate their flowers. These plants are sometime ingenious in the ways that they trick insects to pollinate them, making the union between the orchid and the pollinator eerily perfect. Orchids are currently the biggest flowering plant family on earth and many orchid lovers mutate and pollinate these flowers to create hybrids and odd mixtures to create a new species.

When an orchid is pollinate, they release pods with millions of seeds because their pollination rates have a very low percentage. In addition, orchids are highly adaptable. Some live in the ground, but others don't need any soil at all. They grow slowly and a pollinated orchid takes seven years to turn into a flowering plant. They have no natural enemies except bad weather and an occasional virus. For this reason, cultivated orchids can live for generations and avid collectors deem certain relatives recipients of their plants because they know they will outlive them.

Susan thinks that for some reason, orchids seem to drive people crazy. They become obsessed with them and they are seen as the sexiest flower on earth. Many of the orchid collectors she meets tell her that a single orchid led to a dozen and now they have multiple greenhouses and make special trips around the world just to find new and rare types of orchids.

The international trade in orchids is more than \$10 billion a year. During the times that Susan spends with Laroche, she hears numerous stories about obsessed orchid collectors. Susan finds that collecting can be a type of love sickness and since these individuals are focused on a living thing, they are pursuing the imperfectible since there is never a guarantee that the plant will not change or die. In addition, there is no limit to the end of different types of orchids since they have adapted to nearly every environment on earth and have outlived dinosaurs. They are tough but dainty, complex and able to mutate, meaning that thousands are being created in laboratories every year. A collector can be certain of one thing: there is no end of new orchids that he or she can find for their collection.

A Mortal Occupation

A Mortal Occupation Summary and Analysis

Hunting for orchids is a dangerous, death-defying activity. Orchid lovers enjoy the plant, but they have also been known to love the difficulty and fatality of obtaining them just as much as the flower itself. Obsessions with orchids began during the Victorian era and although some collectors went to the tropics for them, most paid professional hunters to find them their gems.

A Victorian-era grower named Frederick Sander once employed a famous collector named Benedict Roezl. He travels throughout South America in search of orchids. The ails and dangers of being an orchid collector were tremendous. In addition, the hunters were often alone and enjoyed little fraternity with other people. They traveled to remote parts of the world where they did not speak the language nor know the culture. In addition, they would walk in extremely dangerous terrain looking for remote orchids they could ship back to their employer.

Another famous hunter for Sander was a man named William Micholitz. A German and tireless collector, he is the reason why Sander became so influential in the orchid community. During one expedition, he sent a telegram saying that the ship he was on had caught fire and was lost. Sander insisted he move on. When he arrived in Columbia, there was a revolution in the country. Despite the violent uprising, Sander insisted he continue on. They were an odd pairing, brought together by their love of orchids alone.

Some of the hunters traveled for so long they forgot their homeland and remained in the "foreign" countries. Others terrorized the landscape and the local cultures there. They brought back orchids that were never found again, making them even more desirable and making collectors grow all the more obsessed.

Towards the middle of the 1800s, the hauls out of the jungle from the orchid collectors grew more and more extreme. They were short-sighted, burning and pillaging entire natural habitats of orchids simply for their employers' sake. In 1827, a man named Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, a surgeon, put a caterpillar in a glass jar to pupate and forgot about it. When he saw the caterpillar again, after forgetting about it for months, he noticed a tiny fern. This revelation ultimately changes the orchid world as thousands of orchids can be shipped from tropical climates to England with far less damage than before.

The first orchid to bloom in England was not collected by a professional hunter, but brought back by a Quaker cloth merchant from the Bahamas. More and more individuals picked up on the "queer" flower until William Spencer Cavendish began collecting them in 1833. His prestige and appointment as president of the Royal



Horticultural Society put orchids more in the public sphere, making them a plant only the wealthy and connected could collect.

Initially, English horticulturalists were horrible at cultivating orchids, but towards the end of the 1800s, they progressed enough to save more than they killed. The English had first thought that orchids needed to stay in very hot climates like the tropics where they were recovered; in reality, the hothouses were suffocating the plants and they would die. By changing the temperature, they saved their plants and the orchids thrived.

Susan attends the American Orchid Society gala, a black-tie event, to celebrate the 75th anniversary at the Flagler Mansion in Palm Beach. A lot of collectors attend, which is why Susan wants to go. Although it would have been the ideal place to find new customers, Laroche refuses to go, stating that everyone there hates and distrusts him. She hobnobs with royalty and gains a perspective of the orchid world she had not yet seen.



Gorgeous

Gorgeous Summary and Analysis

Susan calls Laroche the next day to tell him all about the gala and he invites her to an orchid show in Fort Lauderdale. Laroche tries to get into the show for free based on Susan's "press" credentials, but it doesn't work. Susan ends up paying for both tickets.

They walk around looking at all of the many varieties of orchids. Even Laroche must mention how beautiful the orchids are, but points out that many of them are mutated chromosomes. Susan watches as the orchid collectors travel from booth to booth, looking at the flowers. She sees some orchids named for their appearance, while others are named after people. Laroche knows them all and recites information about all of the flowers as they pass them. Some orchids are known for their unusual characteristics, such as smelling like chocolate or Kool Aid, while others are more unusual for their particular appearance. Many of the orchids are named after the cloner. The International Orchid Register now has more than one hundred thousand different types of orchids in their registry.

Susan learns about cloning orchids, including how to do it and the incredible patience it requires since it takes seven years to realize if the cloning took place or not. If the cloning does take place, the cultivator has a seven year monopoly on that particular strain of orchid since it will take any other grower at least that long to find an orchid that flowers. Before cloning was determined, it took a lot of patience to propagate an orchid since the orchids take a long time to mature. Orchids from seeds take a long time because many of the plants rarely form a seedpod and the ones that do take seven years to mature.

Susan needs to take a break and Laroche tells her how a dealer can make a lot of money at shows like this one. There is a lot of money to be made in plants. People go crazy for plants and you can take advantage of their extreme obsessed, he explains. He asks her if she finds some of the orchids beautiful and when she agrees that she does, he nods. He says he understands why she loves it because orchids bring about a type of love sickness in people. Susan notices that people seem to like him while at the show and she believes it is because he has an innate confidence that makes other people believe they are also doing the right thing.



The Good Life

The Good Life Summary and Analysis

Some of the stolen orchids that Laroche takes from the Fakahatchee Strand die. The others are glued onto trees in the swamp. Orchids are tougher than they might look. Susan then mentions a number of plants that are incredibly hardy living in Florida. Some of these plants include the melaleuca, which had been brought there to be an ornamental landscape plant. They drink enough water to drain an acre of wetlands a day and had been used to help drain the Everglades "useless" swamp areas. They now are a prominent sight in south Florida along with Brazilian pepper trees, Asian cogon grass, alligator weed, Chinese water-spinach, and the poisonous South American toad, which now can grow up to three pounds and seven inches long.

Susan drives throughout Florida and is amazed by its space, emptiness and flatness while driving the back roads to the Fakahatchee.

The Fakahatchee Strand itself has an interesting history. Although it looks utterly wild, it has been invaded and disturbed quite a bit in the past. Initially, people had tried to make it into farmland, but had given up. You can still find wild remnants of their produce, trees, and plants.

The Tamiami Trail is the only way to reach the Fakahatchee and this road had taken three tries to build. Once the road had been completed, the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company had begun logging the swamp for cypress trees. By 1952, the swamp had been nearly utterly depleted of its cypress so the Lee Tidewater Cypress Company left the area. In 1966, the company sold the land to two brothers, Julius and Leonard Rosen, and their business, the Gulf American Corporation.

The Gulf American Corporation begins selling designated lots of land to various investors around the world. Specifically, they search for people who would not be likely to check out the land before they bought, allowing the sale of swampland the buyers would "retire on" that is not even developed yet. The government is still attempting to gain pieces of the land back from these bad investments, although some investors had taken their dream seriously and have plotted out a home and land in this area, despite its dangerous wilderness.

A ranger named Mike Owen meets Susan at the Fakahatchee Strand. They then drive around to see what is left of the ruined town that the Gulf American Corporation had promised to thousands of investors. Afterwards, he drops her off near a big sinkhole where some of Laroche's former orchids have been glued up and Katherine, the other ranger working there, takes her into the swamp for a hike.

With Katherine are two very large men. She soon finds out that they are inmates from a work-release program of the Copeland Road Prison. They also both have machetes



because they are terrified of snakes. Katherine thinks it a good idea to give them these knives for protection. Meanwhile, Susan is walking with them as they slap the water that comes up to their chests in fear of snakes. All three of them are in a perpetual state of terror as Katherine calmly walks ahead.



Anyone Can Grow Orchids

Anyone Can Grow Orchids Summary and Analysis

Susan meets a famous orchid man named Tom Fennell and tells him about Laroche's idea of cloning the ghost orchid in the Seminole nursery laboratories to make millions of dollars. Fennell says the idea is insane and that ghost orchids are impossible to clone because they need a perfect climate.

The Fennells had owned the Orchid Jungle, a major tourist attraction for awhile. They had closed it after they won the Florida state lottery for \$6.76 million. The Orchid Jungle had been originally created by Tom's grandfather, who had started the orchids as a unique family garden. After The Miami Herald had run an article about the unusual orchids, groups of people had started coming by unannounced until the family had officially made it an attraction. The Orchid Jungle had been having financial trouble after Hurricane Andrew destroyed thirteen of the greenhouses.

Tom drives Susan to a variety of nurseries, introducing her to people like Martin Motes. Motes runs another famous orchid nursery and is a "recovering academic."

Susan learns that if an orchid breeder comes up with a good cross fertilization, they will get the monopoly in the market for seven years. It takes orchids seven years to bloom so it will take another grower at least that long to replicate the success of the clone. During that time, the orchid breeder can make quite a bit of money if they have an attractive clone.

While touring Motes Orchids, two customers come by and give Susan an idea of what dedicated buyers look like. Denise from Jamaica and her friend Richard stop to look at the orchids. They are dedicated orchid collectors and have brought a permit.

Tom then takes Susan to a huge nursery called Kerry's Bromeliads. It is a massive nursery where Susan and Tom travel by golf cart. They pass by a number of plants the nursery calls Elaine. They deem the botanical experiment a failure and plan to dump all ten thousand of them in the dumpster. Susan wonders if this makes the owners of Kerry's sad; they respond that of course it makes them sad since it means a lot of money down the drain.

Plant Crimes

Plant Crimes Summary and Analysis

Plant poaching is good business in south Florida; one of Tom Fennell's neighbors had had twenty-thousand-dollars worth of bell peppers stolen from his fields and has vowed to never plant them again. Susan looks up the number of times plants are stolen in south Florida and finds a high number of instances. She begins to collect instances of local and international plant crimes.

Laroche's own plant crimes are unusual but not unrivaled. All of the major swamps have been plundered by orchid hunters over the years. Since so many hunters and tourists have taken plants and orchids from the swamps during their visits over the years, there are now laws prohibiting taking any living thing from these protected areas. Still, poachers come for the plants, alligators and deer that live in this area.

A few days after Susan meets Martin Motes, she goes to the Orchid Society of Palm Beach to hear him give a lecture. While there, she meets a woman named Savilla, an avid collector. She had once ridden around in the swamps and collect interesting plants before it had become illegal to do so. For this reason, she has a large collection and is known as one of the premier collectors for ghost orchids. Her secret is to put the baby ghost orchids in a mango tree and watch them flourish. Occasionally, she and her husband will sell their excess orchids at a plant show and during one of these trips, they had met a man interested in their orchids. He had eventually come over to their house and had looked at her ghost orchids, but left when Savilla had refused to sell them. A few days later, she had gone out back and her pods had all been destroyed. She had gone berserk and had done all that she could to save them, but they had been irrecoverable. She believes the man they met at the show is the culprit.

Savilla shows Susan her expansive collection of orchids. Susan hopes to see her first ghost orchid, but unfortunately none of the orchids are flowering.

One of the most notorious plant crimes in Florida happens in 1990 when someone steals \$150,000 worth of prize-winning orchids from the R. F. Orchids shadehouse. The owner of R. F. Orchids is a famous orchid grower named Robert Fuchs.

Robert Fuchs is from a family that has been growing orchids for three generations. He has been growing orchids professionally since 1985. His great-grandfather Charles had come across orchids while on a walk through Homestead, Florida with a friend. They had walked for 10 days in the woods and Charles had fallen in love with the area. He had had moved his entire family from Tennessee to Homestead. The family established the profitable Holsum Bakery as well as growing orchids.

Fuchs is well known in the orchid world and when Susan asks others about him, she gets one of two responses: they either consider him to be the king of the orchid world or



they consider him to be "controversial;" in other words, they hate him. Susan goes to see him and his flowers and can understand why others would be jealous of him and his heritage.

Fuchs becomes famous in 1984 during the World Orchid Conference in Miami. He has a gorgeous display and beautiful orchids. After his spectacular win, he quits teaching junior high and goes into the orchid business full-time. He becomes "the" guy to beat at the shows. Another orchid man, Frank Smith, gets into an altercation with Fuchs, accusing him of being favored by the judges and tells the others that Fuchs had tried to bribe him when he was a judge. Although never proven, it seems that Frank Smith is at least partly responsible for the \$150,000 worth of orchids being stolen from Fuch's shadehouse since another orchid collector spots the missing plants there a few weeks later.



Barbecued Doves

Barbecued Doves Summary and Analysis

The great magnetism of Florida for its inhabitants and new settlers is discussed by Susan. She points out that things are stolen out of Florida all the time, but things are regularly smuggled in as well, including gibbons, woolly monkeys, parakeets, spiders and boa constrictors. Plant smuggling is big business and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora(CITES) has been created to regulate international trade on wild things.

For some CITES is too broad, while others believe that it is not logical. CITES has made it illegal to export or sell wild orchids. If you want a wild orchid, you must poach it or pay a smuggler to poach it for you.

Susan meets Lee Moore, whose profession, according to CITES and the US Government, is plant smuggling. She visits him and his wife Chady at their small apartment in Kendall, a neighborhood in Miami. Chady has a great deal of energy and brags about their smuggling adventures, including their pre-Columbian art phase. During his time as "Lee Moore the Adventurer," Moore had collected a number of exceptional orchids, including the last species of *Cattleya* that would be discovered, as well as two other plants now regularly used in commercial hybridizing. During his hunts, he had become familiar with pre-Columbian and pre-Incan artifacts. Since, at the time, there had been no prohibition on dealing in antiquities, he and his wife had started an excavation that had been partly shipped to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Moore had been wildly successful during this time and had become one of the top five pre-Columbian art dealers in the world. He had had his own plane, two Lincoln Continentals, a large house and a million dollars in the bank. He had turned his back on art smuggling after many disputes with U.S. Customs, taking huge portions of his money. Now, Lee travels up and down the coast with a truck filled with plants, stopping at nurseries to see if anyone wants what he has.



Osceola's Head

Osceola's Head Summary and Analysis

The Circuit Judge in Laroche's case reaches a decision. She decides that the Seminoles will be fined only one hundred dollars each and no charges filed. Laroche, on the other hand, she finds guilty as charged. He is fined five hundred dollars and his exile from the Fakahatchee Strand is extended for another six months. In this way, the Judge narrowly avoids causing a controversy by finding the Seminoles guilty, but punishes Laroche for the crime. Laroche had thought himself safe due to ambiguity in the law books about what a "consultant" could do with the Seminoles in the wildlife preserve, since the Seminoles are permitted to take wild things without worry.

The Florida Seminoles are descendants of the Yuchi, Creek and Cherokee Indians. In 1821, the government had begun three Seminole "subjugation and removal efforts." The last one in 1848 is called the Billy Bowlegs War. By then, nearly 90% of the Seminoles had moved to Oklahoma while the remaining 10% lived on the edge of towns and in the wetlands. Chief Billy Bowlegs had traveled to Washington D. C. on horseback to attempt to repeal a law passed in 1853 that had made it illegal for a Seminole to live in Florida. However, the Florida Seminoles have never surrendered and refer to themselves now as the "Unconquered." They have never signed a peace treaty with the United States.

One of the leaders of the Unconquered was a fighter named Osceola. He was tall, skinny and handsome and became respected as being an exceptional fighter. He was tricked by General Thomas Jesup to make a trip for peace talks and was stuck in a jail at Fort Moultrie in South Carolina on New Year's Day. Even in prison, he was a charismatic and influential figure. He was in his thirties, but got sick at the prison and just before he died, he pulled himself from his bed, dressed in full warrior attire and died. The attending physician, Dr. Weedon, separated his head from his body and buried both parts in South Carolina, despite Osceola's wish to be buried in Florida.

After the funeral, Weedon sneaked back into the burial site and stole Osceola's head. He kept the head at his home for years, using it as an unusual method of punishment when his boys misbehaved. It was eventually given to a man named Dr. Valentine Mott, who specialized in dealing with renowned figures. The head was put in the University Medical College on Fourteenth Street in New York City and when the museum burned down in 1866, it was believed that Osceola's head went up in smoke.

Thanks to his honor and prestigious life, Seminoles now consider Osceola to be a hero and many of them have his last name as their own.

Laroche hears the verdict and screams that he has been crucified. He doesn't believe that anyone else understands the ghost orchids the same way he does and he is being punished unfairly. Susan visits Buster Baxley, Laroche's boss while at the Seminole nursery. The relationship between Baxley and Laroche is a strained one. After the fall,

the plants grow and flourish, but the tribe members complain about Laroche and his behavior and comments. They call him the Crazy White Man or Troublemaker and Baxley finally tells Laroche to take a nice long vacation. When he returns, there is a severance check at the nursery and someone else at his desk. Laroche is shocked, saying that he must have been removed because of politics and that he could have made the Indians millions of dollars.

The nursery is abandoned for awhile after Laroche leaves, but then they hire a young man named Rick Warren, who is mild-mannered and makes the nursery into a success. Susan then attends a Seminole fair to get a better understanding of the Indian people and see their culture in full swing.

Fortunes

Fortunes Summary and Analysis

Susan marvels at Laroche's ability to wholly abandon something with which he had been previously obsessed. After the disaster with the Seminoles and his judgment in court, Laroche renounces the plant world entirely. He shuts down any possibility of returning to that world again. Laroche moves on to work with computers; he starts a company called NetRunner and says he'll make a fortune.

Susan attends the South Florida Orchid Society Show and sees nearly every other orchid grower she had met in Florida, including Martin Motes, Tom Fennell, Bob Fuchs, Frank Smith and all of the American Orchid Society people she had seen at the gala. She still holds out the hope that she might see a ghost orchid in bloom and therefore does not want to miss the show for anything.

She visits Motes' house again and sees many of his orchids and how they have flowered. Martin introduces her to Gary Zill, who owns a number of avocado plants. They visit his nursery, Zill High Performance Plants. Zill immediately introduces her to two fruits that are rare because even with full-time security, they are so often stolen from nurseries and farms. To Susan, everything in the vicinity seems alien to her, including the rare, foreign fruit.

That evening, Motes drives up to the Miami Convention Center to set up his display for the annual show. He plans to build a swamp scene. Susan calculates that there are roughly \$4 million dollars' worth of flowers and displays surrounding her at the Convention Center. She breathes in deep and tries to hold her breath. She notes that the orchid growers have different philosophies and growing styles, so they do not often get along. However, they are part of a massive group similar to a family and they belong to this group. Susan marvels at these individuals belonging to the group and having the intimacy of a family. Susan looks at orchids until she becomes dizzy.

She realizes that each grower belonging to this elite group is able to assert their independence while maintaining membership in this larger community. For her, she envies them and the membership's ability to help define and transform their lives into something more meaningful to them.

A Kind of Direction

A Kind of Direction Summary and Analysis

Susan hears a story from the ranger at the Fakahatchee. He once received a call from a woman in Georgia who asked if any of the ghost orchids were in bloom in the swamp. When he told her there were a few flowering at the time, she drove to Atlanta, got a flight and drove the hours it took to get to the Fakahatchee. However, when she arrived, the orchids were finished flowering. The woman was not disappointed, however, and said she would happily return any time the flowers were blooming. Susan can relate to this drive and desire to see the ghost orchid in bloom and her relaying of the story seems almost like a warning to herself about what could happen if she fell for the love sickness with orchids in the same degree that many others had.

Laroche and Susan visit Dewey Fisk, self-designated "plant nut" at his nursery. The men discuss plants and despite having left plants and moved on to computers, Laroche still has the touch and can name specific plants from their seedpods. While in his nursery, Susan finds herself experiencing a kind of peace that comes from the time of day and the environment. She says that she has met plenty of orchid lovers who say that time in a greenhouse is a rare and shapeless quality. They could spend hours in their greenhouses, they tell her, and only believe that a moment has passed. Although Susan should have been in a hurry to leave, she lets the men talk and enjoys the quiet, dreamlike state that the greenhouse affords her. Here again, it seems like Susan is drifting closer and closer into the world of a plant lover and collector, but is conscious of her attraction and works against it.

Laroche has always promised Susan that he would take her into the Fakahatchee Strand, but his love and interest in plants is long gone before his exile from the swamp is lifted. When it is finally possible for them to go, Laroche agrees to take Susan on a hike. They meet early and despite promises to bring a number of snacks with them, Laroche forgets. They stop at a small convenience store right before they enter the swamp for limited supplies.

They enter the swamp and see a butterfly orchid. It takes them hours to watch since they tread lightly and carefully so as to not disturb any alligators or get stuck in the mud and swamp water. Susan is hopeful she will finally see a ghost orchid, but every one they come across has already bloomed for the season. Eventually, Susan realizes that they are wildly lost and becomes very, very angry with Laroche. She is fearful of the swamp to begin with and his pride has made them get lost in this hostile natural environment. They eventually get up and walk utterly straight. They find the levee that runs around the perimeter of the swamp and after hours of walking, return to their car to return home.



Characters

Susan Orlean

The narrator and writer of the novel, Susan is also one of the main characters in the book. She reads a newspaper article about John Laroche and three Seminole Indians accused of lifting endangered orchid species from the Fakahatchee Strand in Florida. The story interests her and she decides to travel to Florida to visit John Laroche and find out more about the exclusive world of orchids and the unique club that orchid collectors have founded.

Susan is wholly ignorant of the world of orchids before she begins the story and promises herself that she will not become addicted. Throughout the story, various collectors and nursery owners try to give her an orchid, but she either refuses or searches for someone to give them to instead. By the end, however, even Susan is entranced with the idea of finding a ghost orchid - the same orchids that John and his three Indian associates had gone into the Strand to gather.

Susan begins her research by following John around to various nurseries and generally spending time with him. She travels to orchid shows and meets all of the "big players" in the orchid industry, including competitors and former associates of Laroche's. Since Laroche himself is forbidden to enter into the Fakahatchee Strand due to a court order, Susan travels to the Strand without him and hikes in sometimes chest-deep swamp water with a guide who happens to be traveling with two inmates on a release work program that afternoon. Terrified of the swamp, she mucks her way through and sees more of the environment where orchids are found in the wild.

On the other end of the spectrum, Susan also attends important society functions like the American Orchid Society gala, where she meets the who's-who of the orchid collecting world. She presents the reader with the wealthy and established members of orchid collecting who will stop at nothing to obtain the most unusual, rarest and most precious types of orchids available.

Throughout her research, Susan learns every aspect of the orchid world, including its sordid past. Despite numerous tries, including another trip to the Fakahatchee Swamp with Laroche, she never sees a ghost orchid in bloom and decides by the end of the novel that now she doesn't want to see one for fear of being disappointed.

John Laroche

The inspiration behind the book and Susan Orlean's article in *The New Yorker*, John Laroche is an extreme person. Originally, Susan believes that John is a unique, one-of-a-kind individual in general. As time progresses and she spends more time with him, however, she labels him instead as someone who is just extreme. He has many of the same traits as the average person, but his traits are pushed to an extreme by a



personality that is "all or nothing." Physically, he is a tall guy, "skinny as a stick" with slouch-shoulders and pale eyes; Susan sees him as handsome despite the fact that he is missing some of his front teeth.

When Susan meets Laroche, he is in a phase of collecting orchids. He clearly tells her when they initially meet that although he is obsessed with orchids now, he could be completely done with them before her research and book are finished. His prognosis ends up coming true since Laroche declares himself finished with Seminole Indians and orchids for the rest of his life by the end of the book.

Laroche considers himself the smartest person he knows. When he involves himself in a subject, he learns everything there is about it. Susan also describes him as being the most amoral person that she knows. He does not follow the rules and will often do unscrupulous things, but explain them and twist his reasons around until they appear to have a moral meaning and cause behind them. For example, when he learns how to grow pot weed, he creates a new strain that would grow copious amounts of pot, but are void of the aspects that would make the individual high. He sells the strain to potential pot smokers and advertises it in High Times, making money. Although he had been performing an unscrupulous action, lying about the potency of his product, he argues that in the end, he is doing a good deed because it is preventing kids who would be smoking pot from getting high. And the fact that he had been making money in the meantime had made it beneficial for everyone!

Laroche is accused of going into the Fakahatchee Strand with three Seminole Indians to take rare types of orchid species. He is caught by the rangers, but insists that he himself did not take any of the orchids and therefore cannot be prosecuted. Seminole Indians, on the other hand, are exempt from the law of taking anything living out of the state-owned Fakahatchee Strand. In Laroche's eyes, he is manipulating the law in his favor. Unfortunately, a judge doesn't see it the same way and sentences him, freeing the Indians from any crime.

Laroche had been trying to take the orchids in order to start a new nursery on the Indian land to make money for them. He had been hired to help them bring money into the reserve while simultaneously teaching some of the Indians there everything he knows about horticulture in order to pass along a skill to them after he eventually leaves. After the sentencing, Laroche becomes disenchanted with the idea of orchids and eventually severs ties with the Indians, who ask him to go on a vacation and when he returns, hand him a severance check.

Martin Motes

An avid orchid collector and grower, Susan meets Motes at his shadehouse. He introduces her to some of his typical customers, while also taking her to Kerry's Bromeliads, an exceptionally large nursery. Motes is also a "recovering academic" and frequently quotes literary passages.



Robert Fuchs

The third generation of premier orchid growers and collectors, Fuchs is from an established, respected family in the plant world. He is a tall, striking, handsome man and is both envied and disliked due to his status and family background in the orchid world.

Lee Moore

A plant smuggler according to the US Government and CITES, Moore is close to sixty and tells fantastic stories about his smuggling days. He had once been a top dealer in pre-Columbian art, but had stopped after the U.S. Customs won a number of disputes against him. Now, he is back in the plant world and knows nearly everyone in it.

Mike Owens

Mike Owens is one of the rangers who walks with Susan through the Fakahatchee Strand.

Frank Smith

An orchid judge, Smith accuses Bob Fuchs of bribing him during an orchid competition. Later, it is thought, but can never be proven, that Smith steals \$150,000 dollars' worth of orchids from Fuchs shadehouse.

Savilla Quick

A woman famous in the orchid community for her touch with ghost orchids, Savilla Quick suffers a plant crime when someone mysteriously destroys the pods of some of her orchids. She believes it is a man with whom she had talked about potentially selling the orchids and then backed down from the offer.

Tom Fennell

One of the famous orchid men with whom Susan meets, Tom Fennell had owned the Orchid Jungle until he and his wife won the Florida lottery for \$6.76 million.

Julius and Leonard Rosen

Julius and Leonard Rosen are two brothers who create the Gulf American Corporation to sell Florida swampland to investors, drain it, and create a beautiful retirement

community. The plans never come to fruition and the state of Florida is still appropriating the land back from sour investors.



Objects/Places

Fakahatchee Strand

Fakahatchee Strand is the swamp in southern Florida where John Laroche is accused of stealing a number of orchids. Susan walks this terrain to better understand the environment where the orchids live.

Kerry's Bromeliads

One of the largest nurseries in south Florida, Kerry's Bromeliads houses over 3.6 million orchids and 1.4 million bromeliads in 329,000 square feet of greenhouse.

Orchid Jungle

Once owned by Tom Fennell, Hurricane Andrew destroys many of the Orchid Jungle greenhouses and it is finally closed when its owners win the Florida lottery for \$6.76 million.

Big Cypress Reservation

The Seminole Indian reservation in south Florida where Laroche had planned to build his nursery is called Big Cypress Reservation.

R. F. Orchids

R. F. Orchids is a large nursery owned by Bob Fuchs, whose family goes back three generations in the orchid business.

Flagler Museum

The American Orchid Society gala which Susan attends in south Florida is held at Flagler Museum.

South Florida Orchid Society Show

Not attended by Laroche by the end of the book, Susan attends the South Florida Orchid Society Show to see Bob Fuchs win and Martin Motes suffer a disappointment with his display. It is held at the Miami Convention Center and nearly everyone to whom Susan has spoken about orchids is present. It is the biggest orchid show in Florida.



Ghost Orchids

A specific type of orchid that is not currently available anywhere commercially, Susan longs to see one ghost orchid flower but never sees it despite multiple efforts throughout the novel.

Holsum Bakery

The successful Holsum Bakery is owned by the Fuchs family in addition to their orchid growing collection

Elaine

A mutation plant called Elaine at Kerry's Bromeliads was not considered successful and all ten thousand of them were to be dumped.



Themes

Obsession

For many, orchids become the ultimate obsession. Perhaps because they are a living thing and can never be wholly perfect, an orchid obsession is never-ending. Orchid collectors have been known to go to the ends of the Earth in order to find the next rare and unusual orchid for their collection.

During the Victorian era, orchid collection became popular among the wealthy. An obsession for orchids could only be supported by the very rich since in order to gain more orchids, you often had a professional orchid collector travel around the world for you. Orchid collectors during this era were renegade, independent men who lived a lonely life in search of an elusive flower. They would travel to remote places of the world for their employer and bring back orchids never before seen by the European society. The desire to have orchids that no other human possessed in European society drove the wealthy Victorian society to a frenzy. Men would risk their lives and suffer violent, unfortunate deaths so they could claim a flower to bring back to England. Despite civil uprisings, disease, difficult terrain and deadly situations, these orchid collectors continued to persevere, shipping millions of flowers back to their employer.

Although individuals can no longer ship wild plants into more civilized societies, the obsession for orchids continues on another level. Orchid growers will work to mutate chromosomes of the plants and create new hybrids. A successful hybrid yields a seven years' monopoly for orchid growers and they can establish themselves as an influential leader in the orchid world. The quest to create a new orchid is never-ending and there is a wide range of different orchid styles and types for this reason. The expansive availability of orchids in the world only fuels the obsessive drive for collectors to have more and more flowers in their own nurseries. This multitude makes the obsession for orchids an unquenchable, unending passion for growers and collectors alike.

The Unique Environment in Florida

Throughout the novel, Susan discusses how the unique environment of Florida creates the perfect setting for certain events to transpire. Florida is a place where plants grow and living creatures thrive. It is an environment that is expansive, huge and yet able to be easily contained. By draining the swamp waters, investors create land; allow the water to seep back in and your waterfront property becomes a swamp again. The land is pliable and can be molded to fit a person's needs.

Living things flourish in Florida and orchids are no exception. There are types of orchids located in the Fakahatchee Strand in south Florida that are not seen anywhere else in the world. Florida allows plants that are not even natural to the habitat to flourish, including the melaleuca tree, Australian pine trees, Asian cogon grass, alligator weed,



Chinese water-spinach and much more. The environment of Florida and its weather allows these plants to thrive, becoming integral parts of the habitat and surroundings.

Plants and their ability to flourish in Florida make the hobby of collecting orchids even easier for obsessive individuals. Since Florida allows new and unique strains of orchids to grow, orchid cultivators can create successful businesses and nurseries there. In addition, the orchid growers and collectors flock to Florida since there are a number of plant shows, including the largest orchid show each year, the South Florida Orchid Show at the Miami Convention Center. Florida's environment helps to make the world of orchid collection and cultivation a success.

Belonging to an Elite Group

One of the things that Susan remarks upon at the end of the novel is the intimate nature of belonging to the group of orchid collectors. They all know one another and have known one another for years. It is a small and niche group, making it comparable to a large family. And just like any family, a lot of the members don't necessarily like each other or get along. They have different philosophies on breeding orchids and different tastes on orchid flowers.

Despite the differences, however, Susan notes that each one of the orchid society members has found a way to fit into the world at large. They have found a way to place themselves into a small, elite circle that, although it bickers amongst itself, is a unique and whole entity. By joining the elite group of orchid collecting, they are a part of something bigger than themselves, something more than their singular collection of orchids no matter how grandiose. Susan remarks at how one can stay an individual while also being part of a larger community, but she envies the orchid members for achieving this in their own fluid, constantly changing ways. The difference between many other collectors and these orchid society members is that they all share the same obsession. And for them, the obsession is a way of defining their lives in a way that is extraordinary and different from many other lives.



Style

Perspective

The novel is written from the point of view of Susan Orlean, the writer and narrator of the story. Throughout the book, she not only covers John Laroche and his involvement with orchids, but also covers the orchid collecting and growing world in general. While she begins on one specific incident with Laroche and three Seminole Indians leaving the Fakahatchee Strand with orchids, she expands her research out to cover the world of orchid collecting and growing to demonstrate this small society and its incredible obsession with these unique plants.

In addition to covering the type of person who is attracted to orchids, she discusses the life and cycles of the orchids themselves. She describes the flowers in detail and gives the reader a strong understanding of the plant and why so many would be enormously addicted to it. Finally, she covers the history of the Fakahatchee Strand, where the plant crime takes place. Throughout all of it, she interweaves her own personal history with the state of Florida and describes how only there could many of these situations take place due to the unique circumstances and natural habitats that Florida presents. Since Susan has visited Florida many times before and has family there, she conveys her history with the state and gives herself a wider range of understanding about the environment there in general.

Tone

The tone of the novel is often straightforward. The book is written from a journalist's perspective, telling events as they unfold and giving the appropriate background information and history. Rarely does Susan delve into an emotional outpouring with the strong exception of her trips into the Fakahatchee. Here, Susan changes the tone of her novel to convey the sheer terror, anxiety and anguish she feels each time she walks through the wildlife preservation. While she is in the Fakahatchee, she discusses walking through the area with two prisoners with machetes and gives the reader her obvious feeling of anxious stress and tension. She writes that every step is actually three steps since you must test for alligators and be certain that you will not lose your footing in swamp water up to your chest. During these events, her writing style details the environment to demonstrate the danger and awesome magnitude of living creatures in the Fakahatchee giving the reader a better understanding of what it looks and feels like to be there.

While describing the other orchid growers and collectors, Susan is typically removed, outlining events and people as she sees them. Occasionally, she will take a step back to review and analyze what is around her. Such is the case when she attends Florida's largest orchid show, the South Florida Orchid Society show. While walking through, she realizes she is standing amongst millions of dollars in displays and orchids so she



pauses briefly, takes in a deep breath and tries to hold in the smell of millions of dollars' worth of flowers.

Structure

The structure of the novel is broken up into thirteen chapters. The novel starts with a discussion on John Laroche and his recent accusation of taking wild orchids from the Fakahatchee Strand accompanied by Seminole Indians. From there, the novel widens to give a better description and perspective on John himself while also describing other orchid growers and collectors. By putting John in comparison to the other growers and collectors, the reader gains a better idea of the type of eccentric that he is.

Susan then turns to covering the history of the Fakahatchee Strand, the orchid society galas, the history of Florida and living things there, and finally the history of orchids and orchid growing itself. By giving a full background of other plant crimes, the history of orchid obsessions, the type of place that Florida is and the type of person who obsesses over orchids, the reader is provided with a much better perspective of what John Laroche had been attempting to accomplish and what had driven him to act in this way.



Quotes

"He paused for a moment and grinned. Then he glanced around the room and added, 'Frankly, Your Honor, I'm probably the smartest person I know.'" p. 8

"But there is something about Florida more seductive and inescapable than almost anywhere else I've ever been. It can look brand-new and man-made, but as soon as you see a place like the Everglades or the Big Cypress Swamp or the Loxahatchee you realize that Florida is also the last of the American frontier." p.9

"Many things he said were incredible or staggering or cracked or improbable, but they were never boring. The current of his mind and behavior was more riptide than rivulet. I didn't care all that much whether what he said was true or not; I just found the flow irresistible." p. 29

"If the ghost orchid was really only a phantom it was still such a bewitching one that it could seduce people to pursue it year after year and mile after miserable mile. If it was a real flower I wanted to keep coming back to Florida until I could see one." p. 40

"The orchid family could have died out like dinosaurs if insects had chosen to feed on simpler plants and not on orchids. ... Instead, orchids have multiplied and diversified and become the biggest flowering plant family on earth because each orchid species has made itself irresistible." p. 45

"Nothing in science can account for the way people feel about orchids. Orchids seems to drive people crazy. Those who love them love them madly. Orchids arouse passion more than romance. They are the sexiest flowers on earth." p. 50

"An average Englishman couldn't afford an orchid collection or a greenhouse or a gardener or a professional hunter collecting for him. Owning orchids was the privilege of the rich, but the desire for orchids had no class distinction." p.74

"The world is so huge that people are always getting lost in it. There are too many ideas and things and people, too many directions to go. I was starting to believe that the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size. It makes the world seem not huge and empty but full of possibility." p. 109

"Florida is a wet, warm, tropical place, essentially featureless and infinitely transformable. It is as suggestible as someone under hypnosis. Its essential character can be repeatedly reimagined." p. 123

"I hate hiking with convicts carrying machetes." p. 132

"Florida is powerfully attractive. It is less like a state than a sponge. People are drawn to it." p. 186



"There were about sixty displays being put up that night, some with twice as many plants as Martin's, which meant that the total value of the displays in the Convention Center might have been as much as \$4 million, and I thought to myself: I am standing amid millions of dollars' worth of flowers. I breathed in deep and held my breath while I swung my head so that the \$4 million of flower colors smeared like lipstick." p. 252



Topics for Discussion

The Fakahatchee Strand represents various things to different characters in the book. What is its significance to Susan? To John Laroche? To the Seminole Indians?

Are Susan and John Laroche friends? Why or why not?

Other than orchid growing and collecting, name some of the other obsessions that John Laroche has maintained in his lifetime so far.

What does Savilla Quick believe happened to the orchids in her backyard? Who does she believe is responsible and why?

Give a brief history of the Fakahatchee Strand according to Susan's review of its history.

Orchid collecting was a dangerous job in the Victorian era. Describe the profession and name some of the dangers involved.

Describe the pollination scheme for orchids.

Why does an orchid grower have the monopoly on a new strain of orchid for seven years? What biological cause is the reason for this monopoly?

Describe what John Laroche's plan was for the Seminole Indian nursery. How did he believe he would be able to make them, and himself, a financial success?

Why did John Laroche believe he could walk into the Fakahatchee Strand with Seminole Indians and remove wildlife from the preservation? What laws was he trying to work around?