

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Orchid Thief

by Susan Orlean

BOOK GROUP

≡≡≡ *Take-Out* ≡≡≡



DEKALB
COUNTY
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

a place to grow

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

(Reprinted from publisher)

Susan Orlean is an American journalist. She has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1992, and has contributed articles to *Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, and *Outside*.

Orlean was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and graduated from the University of Michigan. She was then a staff writer at the Portland, Oregon, weekly *Willamette Week*, and soon began publishing stories in *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *Vogue*, *Outside*, and *Spy*.

In 1982 she moved to Boston and became a staff writer for the *Boston Phoenix* and later a regular contributor to the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*. Her first book, *Saturday Night*, was published in 1990, shortly after she moved to New York and began writing for *The New Yorker* magazine. She became a *New Yorker* staff writer in 1992. Orlean was also a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University in 2003.

Orlean is the author of several books, including *The Orchid Thief*, a profile of Florida orchid grower, breeder, and collector John Laroche. The book formed the basis of Charlie Kaufman's script for the Spike Jonze film *Adaptation*. Orlean (portrayed by Meryl Streep in an Oscar-nominated role) was, in effect, made into a fictional character; the movie portrayed her as becoming Laroche's lover and partner in a drug production operation, in which orchids were processed into a fictional psychoactive substance.

She also wrote the *Women's Outside* article, "Life's Swell" (published 1998). The article, a feature on a group of young surfer girls in Maui, was the basis of the film *Blue Crush*.

In 1999, she co-wrote *The Skinny: What Every Skinny Woman Knows About Dieting (And Won't Tell You!)* under her married name, Susan Sstrom. Her previously published magazine stories have been compiled in two collections, *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup: My Encounters with Extraordinary People* and *My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who's Been Everywhere*.

She also served as editor for *Best American Essays 2005* and *Best American Travel Writing 2007*. She contributed the Ohio chapter in "State By State" (2008).

In 2011 she published a biographical history about the dog actor *Rin Tin Tin*, followed by *The Ghost Flower* in 2016, and *The Library Book* in 2018.

BOOK SUMMARY

On the morning of April 28, 1986, a fire alarm sounded in the Los Angeles Public Library.

As the moments passed, the patrons and staff who had been cleared out of the building realized this was not the usual fire alarm. As one fireman recounted, "Once that first stack got going, it was 'Goodbye, Charlie.'"

The fire was disastrous: it reached 2000 degrees and burned for more than seven hours. By the time it was extinguished, it had consumed four hundred thousand books and damaged seven hundred thousand more.

Investigators descended on the scene, but more than thirty years later, the mystery remains: Did someone purposefully set fire to the library—and if so, who?

Weaving her lifelong love of books and reading into an investigation of the fire, award-winning *New Yorker* reporter and *New York Times* bestselling author Susan Orlean delivers a mesmerizing and

uniquely compelling book that manages to tell the broader story of libraries and librarians in a way that has never been done before.

In *The Library Book*, Orlean chronicles the LAPL fire and its aftermath to showcase the larger, crucial role that libraries play in our lives—delving into the evolution of libraries across the country and around the world, from their humble beginnings as a metropolitan charitable initiative to their current status as a cornerstone of national identity.

Furthermore, Orlean brings each department of the library to vivid life through on-the-ground reporting, she studies arson and attempts to burn a copy of a book herself, and she reflects on her own experiences in libraries. Lastly, Orlean reexamines the case of Harry Peak, the blond-haired actor long suspected of setting fire to the LAPL more than thirty years ago.

Along the way, Orlean introduces us to an unforgettable cast of characters from libraries past and present—

- *Mary Foy*, who in 1880 at eighteen years old was named the head of the Los Angeles Public Library at a time when men still dominated the role;
- *Dr. C. J. K. Jones*, a pastor, citrus farmer, and polymath known as “The Human Encyclopedia” who roamed the library dispensing information;
- *Charles Lummis*, a wildly eccentric journalist and adventurer who was determined to make the L.A. library one of the best in the world;
- *the current staff*, who do heroic work every day to ensure that their institution remains a vital part of the city it serves.

Brimming with her signature wit, insight, compassion, and talent for deep research, *The Library Book* is Susan Orlean’s thrilling journey through the stacks that reveals how these beloved institutions provide much more than just books—and why they remain an essential part of the heart, mind, and soul of our country.

The book is also a master journalist’s reminder that, perhaps especially in the digital era, libraries are more necessary than ever.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a hero in *The Orchid Thief*? An anti-hero?
2. Is the book subjective? Objective? Or a different genre altogether? Some people describe this as “literary non-fiction.” Is that how you would characterize it?
3. Susan Orlean resists the temptation to feel possessed by the orchids but she is willing to undergo great trials in order to satisfy her passion for reporting. Is this passion evident in her writing?
4. The passion for collecting is described in the book as a means of infusing meaning into life, subjecting the vicissitudes to some order, acquiring the ability to mold and change the nature of things, i.e. create life itself. What other means do humans employ to achieve the same ends, and how effective are they?

5. John Laroche would not describe himself as an orchid person. To him the orchid is a temporary albeit very intense passion, a means to an end, not an end in itself. How would you analyze the difference between Laroche's motives in collecting orchids and the regular orchid collectors we visit in the course of the book?
6. Laroche wrestles verbally with the thought that acting within what he considered the bounds of the law for his own immediate gain was ultimately an act of altruism. His rape of the Fakahatchee would force the law to be changed and close the loophole that allowed him to poach rare and wild orchids from an Indian reservation in the first place, thus protecting the species in the wild, and securing it for the marketplace at the same time. Is this the thought process of an amoral character? Or is he just an everyday charlatan? Discuss.
7. Laroche makes a very telling statement: "When I had my own nursery I sometimes felt like all the people swarming around were going to eat me alive. I felt like they were that gigantic parasitic plant and I was the dying host tree." Is Laroche playing the role of the victim, the martyr to a (preferably lost, but grand) cause or is he in control of his life by making a living off other people's weaknesses, whether it be a passion for orchids or pornography? Discuss.
8. Orlean seems fascinated by the story of Darwin and the study of the orchid with the eighteen inch nectary and the moth with the eighteen inch proboscis to feed on it: the idea that two totally different life forms evolved specifically to serve each other; that neither could have existed without the other. What has the evidence of the orchid's adaptability altered your perception of the theories of evolution?
9. Orlean interrupts her central narrative of John Laroche with stories of the orchid hunters of the past, the contemporary state of Florida and other histories. How does this affect the pace of the work? Is the framework she has devised successful?
10. The Native Americans on the reservation are entitled by one law to remove protected species from their land. Is this law justified?
11. Orlean seems surprised by the abundance of sexual references to orchids in her book. Yet the flower is the prime sexual organ of most plants. Seek out a florist with a good representation of orchids. What alternative descriptions of these exotic flowers can you devise?
12. What is the real core, the central character, of the book: Laroche? Florida? Orchids? Native Americans? Darwin? Orlean?
13. As a reader, what did you expect from a book about orchids? How did your experience of reading *The Orchid Thief* compare to what you expected?
14. The working title of *The Orchid Thief* was "Passion." What does that suggest about the themes in the book?
15. What, besides orchids, could generate a book like this? Are there other subcultures or other objects of desire that might be as provocative?

For a complete list of Book Group Take-Out titles, go to
dekalblibrary.org/book-group-take-out