

## Stories of Florida's Orchid Obsession: Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* and Craig Pittman's *The Scent of Scandal*

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Many of Florida's native orchids, a onetime abundant and valuable Florida treasure, have been lost in light of overharvesting, habitat loss, and global climate change. Despite its diminishing presence in the Florida wild, the orchid still retains a form of cultural capital in the imaginations of laypeople, orchid enthusiasts, and writers alike, two of whom, Susan Orlean and Craig Pittman, have composed comparable yet nuanced accounts of Florida's orchid obsession.

When longtime *New Yorker* journalist Susan Orlean published *The Orchid Thief* in 1998, the book earned critical acclaim in the *The New York Times Book Review* and elsewhere (Conover; Fetherston). Orlean's work later reemerged in 2002 when film director Charlie Kaufman produced a tour de force meta-adaptation of the book, entitled *Adaptation*. A counterpoint to Orlean's more personal account of Florida's orchid obsession is Craig Pittman's 2012 book, *The Scent of Scandal*. A *Tampa Bay Times* journalist for more than 15 years, Pittman recounts a scandal that recently befell the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens (MSBG) in Sarasota, Florida. This paper identifies similarities and differences between *The Orchid Thief* and *The Scent of Scandal*, especially regarding subject matter and the texts' contrasting features in terms of coverage. It also questions whether Orlean (writing from outside of Florida) and Pittman (a native Floridian) treat the state differently due to their respective outsider-insider relationships to the Sunshine State.

### **"How could so much trouble stem from a flower?"<sup>1</sup>**

Each book takes as its plot a true story about orchids obtained through illegal measures. The orchid at the center of *The Orchid Thief* is *Polyrrhiza lindenii* (sometimes referred to as *Dendrophyllax lindenii* or *Polyradicion lindenii*). It has earned the nickname "the ghost orchid" due to the flower's pale white color and the orchid's ghost-like elusiveness. Difficult to obtain, the ghost orchid grows "nowhere in [the American wild] but the Fakahatchee [Strand]" (Figure 1) and other protected areas in South Florida (Orlean 25).

*The Orchid Thief* chronicles Orlean's time on assignment in Florida investigating the smuggling bust of a white man and three Seminole Indians who were in possession of several pillowcases filled with protected plants. John Laroche, the book's central character, is accused of colluding with Native Americans to steal plants from federally-protected land, including "two hundred rare orchid and bromeliad plants from the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve," with the intention of selling them at the Seminole-owned nursery that Laroche designed and managed (Orlean 8). Carrying out what Orlean describes as "a Laroche-style plan," Laroche

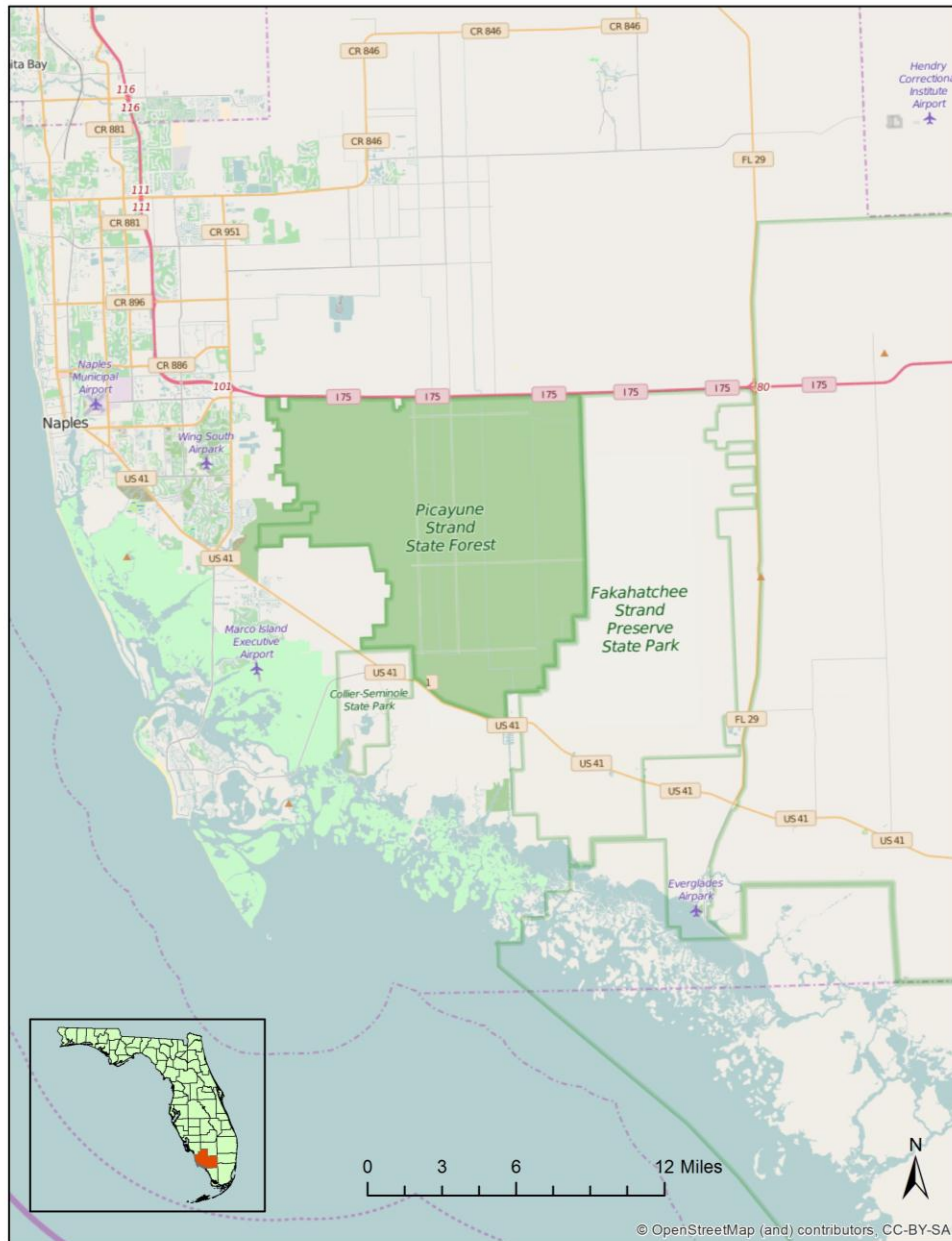
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<sup>1</sup> Pittman 3

outsources the collection of the plants to his Native American associates; he later claims that he was only a guide on the expedition into the Fakahatchee, and that he is innocent because he himself never laid a finger on the plants (Orlean 26).

Shadowing Laroche for extended periods of time, Orlean comes to consider him as more complex than the typical “run-of-the-mill crook.” She says that “[Laroche] unveils an ulterior and somewhat principled but always lucrative reason for his crookedness” (5). During Orlean’s

**Figure 1: Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park in Collier County, Florida**



investigation, Laroche leads her on a presumably dangerous quest through the Fakahatchee in search of the rare ghost orchid in flower. Like many orchids, the ghost is a secretive species that grows in just a few hard-to-reach places. Throughout the book, Orlean unravels her own growing fascination with the orchid's fleeting beauty. The resulting story is half-reportage and half-memoir, what might be described as "personal journalism."

Likewise, Pittman's *The Scent of Scandal* revolves around a rare orchid, this one known as *Phragmipedium kovachii*, a plant that may have been brought into the United States illegally, as its rarity and value make it a prime target for smugglers. *Phragmipedium kovachii* is named for Michael Kovach, an orchid enthusiast from Virginia, who transports the orchid from Peru to Selby's Orchid Identification Center (OIC) for processing.

Most crucially, Kovach fails to obtain the proper documentation for transporting this particular orchid from Peru to the United States. This type of permit, issued under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), regulates the exportation and importation of orchids (and other plants and animals) between countries for the purposes of protecting endangered indigenous species. Whereas the CITES regulations are mentioned only in passing in *The Orchid Thief* (Orlean 190), *The Scent of Scandal* devotes significant time to reviewing the regulations surrounding the exportation and importation of *unidentified* orchid species like the *Phrag.* that Kovach purchases. Kovach claims that he couldn't have possibly obtained the proper permit, because, in order to complete the required paperwork, an official name for the plant must be given. This is why he fails to obtain the permit, he says, because the plant (recently "discovered") had no name. In order to circumvent customs officials, Kovach hides the unnamed *Phrag.* among a collection of other orchids for which he has the proper permits, and passes inspection. The scandal surrounding the orchid's appearance at the Sarasota-based gardens holds serious implications for MSBG horticulturalists and the orchid community at large.

Thus, *The Scent of Scandal* documents the fallout surrounding the naming of the Peruvian *Phrag. kovachii*. For his crimes, Kovach is ordered to serve just two years' probation in Virginia, pay a \$1,000 fine, and undergo mandatory drug testing (the judge is convinced that Kovach is a chronic user of marijuana, though why this is relevant to the case at hand remains unclear). Kovach receives a relatively light sentence compared to the consequences for others whose connection to the scandal is loose at best, political at worst. Meg Lowman (former executive director of Selby) neither handles nor sets eyes on the orchid when Kovach brings it to Selby, yet the Selby Board of Directors ultimately holds her responsible for the actions of her employees and terminates her employment. In other words, as Pittman suggests, a world of trouble stems from these flowers, but, more to the point, it is the people who love them who are often to blame.

### **Discovery or Theft?**

The person who truly discovered *Phragmipedium kovachii* is of course disputed. While Michael Kovach is the first to scientifically describe the plant, he narrowly beats out longtime Selby detractor Eric Christenson. It is Christenson's intention to name the orchid in honor of

Peru, the orchid's country of origin. Working with a Peruvian orchid expert, Christenson hopes to be the first to describe the orchid in a major publication, thus earning the right to have the orchid recognized by the International Association of Plant Taxonomy. Christenson plans to call it *Phragmipedium peruvianum*, asserting that "such a showy flower should bear a name honoring its country" (Pittman 74).

Regardless, three representatives of Selby rush to publish a description of the plant, describing it as *Phragmipedium kovachii* in a special issue of *Selbyana*, Selby's scientific journal (Pittman 84, 88). *Phragmipedium* describes the plant's genus, while *kovachii* refers to the so-called "discoverer" of the plant, Michael Kovach. This tribute is marred by the fact that Kovach hardly exerts much effort to obtain it. He simply purchases the orchid (for a few dollars) from a roadside vendor in Peru. Then, according to law enforcement officials, Kovach smuggles the plant into the United States and brings it to Selby for identification.

The naming of *Phrag. kovachii* illustrates the dubious nature of discoveries in the orchid world. Indeed, it can be difficult to distinguish between a genuine discovery and a situation where a person has the resources and the wherewithal to run through the steps of scientifically describing the plant and registering it with the International Association of Plant Taxonomy. This begs the question: Is it possible to discover a plant that has been appreciated by the people of a certain region for years?

Describing an orchid as "never-before-seen" might not be patently false—many orchids grow in places inaccessible to the average person. However, I propose that Kovach's method of discovery represents an iteration of colonization, an unethical process by which one finds an artifact or a plant or a piece of land in a country other than one's own, and, in order to claim ownership over it, the discoverer gives it a name—typically their own name or the name of their home country. "Never-before-seen," in this context, could quite possibly mean "never-before-seen-by-white-men."

Pittman introduces this problem when paraphrasing Harold Koopowitz, a tropical slipper orchid expert and editor emeritus of *Orchid Digest*: "Without facing the prospect of any punishment, some botanical garden scientists have come to regard themselves as somehow beyond the law ... They believe that their devotion to science allows them to disregard the rules by which commercial traders must abide" (Pittman 72). More important, however, are the ethical concerns raised when a scientist or explorer from the West enters another country and claims a piece of it for him or herself.

Eric Christenson speaks to this concern, suggesting that this type of plundering is widespread throughout the orchid community. Christenson is paraphrased as saying, "[Selby] especially cared nothing for the exotic lands where most orchids grow, taking a jingoistic, me-first approach to their work. Thus, he said, their attitude became, 'We're white, and we're going to do whatever we want, and fuck the Third World'" (Pittman 70). Christenson asserts that this attitude paved the way for Kovach's unfettered access to Selby resources when identifying the *Phrag.* from Peru.

## Love or Lust?

In order to understand the troubled history of the orchid and the power it holds over its admirers, one needs to look no further than the origins of the word “orchid.” It is derived from *Orchis* (or *Orkus*), the name of a figure in Greek lore. According to Berliocchi’s *The Orchid in Lore and Legend*, *Orchis* is a lecherous man who attempts to rape a priestess. As punishment, the Fates send wild beasts to tear him limb from limb (16). The story goes that *Orchis* is then “metamorphosed into a modest and slender plant—the antithesis of the frenzied remains that had generated it. With poetic justice, however, the organs of *Orchis*’s undoing were transformed into the plant’s nether regions, its tubers. These were fashioned to resemble the very parts of his anatomy that had brought *Orchis* to grief” (Berliocchi 16). Pittman contributes to our understanding of this etymology: “Even the name says sex—but not because of the flowers. The word ‘orchid’ comes from *orchis*, Greek for ‘testicle,’ because that’s what the roots of European orchids resemble” (23). The orchid’s etymology might serve to explain its powerful effects—often called “orchidmania” or “orchidelirium”—on its devotees.

Mythology aside, there must exist a reasonable explanation for the power that orchids hold over characters in Orlean’s and Pittman’s books. Questions remain: Does the pursuit of wealth account for orchid obsession? Is it love, or an ambition for money and immortality mistaken for love? Is the orchid really just a means to an end?

Orlean reflects on this idea: “It seemed as if there were hundreds and hundreds of people who were wrapped up in their special passion for the natural world. ... [Laroche] was the oddball ultimate of those people who are enthralled by nonhuman living things and who pursue them like lovers” (136). This idea of love between humans and orchids is again illustrated in an exchange between Laroche and a woman at a plant show. “Do you love it?” Laroche asks the woman, “it” being a nondescript pile of orchid roots in a pot. Her reply: “‘I do love it,’ she said. She hesitated. ‘I mean ... it’s ... it’s a little ... *unusual*. But I do love it.’ ... ‘I know why you love it,’ he said. ‘It’s just part of the sickness’” (Orlean 97).

Rather than lovesickness, is Laroche’s desire for power the “sickness” to which he is referring? Early in *The Orchid Thief*, we learn that Laroche’s attraction to orchids is neither love nor an appreciation for botany, but more so an indication of a pervasive megalomania. “Every time I’d make a new hybrid [of an orchid], it felt so *cool*,” he said. “I felt a little like God” (Orlean 17). Later, reflecting on the same subject, Laroche says, “That’s the cool thing with hybridizing. You are God” (Orlean 94). And, in a telling passage, Laroche describes the feelings inspired by the inanimate objects he collects, even after he has disavowed collecting orchids because “orchid people are too crazy”: “I still get that collector feeling. You know what I mean. I’ll see something and then suddenly I get that *feeling*. It’s like I can’t just have something—I have to have it and learn about it and grow it and sell it and master it and have a million of it” (Orlean 32, 33). That Laroche positions himself as “master” over orchids reveals a link between his impulse to collect and an inner need to feel like “God.”

Similarly, in *The Scent of Scandal*, the special prosecutor accuses Michael Kovach of adopting a Laroche-like attitude toward orchid collecting: “There was no conservation motive

here [for smuggling the *Phrag.*]," the prosecutor says. "[Kovach] wanted something named after him to become somewhat immortal" (Pittman 219). However, Kovach's wife, speaking to the court in defense of her husband, says, "We are both very much in love with orchids" (Pittman 221).

Audiences are thus left speculating about the true motives behind orchid collecting. Is it a hobby grounded in a dedication to nature and taxonomy, or is it a side effect of capitalism and a form of colonization, as earlier discussed? These separate issues seem to form a complicated nexus which drives some orchid collectors to collect and conquer these plants, sometimes to the detriment of the plants' countries of origin and in violation of international law. Though motives for orchid hunting and collecting may differ widely throughout the orchid community, a future inquiry into the matter by psychologists, ethnobotanists, and postcolonial scholars might better illuminate the impetus behind the global orchid trade, a multi-billion-dollar industry.

### **Differences in Coverage and Perspectives on Florida**

Advertising the obvious connection between Orlean's and Pittman's books, the dust jacket for *The Scent of Scandal* attests to the publisher's awareness of Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* and Kaufman's *Adaptation*. From the dust jacket: "With candid interviews from nearly everyone involved in the case, *The Scent of Scandal* unspools like a riveting mystery novel, stranger than anything in Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* or the film *Adaptation*" (Pittman). Attempting to profit from name recognition of Orlean's book, the blurb somewhat degrades *The Orchid Thief* in the service of selling copies of *The Scent of Scandal*; in any case, the slight is indicative of the precedent set by Orlean's work.

In fact, Pittman makes several mentions to *The Orchid Thief* in his book. First, he quotes the screenplay for the film *Adaptation* as the preface to chapter 2, "The Garden of Earthly Delights." Another mention occurs on page 22 when Pittman introduces *The Native Orchids of Florida*, Carl Leur's seminal text about Florida orchids that figures into *The Orchid Thief* and *Adaptation*. Later, Pittman writes, "The most popular book about orchids is Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*. ... Published in 1998, the book became a *New York Times* best seller, and the basis for the movie *Adaptation*. The movie starred Chris Cooper, who won an Oscar, as Laroche, and Meryl Streep as Orlean. A lot of orchid people hate this book." He continues, "They complain that it's chock full of errors about their favorite flower—for instance, giving the number of species as sixty thousand when the correct number is, at best, half that. When some of them noticed that the book's acknowledgements page says Ned Nash of the American Orchid Society helped check the text for accuracy, Nash was bombarded with complaints. But he said Orlean never asked him to check anything" (Pittman 33).

A closer reading of *The Orchid Thief*, however, reveals that Orlean is aware of the inexact figures of orchid species. "There are thousands and thousands of orchid species," Orlean writes. "New orchids are being created in laboratories or being discovered every day, and others are nearly unfindable because they exist in tiny numbers in remote places. In a sense, then, the number of orchid species on the planet is uncountable because it is constantly

changing” (53-54). Also, Orlean never claims to be an orchid expert, simply a writer and an admirer of orchids. While attending a gala hosted by the American Orchid Society, someone asks Orlean what species of orchid she collects. Her response elucidates her status as a novice: “[I] admitted to him that I was just a spectator in the orchid world” (Orlean 84). Is it fair, then, for readers to expect total accuracy (even when the data are unknowable) from an author who admits to having certain limitations?

Describing *The Scent of Scandal* as “excruciatingly detailed,” one *Kirkus* reviewer raises an interesting point about the purpose of Pittman’s book in contrast to the purpose of *The Orchid Thief*. Directly after the book’s “Foreword,” Pittman provides a “Cast of Characters,” much like one finds at the beginning of a play, complete with full names and descriptions of how each person is related to the case. There are 44 characters in total (not including tertiary characters who crop up from time to time). Keeping up with the cast of characters proves an enormous task for both reader and writer. In fact, the book’s central figure, Michael Kovach, for whom the stolen orchid is named, does not make an appearance until 44 pages into the book.

Pittman’s almost obsessive attention to detail, along with an enormous depth of coverage, reveals the author’s purposeful commitment to recording every facet of this highly complex case. Whether the reader finds the story interesting appears secondary to Pittman’s dedication to unearthing the truth. At the end of chapters, Pittman designs a number of cliffhanger-type endings intended to propel the narrative. For example, at the end of chapter 6, the race toward naming the *Phrag.* from Peru has yet to be decided: “Under the rules of taxonomy, as of that mailing date, Christenson’s description [of *Phragmipedium peruvianum*] would be the officially accepted one ... unless, of course, someone beat him to it” (75). These moments, calling to mind the conventions of crime fiction, bring charm to an otherwise straightforward account.

Pittman’s undertaking, however, is enormously complex due to the various accounts of what exactly takes place at the Selby OIC on the day that Kovach arrives with the plant (or plants, depending on who is telling the story). Even Kovach tells multiple versions of the story, claiming first that he brought only one plant to the OIC. Others claim that he had three plants; others say ten. Representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and their special prosecutor are convinced that Kovach smuggled a large number of *Phrag. kovachii* into the United States, but a search of Kovach’s residence proves inconclusive. Such is Pittman’s plight, determining who is telling the truth when the truth is inextricable.

Pittman’s more traditional style stands in stark contrast to Orlean’s vibrant, ambulatory prose. Orlean’s book is an exploration of obsession and orchidphilia, framed within a historical context and as the term applies to John Laroche (the book’s supposed central character, though his narrative serves as a frame for Orlean’s larger meditation on obsession). Whereas Pittman constructs his book from beginning to end in a mostly chronological fashion, flashing back when necessary, Orlean frequently departs from the Laroche narrative to describe the history of Florida and its landscape, of orchids and their hunters, and of the Seminole tribe with whom Laroche associates. Less important are the facts of Laroche’s crime than the contexts and

settings in which they occurred; thus, the physical and historical landscapes of Florida assume central roles in the book.

One such example occurs early in the book when Orlean describes the Fakahatchee Strand, “a preserve of sixty-three thousand coastal lowland acres in the southwestern corner of Florida” (34). Employing metaphor and sensory imagery throughout, Orlean sketches the Fakahatchee with a tone of awestruck wonder:

Overall, the Fakahatchee is as flat as a cracker. Ditches and dents fill up fast with oozing groundwater. The woods are dense and lightless. In the open stretches the land unrolls like smooth grass mat and even small bumps and wrinkles are easy to see. ... The Fakahatchee has a particular strange and exceptional beauty. The grass prairies in sunlight look like yards of raw silk. The tall, straight palm trunks and the tall, straight cypress trunks shoot up out of the flat land like geysers. It is beautiful the way a Persian carpet is beautiful—thick, intricate, lush, almost monotonous in its richness. (34-35)

Many such passages evince Orlean’s powers of observation and the author’s mesmeric appreciation for a landscape so thoroughly different from that of her home (at the time) in New York.

After all, Orlean is not only an outsider to the orchid world, she is also an outsider to Florida. Orlean writes, “A lot of the time I was in Florida I was in a bit of a daze, a kind of stranger’s daze that comes on when you hear and see and smell and touch so many new things that they all start to smear together into one single feeling of newness and strangeness” (84). Reflecting on her overall experience in Florida, Orlean says, “I’m not sure what I had imagined my life in Florida was going to be like, but I guess I must have expected there might be more occasions that involved cocktails. It wasn’t like that at all” (80). One logical explanation for Orlean’s initial disorientation finds its basis in the introduction to Anne Rowe’s seminal book *The Idea of Florida in the American Literary Imagination*: “In spite of the state’s assimilation into the mainstream of American life,” Rowe writes, “the idea of Florida—the subtropical land, the idyllic, exotic paradise—continues to be a powerful seductive force” (6). Indeed, the idea of Florida in Orlean’s work is pervasive and—to echo Rowe’s description of the idea—persistent. Orlean further describes her devotion to the idea of Florida when she says, “I have friends and relatives in Florida, but I didn’t see most of them while I was there; I felt as if I really was in some other exotic place where I didn’t expect or want to recognize anything I’d see” (81). In an interview included at the end of *The Orchid Thief*, Orlean says, “I came to Florida with a scheme in mind: I wanted to write this book about this peculiar event ... [because] interesting, strange things happen in Florida” (294). Orlean ultimately supports Rowe’s theory that Florida continues “to be important both as a real part of the nation and as a source of imaginative appeal” (Rowe 137).

Pittman, on the other hand, treats Florida more as a backdrop for the story’s events rather than a setting-cum-character as in Orlean’s work. That said, *The Scent of Scandal* begins with a passage akin to Orlean’s more personal style of journalism. The first chapter opens with a description of a wedding taking place at the Selby Botanical Gardens—it turns out to be



Pittman's own wedding, a marriage that would later end in divorce, he tells us. Pittman describes the scene in vivid detail: "A sea breeze ruffled [my ex-wife's] red hair and stirred the leaves of the nearby banyan tree. Sunlight danced across Sarasota Bay, making the water glitter like distant diamonds" (1). From that point forward, though, the authorial voice takes a step back, giving few impression of Pittman the man, and even fewer descriptions of Florida. While much of the action takes place in Florida, the narrative concerns itself more with the ins-and-outs of the Kovach case rather than its setting.

In this way, *The Orchid Thief's* exploration of Florida's rich physical landscape establishes the book as yet another tribute to, as Rowe puts it, the idea of Florida in the American literary imagination. In contrast, *The Scent of Scandal* mentions Florida only in passing, almost as an afterthought. The authors' disparate relationships to the state (Orlean as an outsider, Pittman as an insider) might explain this difference. What might seem exciting, foreign, and strange to Orlean might be mundane and commonplace to Pittman, a native Floridian. Orlean's fresh perspective on the state even allows her to identify two Floridas, one distinctly rural and one commercialized and populous: "[Rural Dade County] was one of those parts of Florida that have nothing to do with the other Florida, the brassy, booming Florida of superstores and tall hotels. This was the low, simmering part of the state, as quiet as a shrine except for crickets keeping time and the creak of trees bending and the crackly slam of a screen door and the clatter of a car now and then" (268). Without question, the idea of Florida to Orlean and other outsiders is "powerfully attractive," which could explain Orlean's effusive reflections on the state (184).

Of course, the goals for each book could account for the authors' different perspectives on Florida, how these goals require the author to privilege certain details over others. Does the *Scent of Scandal* require the same kind of descriptive passages as *The Orchid Thief*, considering that Pittman's goal from the outset seems to be more about documenting an intricate legal case rather than recounting, as in Orlean's book, a more personal engagement with the subject matter? Whatever the case, I disagree with *The Scent of Scandal's* dust jacket that Pittman's book is "stranger than anything in Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*." For one, the characterization of John Laroche in *The Orchid Thief* (and *Adaptation*) is utterly grotesque and much stranger than the more subdued, forgettable characters in Pittman's book. And Orlean's accounts of Florida, documenting oddball characters and dynamic landscapes that many have come to expect of the state, further contribute to the imaginative appeal of Florida for readers, orchid enthusiasts, and the millions of tourists each year in search of this idea.

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