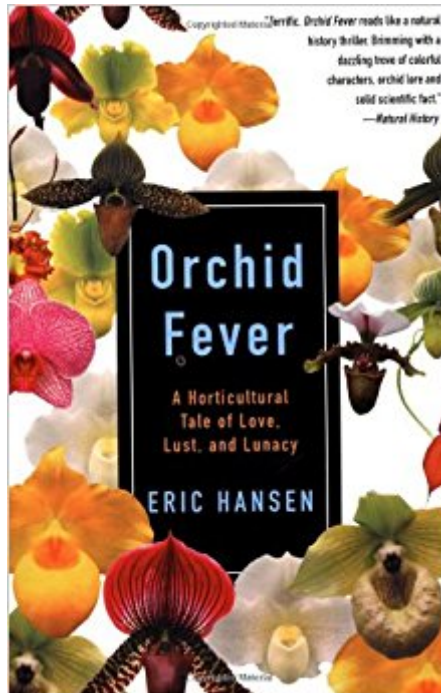


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Orchid Fever: A Horticultural Tale Of Love, Lust, And Lunacy



Synopsis

The acclaimed author of *Motoring with Mohammed* brings us a compelling adventure into the remarkable world of the orchid and the impossibly bizarre array of international characters who dedicate their lives to it. The orchid is used for everything from medicine for elephants to an aphrodisiac ice cream. A Malaysian species can grow to weigh half a ton while a South American species fires miniature pollen darts at nectar-sucking bees. But the orchid is also the center of an illicit international business: one grower in Santa Barbara tends his plants while toting an Uzi, and a former collector has been in hiding for seven years after serving a jail sentence for smuggling thirty dollars worth of orchids into Britain. Deftly written and captivatingly researched, *Orchid Fever* is an endlessly enchanting and entertaining tour of an exotic world. "A wonderful book, I've been up all night reading it, laughing and crying out in horror and clucking at the vivid images of bureaucracy with the bit in its teeth." —Annie Proulx "An extraordinary, well-told tale of botany, obsession and plant politics. Hansen's vivid descriptions of the complex techniques some orchids use to pollinate themselves will raise your eyebrows at nature's sexual ingenuity." —USA Today

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Customer Reviews

At first blush, the subtitle of intrepid traveler Eric Hansen's floral account might seem, well, hyperbolic. After taking this whirlwind tour of the hidden world of rare orchid collectors, the reader will find the words well chosen. Hansen invites us into a strange demimonde of intrigue and desire, at the center of which is the orchid, that shadowy and somewhat sinister parasitic oddball of the plant kingdom. Orchid raising and trading is big business. Worldwide, the retail economy in orchids

adds up to some \$9 billion; in the United States, wholesalers ship nearly 8.5 million plants a year, while in Holland a single nursery produces 18 million. "Several million people worldwide now grow orchids," the author notes, "and this botanical craze has already eclipsed both the nineteenth-century frenzy for orchids as well as the tulip madness that gripped the Netherlands in the seventeenth century." With such willing customers, it's no wonder that a thriving black market now exists. To serve it, orchids are taken illegally from sensitive ecological areas in places like Thailand, Borneo, and darkest Minnesota. In scenes reminiscent of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief*, Hansen follows the trail of orchid smugglers, pursuing money and plants in a whodunit tale that involves botanical gardens, scholars, scientists, ordinary enthusiasts, and "plant cops"--international eco-police whose job it is to stop the traffic in rare and often endangered plants. Those vigilantes have their work cut out for them, Hansen writes, especially because some of the current laws may be misguided, causing more harm than good and equating honest breeders with botanical desperadoes. The laws are bound to fail in any event, he suggests, if only because the plant trade, like that of the drug trade, is simply too big to curtail. Orchid enthusiasts and admirers of good journalism alike will find plenty of interest in Hansen's vivid, richly anecdotal investigation.

--Gregory McNamee --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the same vein as Susan Orlean's *Orchid Thief*, this captivating tale is not so much about flowers as it is about obsession. In various chapters (some of which have appeared in *Natural History* magazine), Hansen (*Stranger in the Forest*; *Motoring with Mohammed*) examines different facets of the mysterious world of orchids, a universe of incredible subterfuge, erotic plant names and some very eccentric characters. He visits Borneo with two orchid growers and two Penan guides who are extremely puzzled about such enthusiasm over a flower that serves no medicinal or nutritive purpose. Hansen also interviews 84-year-old Eleanor Kerrigan, who in her Seattle basement greenhouse cultivates an illicit orchid collection worth \$70,000. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora has a strict policy about certain types of orchids, and many orchid growers and collectors, it turns out, operate on the wrong side of that policy, resulting in an underworld that, as the author notes, resembles the illegal drug trade. Hansen manages to talk to the secretive Henry Azadehdel (a cause célèbre in the orchid world since he was arrested for orchid smuggling in 1987) and travels to Turkey to taste orchid ice cream, which is rumored to be an aphrodisiac. Eventually, he comes to the conclusion that after five years of research he has become as obsessed with his subjects as they are with their flowers ("Orchids were doing strange things to me"). The results are fully enjoyable. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business

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A very unexpected pleasure to discover a reference to this book while perusing other areas of the storied New Yorker Magazine online recently. Ordered it immediately and read it cover to cover with the greatest enjoyment. The book is unusually addictive and has a lot of inner dynamism, revolving around the arcane world of potted plants, namely rare and massively overprotected orchideans. The hunt for the rarer ones takes up several chapters and talking about the dangers and the brutal conditions in tramping through the jungles of the world on collection expeditions is mind-bending. The political inconsistencies in the management of international distribution and trade in several species is beyond ludicrous too. Salacious and frankly gossipy in style, mature in professionalism and dedication to development of the species, and abounding in anecdote after amusing anecdote, this book rocks with joy, laughter, and the sexual antics of (yes!) a plant whose mastery around getting itself adequately pollinated is overtly creative as well as subtly clandestine. Who or what co-evolved with the orchids is my main question? Any guesses? It must have been mankind, for who else would ever notice.

I ordered this by mistake, thinking it was a guide (read too many synopses in too short a period of time). Excellent story; many things are so funny while other things make you want to smack the bureaucracy. Certainly an eye opener to the incongruities of laws, the need to have established criterion for determining what is endangered, and the intricacies of various groups and interests not able to communicate well. Even if you are not into orchids - or flowers of any kind - it is still a great read. The various situations are so well described that he makes you feel like you are there, whether in the jungles of Borneo, the judging tables of an orchid competition, appreciating how people are motivated by various aspects of the plant and/or the processes, or talking with the people who are diligently working to preserve and produce these wonders of nature. It is certainly a page turner!

I don't raise orchids. In general, I don't bother raising flowers. So, why read this? I'm interested in conservation of wild things...and a long time ago, one summer I took up wild flower photography with a 4x5 view camera. Yeah, just for the summer...or maybe it was 2 summers. That camera, and its expensive lenses, have long since been sold. So, what flowers did I use it on? Whatever was local. But of course, sooner or later you will start to wonder about anything rare and showy. Most wild flowers are not that showy, but orchids are a different story. Where I live they are very rare. So,

of course, I wanted pictures. And then I found out about a place with some of those showy orchids Hansen mentions in the last chapter of this book. I went on a week long camping trip to the general location...found the showy orchids, made some connections, and then found a different patch of white showy orchids. The rare alba form of *Cypripedium reginae*. Wow. Made a great subject for the view camera...not that I knew what I was doing with the camera or how rare the white orchids were. That happened about a decade before the events of the last chapter in Hansen's book. I hadn't thought about it much since then, but this book brought those memories of that trip back to me. I will add that I did not collect anything but pictures on my trip. Like I said...I'm not a flower grower. As for the book....loved it. But I did find the information on CITES enforcement to be dismaying. I guess it's pretty much always the case that power goes to the head of whoever wields it. That the people in charge of CITES are more interested in aggrandizing their power than in protecting the wild plants of the world is sad, but not surprising. That there are other people willing to do whatever is necessary to protect wild plants is, however, gratifying.

From the very first sentence, I was in love with this engaging account. If it hasn't yet been optioned as a comedic screenplay, I'd consider pawning the cats to pick it up as a showcase for pretty much every eccentric character actor working in Hollywood today. Beautifully drawn, wry with a loving twist, whoda thunk such an esoteric subject could yield such a delightful book? Thank you, Eric Hansen. Not only did I learn way too much for my own good about a subject I'd never really considered before, I think I may have found a new community to hang with -- however deeply it disturbs me to realize that they all seem so. . . familiar. :-)

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