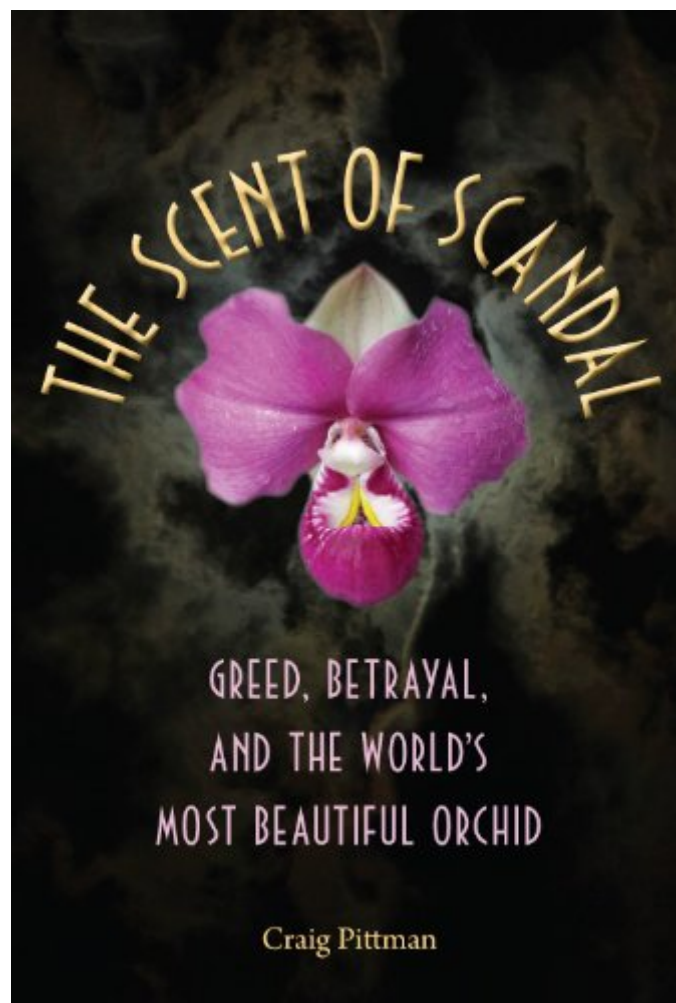




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The Scent Of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, And The World's Most Beautiful Orchid (Florida History And Culture)



Synopsis

After its Peruvian discovery in 2002, *Phragmipedium kovachii* became the rarest and most sought-after orchid in the world. Prices soared to \$10,000 on the black market. Then one showed up at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, where every year more than 100,000 people visit. They come for the lush landscape on Sarasota Bay and for Selby's vast orchid collection, one of the most magnificent in the world. The collision between Selby's scientists and the smugglers of *Phrag. Kovachii*, a rare lady's slipper orchid hailed as the most significant and beautiful new species discovered in a century, led to search warrants, a grand jury investigation, and criminal charges. It made headlines around the country, cost the gardens hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations, and led to tremendous internal turmoil. Investigative journalist Craig Pittman unravels this tangled web to shine a spotlight on flaws in the international treaties governing trade in endangered wildlife--which may protect individual plants and animals in shipping but do little to halt the destruction of whole colonies in the wild. *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 shows how some people can become so obsessed--with beauty, with profit, with fame--that they will ignore everything, even the law.

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Customer Reviews

Back in 1960 when I turned sixteen a couple of friends and I headed out to explore Big Cypress. Part of our purpose was to experiment with cigarettes and bourbon. For me, at least, son of a hunting guide and nephew of the first biologist ever hired by the old Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, the appeal was even more (really!) the opportunity to explore and investigate the wild places and wildlife. I craved encounters with anything that ran, flew, or -- best of all -- slithered. But one of our number was interested in the plants, in particular orchids. And they were profuse. The little Butterfly Orchids grew in such profusion that when they bloomed they perfumed the air downwind of the cypress domes they favored. Cigar Orchids and Ghost Orchids were also common, and even more captivating. I was smitten. I still am. We were all smitten. So we stole them. Stole them shamelessly and enthusiastically for parents, teachers, and girls. And on nearby Chevalier Loop (which the locals all called "Chevrolet") a retired Navy Chief had established his own orchid jungle, with boardwalks running out over the swamp waters. He was friendly and informative with us, but he hated "garden club ladies" with a bitter passion, expressed with the force and vocabulary honed in a former life at sea, on warships, in combat. The ladies arrived, according to him, in chauffeured limosines and -- stole orchids. And so I learned, first hand and young, that orchids, as James II of England said of falconry, are "a great stirrer up of passions." "A Scent of Scandal" is a recounting of one more story of these most beautiful and erotic of flowers, and of the passionate, irrational, and often illegal actions they inspire. Our merry 1960 band of hormonally overloaded high school boys, a Popeye-double Navy Chief, and larcenous rich Miami ladies was far less varied and colorful than the cast of orchid fanatics Craig Pittman follows through the episode of discovery and intrigue he reports in "Scent...". Other reviews perfectly describe in accurate detail the plot and specific subject matter of this fascinating book. For me it was a return to and reminder of that first introduction to the perilous intoxication of orchids and wonder of encountering them in the wild places they inhabit and symbolize.

Though orchids are a multi-billion dollar industry worldwide, the true money lies with individuals who take advantage of new species for both hybridization and collectors value. This book explains the grey area encompassing the legal ownership and naming rights of orchids, and the rush to be the

first to market...The importance of this flower lies in the large size and new color, never before seen in the *Phragmipedium* genus. This makes collectors and hybridizers salivate. This being said, I am the owner of a legally obtained *Phrag kovachii* seedling, which by the way are down to about \$100 for a two inch seedling from several hundred a few years ago. Even the growers, whom I speak with personally, many mentioned in this book, speculate that thieves took several thousand of these plants from the wild to supply their illegal ventures and wealthy collectors. A wonderful well written account!

This non-fiction book reads like a novel and kept me completely entranced. It reminds me of John Berendt's novel, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, because of its upscale Southern setting, its quirky characters with diverse motives, and a smoke-and-mirrors feeling. The setting, Sarasota, Florida, is well-depicted, as are the many individuals who are interested in rare orchids for a variety of reasons. Human nature (greed, ego, power, revenge, altruism) all are at play. The account of travels to remote jungles, clever methods of smuggling, international laws, orchid propagation, and professional connections among scientists is detailed but never dull. I am now eager to visit Selby Gardens to feel its ambiance in person and re-imagine the drama that unfolded there.

I recently joined my local AOS society and heard about this book after the author did a meet-and-greet in Daytona Beach. Living in Florida all my life and growing up outside Tampa, I had never heard of this event. I received the Tampa Bay Times every day while this was going on and don't remember ever reading about it. After doing some research on this crazy, not-even-Hollywood-could-write-this-stuff story I had to buy the book. Let me tell you, it didn't disappoint. Being new to the orchiding world, I had no idea how insane the smuggling world is, or how ridiculous the government laws surrounding it are. The writer did an excellent job of introducing all characters, telling the story, and staying unbiased. After reading this book all I can do is shake my head over the whole incident...there are just no words. If you're looking for a great read, even if you're not "into" orchids, I highly recommend you check this one out!

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