



Orchid: A Cultural History

Jim Endersby

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At once delicate, exotic, and elegant, orchids are beloved for their singular, instantly recognizable beauty. Found in nearly every climate, the many species of orchid have carried symbolic weight in countless cultures over time. The ancient Greeks associated them with fertility and thought that parents who ingested orchid root tubers could control the sex of their child. During the Victorian era, orchids became deeply associated with romance and seduction. And in twentieth-century hard-boiled detective stories, they transformed into symbols of decadence, secrecy, and cunning. What is it about the orchid that has enthralled the imagination for so many centuries? And why do they still provoke so much wonder?

Following the stories of orchids throughout history, Jim Endersby divides our attraction to them into four key themes: science, empire, sex, and death. When it comes to empire, for instance, orchids are a prime example of the exotic riches sought by Europeans as they shaped their plans for colonization. He also reveals how Charles Darwin's theory of evolution became intimately entangled with the story of the orchid as he investigated their methods of cross-pollination. As he shows, orchids—perhaps because of their extraordinarily diverse colors, shapes, and sizes—have also bloomed repeatedly in films, novels, plays, and poems, from Shakespeare to science fiction, from thrillers to elaborate modernist novels.

Featuring many gorgeous illustrations from the collection of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, *Orchid: A Cultural History* tells, for the first time, the extraordinary story of orchids and our prolific interest in them. It is an enchanting tale not only for gardeners and plant collectors, but anyone curious about the flower's obsessive hold on the imagination in history, cinema, literature, and more.

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