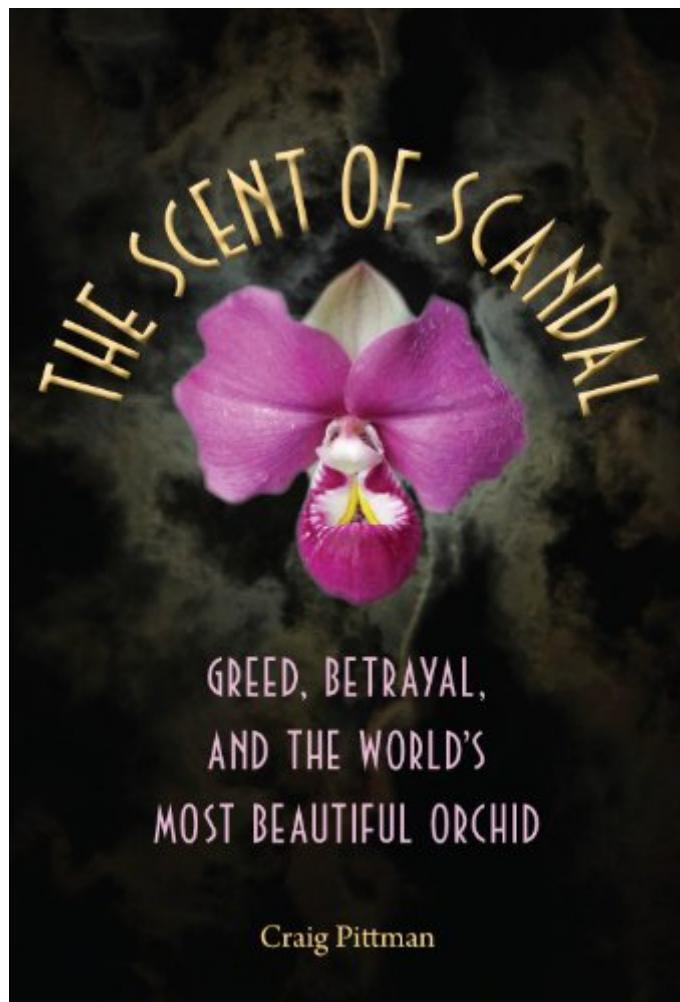


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The Scent Of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, And The World's Most Beautiful Orchid (Florida History And Culture)



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

Investigative journalist Craig Pittman had covered plenty of crazy people by the time he stepped onto the tranquil grounds of Sarasota's Marie Selby Botanical Gardens to report on a case of orchid smuggling in 2003. There was the triple killer he interviewed on Death Row who took to writing him letters with smiley faces dotting the i's. There was the woman so in love with manatees she left a date to wade into the water with them fully clothed, then tackled a major political campaign on their behalf. Pittman's second book even had crazy in the name: "Manatee Insanity." But none of that came close to the maniacal obsession to possess and name a new orchid discovered growing on a hillside in northern Peru. The petals of *Phragmipedium kovachii* stretch up like hot-pink fairy wings poised to soar away with the swollen pouch that makes it a "slipper orchid." The story of how it got to Selby, and how reputable scientists lost their minds in the race to be first to describe it, makes for incredible reading in "The Scent of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, and the World's Most Beautiful Orchid." If it were fiction, "The Scent of Scandal" might be skewered for improbability: A Ph.D. taxonomist named Guido who punches out a cop. Not one but two collectors trying to pitch the idea of a wild-orchid-hunter reality show -- starring themselves as the macho leading man. Pittman is on staff at the Tampa Bay Times, where he has established himself as one of the nation's top environmental reporters. He came to the beat more than 20 years ago on staff at the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. Local readers will appreciate his insights into the city's unique history and society scene.

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 chauferred 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.

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