Susan Orlean

Susan Orlean has been called “a national treasure” (Washington Post). Her deeply moving—and deeply humorous—explorations of American stories, both familiar and obscure, have earned her a reputation as one of America’s most distinctive journalistic voices. A staff writer for the New Yorker for over twenty years and a former contributing editor at Rolling Stone and Vogue, she has been praised as “an exceptional essayist” (Publisher’s Weekly) who “approaches her subjects with intense curiosity and fairness” (Bookmarks Magazine). Orlean is fascinated by tales of every stripe—her profiles and interviews for the New Yorker have covered such wide-ranging subjects as Jean Paul Gaultier’s design inspiration, urban chicken farming, the friends and neighbors of Tanya Harding, the contemporary painter responsible for capturing “the art in the Wonder Bread,” and the World Taxidermy Championships. From the everyday to the outlandish, she has an eye for the moving, the hilarious, and the surprising.

Orlean’s most recent book, Rin Tin Tin, explores the life and legacy of the iconic German shepherd. Rescued from a World War I battlefield in 1918 by an American soldier and brought to the States, Rin Tin Tin went on to appear in 27 Hollywood films and was even nominated for the first Academy Award for Best Actor in 1929. On NPR’s Weekend Edition, Scott Simon reflected, “Susan Orlean has written a book about how an orphaned dog became part of millions of households, and hearts, in a way that may reveal the changing bonds between humans and animals, too.” In The Orchid Thief—the national bestseller that inspired the Academy Award-winning film Adaptation—Orlean delves into the life of John Laroche, a charismatic schemer once convicted of trying to steal endangered orchids from a state preserve in southern Florida.

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A horticultural consultant obsessed with rare orchids, Laroche is the unforgettable, strangely appealing heart of The Orchid Thief. Orlean spent two years doing research for the book, going so far as to wade through a swamp in hopes of spotting the elusive ghost orchid. The result is a story that the Wall Street Journal called “a swashbuckling piece of reporting that celebrates some virtues that made America great,” citing “visionary passions and fierce obsessions; heroic settings; outsize characters [and] entrepreneurs on the edge of the frontier.”

She is the author of several other books including Saturday Night, a portrait the varying experience of Saturday night in dozens of communities across the United States, of which Entertainment Weekly concluded, “I can’t think of a better way to spend Saturday night than staying home and reading this book.” Her journalism has been compiled into two collections: The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup: My Encounters with Extraordinary People and My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who’s Been Everywhere. Orlean’s work has inspired two successful films: Blue Crush, the story of young women surfing in Maui, and Adaptation, the metafilm directed by Spike Jonze. Meryl Streep, who portrayed Orlean in the film, was nominated for an Academy Award, as were costars Nicholas Cage and Chris Cooper and writer Charlie Kaufman.

Orlean lives in Los Angeles and upstate New York, where she is a parent, dog owner, gardener, and occasional teacher. She is currently working on The Library Book, an exploration of the history, power and future of the endangered institutions, told through the lens of her quest to solve a long unsolved crime: who set fire to the Los Angeles Public Library in 1986, ultimately destroying 400,000 books?