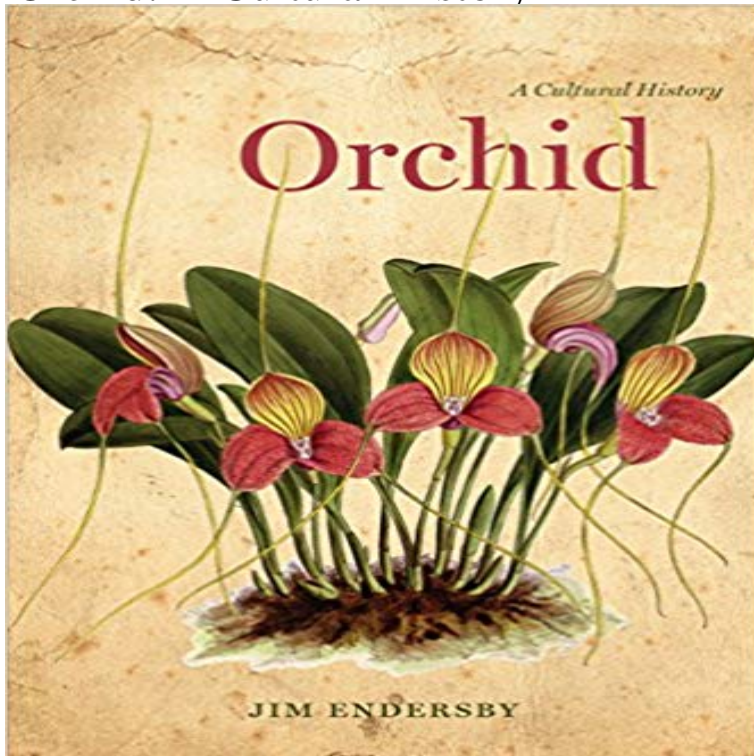


Orchid: A Cultural History



At once delicate, exotic, and elegant, orchids are beloved for their singular, instantly recognizable beauty. Found in nearly every climate, the many species of orchids have carried symbolic weight in countless cultures over time. The ancient Greeks associated them with fertility and thought that a parent who ingested the orchid root could determine the gender of a 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? To answer, Jim Endersby offers a unique cultural history of this captivating family of plants. Following the stories of orchids throughout history, Endersby divides our attraction to them into four key themes: science, empire, sex, and death. He explores how these have shaped orchids and how orchids, in return, have shaped our own investigations and associations. 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. Endersby 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 Endersby 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 hard-boiled 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 a tale sure to

enchant not only gardeners and plant collectors, but anyone curious about the flowers obsessive hold on the imagination in history, cinema, literature, and more.

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