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Jim Endersby. *Orchid: A Cultural History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 288 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-37632-5.

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"There is no stable boundary between the natural and the cultural" (p. 9). This is often pointed out, particularly in history of science circles, but rarely is this intertwined and coproduced relationship so compellingly demonstrated as in Jim Endersby's *Orchid: A Cultural History.* In this account, stories of how the mysterious orchid has gradually become known to science are inseparable from the peculiarities of orchid morphology and reproduction as much as from societal shifts in religion, class, gender, colonialism, and industrialization. Through this wide scope, from literature and cinema to herbaria specimens, from ancient Greek plant lore to today's pressing anxieties about climate change, *Orchids* raises important questions about how to account for the long expanses, complexities, and dramatic shifts of botanical history—and why it matters. It is at once eloquent, illuminating, accessible, and witty.

Readers familiar with Endersby's previous work will find this a rather different kind of history, although it revisits imperial British botany, and, like in *A Guinea Pig's History of Biology: The Plants and Animals That Taught Us the Facts of Life* (2001), plants—orchids in this case—are portrayed as active participants in the human pursuit of scientific knowledge. As Endersby explains in the conclusion, this story about orchids began with the recognition of apparently coincidental connections between orchids, evolution, and science fiction, which formed interwoven patterns through recurring associations of orchids with sex and death. These coincidental beginnings are reflected in the rhizomatic structure of the book, which follows a mostly chronological sequence from herbalism and classification to evolution, ecology, and climate change. The first three chapters trace the ancient Greek roots of the European tradition of associating orchids with sex (originating in the resemblance of the glands of European orchid species with a particular part of the male anatomy, an idea transmitted into early modern herbalism) and death (through naming the plants after the Greek myth of Orchis). The orchid thread follows the introduction of the vanilla orchid from Mexico by the Spanish, one of a vast number of species new to European botany that led to a classification crisis. Appropriately to this story, the crisis was to some degree resolved with the Linnaean sexual system, global because of its simplicity.

Chapter 4 jumps to nineteenth-century orchidmania, with the devastating plunder of wild tropical orchids, the few survivors of which were sold for exorbitant prices, egged on by embellished accounts of orchid hunting. With a growing understanding of the mystery of how to grow and propagate orchids, this aristocratic flower began

to be popularized. It is within this orchidmania that Charles Darwin used the case of orchid pollination to give detailed, empirical evidence for his theory of evolution. In turn, the orchid was reimagined as an organism with agency, reflected in a subgenre of science fiction dominated by cunning, man-eating orchids. After the steamy greenhouse chapters of intrigue and dense accounts of bizarre orchid-horror and orchidmania, it is a relief in the final chapter to stumble out into the windswept South Downs in search of the inconspicuous spider orchid. It is pollinated by a wasp through pseudo-copulation (the mystery of orchid pollination that puzzled Darwin and that Endersby argues could only be solved after the emancipation of women made it possible to imagine both women and orchids as active and potentially cunning subjects rather than passive objects). This chapter brings the book to the present. Through the co-evolution of orchid and wasp into a precisely matched but therefore also acutely vulnerable relationship, the ecologist Professor Mike Hutchings has monitored this orchid-insect relationship over three decades to study how they respond to rising temperatures. Compared with the destruction wrought by orchid hunters, climate change is slow and almost imperceptible, but no less the result of human activity and no less devastating.

Orchid: A Cultural History is at heart a history of science, in which "the stories of real and fictional orchids turn out to be part of a single story" (p. 209). Endersby draws on both scientific publications and pulp fiction, auction advertisement, horticultural manuals, myth, science fiction, and cinema. Orchids emerge as charismatic participants, suggesting how the more-than-human can be given a place in traditionally human-oriented history, in light of emerging fields such multispecies studies and critical plant studies. Following the orchid, rather like an object history, also allows Endersby to navigate the long chronological scope of the book, given coherence through the thematic focus on sex and death. It is not a comprehensive history (this would hardly be possible); the examples discussed are weighted toward the nineteenth century and onward, reflecting Endersby's extensive knowledge of Darwin, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and imperial botany. While the early chapters cover an impressive scope succinctly and clearly, an early modernist might have wished for the inclusion of more encounters with orchids in the period, such as Georgius Everhardus Rumphius's seventeenth-century descriptions of Indonesian orchids.

Orchid also suggests a dilemma for the engaged historian of science. It demonstrates that the study of plants has never been neutral, but shaped by society, religion, and culture, and neither can the telling of its history be neutral. The book reflects Hutchings's commitment to being an engaged academic with a prerogative to explain his research and why it matters. Endersby does this. The vein of humor that runs through the text in bracketed comments continually reminds us that we are seeing the past through his eyes, from the present. While he consistently historicizes scientific developments, social and moral changes are judged by the present: for instance, with the thematic focus on sex and death, nineteenth-century religion only features as a repressive force from which secular society has freed us. This raises the question whether the engaged historian cannot avoid a certain degree of teleology. Orchids are, as they always were, a moral battlefield.

Endersby describes the experience of writing these stories as a process of becoming sensitized to orchids, and it had a similar effect on me as a reader. Orchids increasingly take center stage toward the end of the book, reflected in the final chapter titles ("Savage Orchids," "Sexy Orchids," "Manly Orchids," "Deceptive Orchids," and "Endangered Orchids"). It concludes from an "orchid-eye view," in which we humans have been enlisted as pollinators, and orchids have colonized not only our imaginations but also our homes and offices, while the threat of climate change hangs

over plant and human both. I am left with a new awareness of the orchid that bends its pale faces over my desk, watching me as I type.

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