FINDING THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY: SUSAN ORLEAN'S IMPACT ON CREATIVE NONFICTION

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ABSTRACT

Susan Orlean is one of the most innovative creative nonfiction writers of our time. Her interest in people and the ability to connect with them greatly inspires her work. She has worked for the *New Yorker* since 1992 and has published multiple collections of literary journalism pieces and book-length works such as *The Orchid Thief, Library Book,* and *Saturday Night.* Orlean is known for her ability to draw inspiration from the ordinary things in life. She takes on the role of a researcher, spending time with people all over the country (and sometimes the world), exploring everyday aspects of their lives that seem outlandish to others. Writing about the eccentric, abnormal, and mundane is not a challenge for her, as some subjects she has written about are orchid collecting, taxidermy, and library fires. As we dive into the world of creative nonfiction, I will ask, what makes us so interested to hear about the truth within everyday life that she writes about? How does she catch our attention and keep it? Orlean writes nonfiction, yet as readers, we feel as if we are reading a story that we cannot put down. She utilizes techniques such as; dialogue, word choice, and scene-setting to establish a strong narrative voice that compels you to keep reading. This presentation explores the creative nonfiction works of Orlean and analyzes her writing strategies and tactics she uses to inform and interest her audience.

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INTRODUCTION

Creative nonfiction allows writers to be creative and imaginative while telling the truth at the same time. This genre encompasses facts and true events and stories combined with writing techniques that pull the audience in as if they were reading a story. Not everyone is interested in the nonfiction genre, but taking accurate information and crafting it into a piece that reads like fiction will allow the writer to reach a new audience. A story is what captivates interest, not a list of facts. Creative nonfiction is so important because readers can learn new things while the text holds their attention. How exactly do writers hold their audience's attention? Literary techniques, genre analysis, and examples within the genre will be discussed to understand why creative nonfiction is such a tremendous movement in writing. Examples of creative nonfiction writing by writer and author Susan Orlean will be examined and explored to understand this genre fully. Orlean is known for her unique creative nonfiction pieces and her longer collections and book-length works of literary journalism. Many appreciate her work because she embraces the extraordinary within the ordinary and seeks out stories through regular people. She has traveled to taxidermy conventions, to the swamps in Florida to observe orchids and orchid collectors, and all over the United States to see what people do on Saturday nights. To Orlean, there is no shortage of what we can learn from other people. I want to determine why her stories captivate the audience and why we are fascinated to read and learn about other people. There is something special about conveying facts and information into a story that makes people unable to put it down. Orlean has truly made creative nonfiction into an art form, and we will take a look into how and why she does this.

From an early age, Susan Orlean has loved storytelling, but not in the way you think. She told stories based on the things around her and always had a knack for describing the

real world. Instead of embellishing or telling fiction, she loved telling stories of things that happened to her or events she experienced. This love for creative nonfiction stayed with her, and she enjoyed the challenge of taking specific moments in life and turning them into something comprehensible and meaningful. In an interview with Bill Kenower in 2013, Orlean said that the "magic was to take an experience and put it on the page and have it preserved the way a photograph does." Similar to a photograph, a writer wants their work to capture the audience and show something meaningful. What a photograph and creative nonfiction have in common is that they are both works of art. Creative nonfiction is about shaping and sculpting the facts into something that tells a story. A list of facts can be called nonfiction, but with creative nonfiction, the writer crafts their information and uses literary techniques to turn something true into something captivating.

In an interview with Kristin Vukovic, Orlean said, "My point is that people are really interesting, and that the more you know about life, the more enriched your life will be. That's my only agenda" (Vukovic, 46). This point is evident when looking at all the work she has done over the years. Her pieces are all about her experiences with other people or telling the stories of others. She writes about herself to some degree, but only if it adds to the story's meaning or involves her interactions with her subjects. Her focus is on the beauty of life, the things that may seem odd to some people but completely normal to others. We can learn so much from others, and that is why Susan Orlean's work is so unique. My favorite example of this is *Saturday Night* because she traveled all over the U.S. to see what people of all different ages and backgrounds do on a Saturday night. She took one general thing that everyone experiences and has in common, using it to show the differences and beauty in human life.

CREATIVE NONFICTION/ETHICS

Creative nonfiction contains four subgenres; Memoirs, Literary Journalism, Essays, and Place Writing. Memoirs are about lived experiences, and they can range widely in length. They can be about a single moment in someone's life, or they could describe long stretches of life. When people think of memoirs, they often think about celebrities and their best-selling books. However, anyone can write a memoir. It is not about how well-known someone is; it is about "the craft of writing, the quality of thought and reflection, the author's voice" (Hesse, 19). Creative nonfiction is all about the narrative elements and how they can shape and sculpt the author's writing. Lee Gutkind, the founder of the Creative Nonfiction literary magazine, defines the genre, stating, "The word "creative" refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner" ("What Is Creative Nonfiction? - Creative Nonfiction"). When writing creative nonfiction, it all comes down to two things; craft and truth. One of the best things about the creative nonfiction genre is trying new writing styles and techniques and exploring new writing genres. "Creative nonfiction allows the nonfiction writer to use literary techniques usually used only by fiction writers, such as scene-setting, description, dialogue, action, suspense, plot" (Lopate, 5). Fiction immerses the reader into the plot, making them almost forget that they are reading. Creative nonfiction uses this immersion but keeps the reader engaged in reflection and thought. After creating his magazine, Gutkind realized that "most of the best essays were not written by journalists, but by poets and novelists. Writers crossing genres seems to be another significant hallmark of the creative nonfiction genre and a reason for its popularity" ("The Creative Nonfiction Police? - Creative Nonfiction"). The

innovation of creative nonfiction gave writers the outlet to explore a new type of nonfiction and draw from their own experiences or curiosity.

However, the word “creative” does not mean that writers are straying from the truth. Sometimes the connotation of creative means that people make up stories or create something that did not happen. Nevertheless, in this case, the word creative only relates to the narrative techniques and writing styles that writers can use. There can be a fine line between embellishing a story and telling the truth, which is something that many writers in this genre have to deal with. When you are writing “factually accurate prose," it is perfectly natural to wonder if your audience will feel compelled when reading it or if the material will be too bland for them. Fiction and creative nonfiction share many similarities, making the line between the two genres blurry, and there can be some debate over where this line is exactly. Gutkind also relays questions that are constantly asked, as people wonder how you can use certain narrative elements while also sticking to the truth. These questions include; “How can you be certain that the dialogue you are remembering and recreating from an incident that occurred months ago is accurate?... How can you look through the eyes of your characters if you are not inside their heads?” (“The Creative Nonfiction Police? - Creative Nonfiction”). Gutkind believes that the answer to these questions can fluctuate and that it depends on the writer themselves and how willing they are to put in hard work to achieve accuracy. When dialogue is a significant factor, it might be helpful to cut things out and keep it brief. However, creating some dialogue for an actual situation can make things a little more interesting, but it might not be needed. When writing creative nonfiction, we all wonder at some point, “The line between fiction and nonfiction is often debated, but is there a single dividing point or an all-encompassing truth a writer is supposed to tell? (“The Creative Nonfiction Police? - Creative Nonfiction”).

Everyone's writing process is different, and so is how accuracy and truth are attempted. It can slowly turn into a rabbit hole that we cannot get out of. Do we own our truth? How is our information verifiable? What happens when we write about people we know? Questions about truth are essential to literary journalism because they rely on sources. And then, there is the question of if the sources used are valid and verifiable. It almost seems never-ending, and it has been a subject of debate for a long time. Since there is such a fine line with the truth, people are skeptical of this genre. However, Lee Gutkind shares the purpose for this genre that shuts down any criticism of it:

> "Creative nonfiction encourages personal reflection about events and ideas that affect our lives in a number of universal ways—not necessarily as therapy for writers, but so that more readers might understand and relate to the larger issues which connect to the personal stories" ("The Creative Nonfiction Police? - Creative Nonfiction").

Creative nonfiction allows writers to take the truth and turn it into something that readers can reflect and learn from. There is no exact answer as to where the line should be drawn, but the main goal is that information should not be entirely made up or falsified to the point where the reader is fooled and loses trust. Trust is one of the most important things that a writer gains from the reader, and losing this trust will unravel the work and damage the writer's reputation.

Gutkind offers a checklist to those attempting to write in the creative nonfiction genre. He reiterates that there are no laws and rules that must always be followed, but he has a list that recommends helpful tips to writers. He says, "First, strive for truth," then "Second, recognize the important distinction between recollected conversation and fabricated dialogue" ("The Creative Nonfiction Police? - Creative Nonfiction"). It is vital that the main goal is to tell the truth, because the audience will trust the writer and see their honesty. Even though there can be many

versions of the truth, the writing should be as personally true to the writer as possible. You do not want to "assume or guess" what people are thinking or what they might have said with dialogue and conversation. The best way to follow the first tip is not to fabricate anything and, if necessary, ask for clarification if it is possible. Gutkind's third and fourth tips are;

> "Third, don't round corners—or compress situations or characters — unnecessarily…Fourth, one way to protect the characters in your book, article or essay is to allow them to defend themselves—or at least to read what you have written about them" ("The Creative Nonfiction Police? - Creative Nonfiction").

Gutkind believes that it is essential to deeply consider the people you are writing about and portray them fairly and accurately. One example he provides is that writers should punish them when writing about guilty people and unleash the wrath they deserve. However, writers should also consider the other side of the story and make sure the subjects are given equal representation. The goal is to be truthful and accurate, and bias can sometimes get in the way of that goal. He also advises writers to share their work with the people included in the story. Letting them read what has been written about them allows the writer to take responsibility for their characters and their stories. However, it might not always be the best option if the person is portrayed negatively, or if the writer is too shy or embarrassed to reveal their writing to that person. This step is not always necessary, but it can reflect responsibility and respect for the other person.

In conclusion, there are some ways to improve truth and accuracy when writing creative nonfiction since there is such a fine line between embellishing a story and straying from the truth. There are no immediate laws of the genre but writers also all share the same goal of portraying the truth while getting their audience to reflect and learn from their writing. The

different sub-genres also give writers the chance to try different techniques and styles different from what they usually write.

Literary journalism is a subgenre of creative nonfiction, and there is some degree of difference between the two. Creative nonfiction employs narrative techniques shared by poetry or fiction, but literary journalism is a more fact-driven and research-based writing style. Usually, literary journalism writers utilize interviews to gain more information on their topic, allowing them to be more about a specific subject than a person. "The literary journalism piece should be well-researched, focus on a brief period of time, and concentrate on what is happening outside of the writer's small circle of personal experience and feelings" (Purdue Writing Lab). This subgenre can be more informational than creative nonfiction and strays away from the author's thoughts. An example of literary journalism is Orlean's taxidermy article "Lifelike" from *The New Yorker*. Her knowledge of taxidermy was highly researched (especially since she did not know much about taxidermy beforehand); it focused on a brief period about her first visit to a taxidermy convention, acknowledging the world of taxidermy without her personal bias in it. The audience learned about and saw the world of taxidermy through an unfiltered lens, just like how Orlean saw it all for the first time. An example of her creative nonfiction is *Saturday Night.* This book-length work was about her personal experiences that she shared with a different group of people every Saturday night in a different location in the U.S. She included information and statistics relating to the places she went, but her audience got to experience her travels, experiences, and new friendships within the book. Sharing your experiences about traveling and meeting new people all over the country is a story that people want to read about because it helps us learn more about people's lifestyles that are different from our own. It expands our perspectives and gives us honest information. Orlean has written literary journalism and creative

nonfiction and holds the audience's attention while telling her stories. She has mastered the craft of creative nonfiction by displaying her creative talents while simultaneously sharing her own experiences and research.

CHOOSING A STORY/WHAT IS WORTH WRITING ABOUT?

Deciding on the topic of a story or what to write about can be a challenging task with creative nonfiction. The goal is to interest the reader and make them feel like they are reader fiction, yet there is a worry regarding whether readers will find specific topics interesting. If a writer is choosing to write about their own life, it may even become more challenging. What makes their life different from someone else's? However, a story can become captivating depending on the way it is told. If the author can make their passion known through the page, then the reader can become interested. It is a two-way street. Readers will become interested if the author can convey their interests and curiosity. Otherwise, the topic will seem random and pointless. "Writing creative nonfiction means perceiving what details are worth telling, why they might matter, and how they might connect" (Hesse, 18). Including too much detail or random information can make readers lose interest. Leaving some information out keeps the piece flowing and invites the opportunity for curiosity. Similar to passion and interest, curiosity is essential between both the writer and reader. For the writer, curiosity is an essential part of finding a story if they are not writing about their own life. Susan Orlean has referred to this sense of curiosity many times. She wrote a shorter piece on taxidermy and traveled to a taxidermy convention to write the story. She had visited a friend at their apartment and happened to notice a taxidermy catalog on a table. She flipped through it for a moment and found herself curious about this world of taxidermy that she never thought about, a world that felt so far away from her

own. This sparked the creation of her article *Lifelike.* Orlean firmly believes in the idea that inspiration can come from anywhere, from "the serendipity of stumbling onto an idea that comes up in your life" (Vukovic, 45). All a writer needs to do is make it interesting. If the writer is not interested, then the writing will fall flat.

I have had many experiences where I was not interested in what I was writing about. As a college student with a major in English, most (if not all) of the writing I do is for school assignments. Some are interesting to me, like fiction workshops or essays about *Game of Thrones* (yes, I have taken an English course based on *Game of Thrones*). But many others required me to analyze and develop writing on topics that are of little interest to me (for example, 20th-century British literature or the adventures of Marco Polo). When I look at the assignments that I have completed over the years, I can tell which ones I enjoyed and which ones I did not. The same goes for any type of writing project. If I can tell the difference between my assignments, the reader will undoubtedly be able to tell. When they notice, they will become disinterested and bored.

> Lee Gutkind summarizes the importance of creative nonfiction in the best way. He states, "What is most important and enjoyable about creative nonfiction is that it not only allows, but encourages the writer to become a part of the story or essay being written. The personal involvement creates a special magic that alleviates the suffering and anxiety of the writing experience; it provides many outlets for satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility and freedom" ("The 5 Rs of Creative Nonfiction - Creative Nonfiction").

This is also how creative nonfiction writers can choose their subjects or topics for their writing projects. Picking something they have experienced or passionate about draws them into the story and allows them to "become part of the story." It elevates the writing experience and can be what

inspires them to write. However, the subject/topic that is chosen still needs to tell a story that will captivate the audience's interest. Orlean recalls when a promising student of hers chose a personal topic but had no indication of what an interesting story was supposed to be. She recalled,

> "She sent me a story that she was planning to submit...it was a very long piece about a breakup with her boyfriend, and I thought: What makes you think this is a story? What is it that you're thinking readers would want or a magazine would want?...Is it just pure narcissism that you don't realize that what's interesting to you is not interesting to other people?" ("Susan Orlean - Creative Nonfiction").

It is crucial to register whether your topic is interesting to the public or just interesting to you. Acknowledging this difference is what prevents the author's work from falling flat. An audience's main priority when reading a story is to build curiosity and wonder what happens next. Feeding them a piece of writing that does not have a plot or movement will leave them feeling betrayed and misled at the end. Choosing a story is up to the writer (unless it is required for a job), and the writer needs to recognize if the topic is worth writing about. Only then will you be able to create a story that engages the reader. There is no right or wrong way to choose a subject, and many writers come up with ideas differently. Gutkind said, "Some writers (and students) may utilize their own personal experience rather than immersing themselves in the experiences of others" ("The 5 Rs of Creative Nonfiction - Creative Nonfiction"). Choosing to use personal experiences or focus on others depends on the preference of the writer. Some people may not be willing to get personal, and other people may find the lives and experiences of others more interesting than their own. It all comes down to recognizing what makes a story and what

the writer is curious or passionate about. The fun begins once a writer has chosen their story. It is up to them how they craft the truth onto the page.

SIZE OF THE SUBJECT VS SIZE OF THE WORK

The length of a work is also an essential factor when beginning a project. Sometimes a story idea and topic can determine how long a piece will be. There are many different project sizes, like shorter articles, book-length works, collections of essays, and more. Susan Orlean's work portfolio has all of the above with articles that have been published in *The New Yorker* and other places, book-length works like *The Orchid Thief* and *The Library Book*, and collections of smaller essays like *Saturday Night.* For Orlean, the subject itself cannot be too narrow or too broad. Readers will not be interested in something minuscule that does not matter, but they might get lost in something too big. Authors must find the perfect middle-ground for their subject. The size of a topic or the period of a subject can also determine what length a piece of writing should be. If a topic is more specific and narrow, it may only need an article-sized piece. However, if someone is writing about a longer length of time, like someone's life, their writing may require a book-length project.

Orlean's topic for *The Orchid Thief* was initially published as a smaller article titled "Orchid Fever." She was then asked to turn the subject of John Laroche and orchid collecting into a novel so that a movie could be produced. She managed to turn a small article into something a lot bigger and broader. However, this task allowed Orlean to prove to herself how good of a writer she could be. Her first book *Saturday Night,* was more of a collection of shorter pieces, whereas *The Orchid Thief* would be one complete narrative. She felt more pressure than when she wrote pieces for the *New Yorker.* She said that people buy a magazine for

the magazine (not just her article), but with a book, it stands alone, and people will only buy it if they are interested in the story. There is this larger pressure where the subject or story has to be interesting and captivating. One way that a longer piece can be sustained is the passion and curiosity that a writer experiences. A writer's curiosity is the desire to explore things outside of their everyday life. The more passion they have when writing can help make a project longer because the author will have a lot to say about the subject, and they will continuously want to learn more about it. If they are passionate about a personal experience, they will add many details and narrative techniques to expand the story.

The challenge of writing a full-length exploration involves extended amounts of research, resources, interviews, and help from people. Articles are shorter than books and may focus on one subject briefly. However, books require a lot of information, including history, backstory, research, and needs to focus on a longer period. Orlean spent years researching information for her book *The Library Book* and used many resources and interviews to put together a plot and timeframe of the library fire and the court case. Orlean mentioned some of her sources for this book, saying,

> it "required years of research and scores of interviews with current and past library staff, deep dives into the Fire Department's archives and the City of Los Angeles's court records, and a lot of digging through the musty boxes of material stashed in the library's Rare Books room...newspaper clippings about the library from the twenties; book lists from the thirties; paraphernalia from every decade; and countless odds and ends left behind by the hundreds of librarians who passed through the Central Library at some point" (*The Library Book*, Notes on Sources).

Writing a book-length piece is no easy feat, and Orlean shows this through a list of some of her sources. She left no stone unturned when writing this book, and it shows the audience the amount of time and effort it takes to start a project of this size, especially in creative nonfiction writing. Fiction writing may need some research in certain areas of the piece, but creative nonfiction depends on the truth and accuracy of the events that are being shown.

THE ORCHID THIEF

Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief* is set in Florida about orchid poacher John Laroche. She gives us detailed information about the world of orchid collecting and the lengths people will go to obtain all different kinds of these flowers. Some sell for high prices, some are productions of crossbreeding, and each one is as unique as the last. This book allows you to discover the origins and history of orchids and the fascination that collectors have with them. It is illegal in Florida to harvest orchids, which gets Laroche in trouble in the first place. An interesting thing about this book is that the subject of orchids and John Laroche was initially written in the format of an article, then she was asked to turn it into a book-length work. People wanted the book so it could be adapted into a movie, which was created and titled *Adaptation.*

The apparent difference between the article and the book is length. A writer will have a lot more pages to fill with a book than someone writing a brief article. If we look at the first pages of both formats, we can see the changes made and what stylistic choices Orlean decided to make. The article "Orchid Fever" is more straightforward than the book, the first paragraph stating:

> "John Laroche is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slouch-shouldered, and sharply handsome, in spite of the fact that he is missing all his front teeth. He has the posture of al dente spaghetti and the nervous intensity of someone who plays a lot of video games. He is thirty-four years old, and works for the Seminole Tribe of Florida, setting up a plant nursery on the tribal reservation near Miami. The Seminole nicknames for Laroche are Crazy White Man and Troublemaker. My introduction to Laroche took place last summer, in the new Collier County Courthouse, in Naples, Florida. The occasion was a hearing following Laroche's arrest for illegally taking endangered wild orchids, which he

> is passionate about, from the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, which is a place he adores" (Orlean, Orchid Fever).

Now let us take a look at an excerpt of the first page from the book *The Orchid Thief*:

> "John Laroche is a tall guy, skinny as a stick, pale-eyed, slouch-shouldered, and sharply handsome, in spite of the fact that he is missing all his front teeth. He has the posture of al dente spaghetti and the nervous intensity of someone who plays a lot of video games. Laroche is thirty-six years old. Until recently he was employed by the Seminole Tribe of Florida...Laroche strikes many people as eccentric. The Seminoles, for instance, have two nicknames for him: Troublemaker and Crazy White Man. Once when Laroche was telling me about his childhood, he remarked, 'Boy, I sure was a *weird* little kid.' For as long as he can remember he has been exceptionally passionate and driven..." (Orlean, 1).

The reader notices the first difference in John's age and the past tense of his employment since the book was published a few years after writing the article. These are logistical changes and are necessary to the timeline of her book. However, another difference is that Orlean spends more time on Laroche and who he is as a person. She mentions his nicknames and employment, similar to the first writing sample. However, she then describes him as eccentric and discusses his years leading up to becoming invested with orchids. He describes what he was like as a child, and Orlean lists all of the things he took an interest in from when he was a child to when she first met him. She does not get the opportunity to do this in the article because it has to be brief. The longer length of *The Orchid Thief* allows her to focus more on character building and describing her experience. The first two sentences of each sample are the same and one of my favorite openings by Orlean. She gives Laroche a detailed yet unique description, and even though we are not told specific details like his hair color or eye color, we can still imagine what he would look

like from her words. She adds the missing front teeth to the end of the sentence to throw readers off and to make them wonder what happened to his teeth and how he lost them. Her use of "al dente spaghetti" and "nervous intensity" shows that she is excellent at observing people closely and picking up on their personalities. Adding Laroche's reflection on his younger self and his journey adds more to his character and shows the audience why he became obsessed with orchid collecting. Orlean wrote, "Laroche's passions arrive unannounced and ended explosively, like car bombs" (*The Orchid Thief,* 4). It is sentences like these that make her my favorite author. She uses similies and descriptions that are so unique and so interesting. I would not have thought to compare passions to car bombs, and that sentence immediately draws me in. Other areas she gets to expand on are John's own experiences that he tells Orlean about when they are together. He tells her stories about being with tribes, trekking through swamps and reservations, and people he had met along the way. It gives the reader a clearer insight into Laroche's journey and what he had done before he and Orlean had met. These types of topics would not have been needed or would not fit into the shorter article.

The structure of the novel is also really compelling. At first, it is hard to comprehend how someone would read an entire book and be captivated by the world of orchid collecting, but Orlean makes this possible with her techniques. One technique she used that many writers use is sentence variation. A reader will get confused and lose interest if many sentences within a piece are too long. If all the sentences are on the shorter side, the writing will become choppy. One example of sentence variation in this book is:

> "I told a famous Florida orchid man I'd met named Tom Fennell about Laroche's plan to make and sell millions of ghost orchids. Tom said he thought Laroche's idea was insane. 'Ghost orchids are sure death,' he said. 'You can't grow them. They've reduced

> themselves through reverse evoltuion into nothing but roots and flowers, and they can only survive in a perfect microclimate that you just can't reproduce'" (*The Orchid Thief,* 134).

The first and last sentences are long and are separated by a couple of short sentences. This breaks up the monotony of the text and keeps the audience engaged. Orlean also does a great job of incorporating her five senses to describe her experience and what is happening around her. Using detailed descriptions like this helps the audience put themselves in her shoes and get a glimpse of her journey in Florida. She did this on page 28 when she wrote:

> "I turned on the car radio and tried to find a music station that I liked but ended up listening to a talk show about how to keep pet snakes and iguanas happy...The highway median was a low-lying cloud of pink hibiscus bushes...the road itself looked as if any minute it might just crack and buckle and finally disappear as things grew over it and under it (Orlean, *The Orchid Thief).*

There are many other examples of her scene-setting and descriptive talents throughout the entire novel, and it is something that she excels at in each piece of writing she completes. Illustrating your surroundings in a story can be difficult, and it is essential to make sure the writing flows and that the audience can picture what is going on. Another way Orlean broke up the sections in *The Orchid Thief* was by transitioning back and forth between informational and factual segments and sections about her current experiences. She detailed her journey in Florida with Laroche, the different people she met, and the new things she learned in some chapters, and other chapters were about the history of orchid collecting, the Seminole tribes, orchid poachers, laws about orchids, and more. The transitions between the two made the book easier to read, especially since there was dense historical information, scientific information, and orchid

knowledge. Orlean's experiences also created a plotline and a story that the reader wanted to follow. With someone as interesting and "eccentric" as John Laroche, it is not hard to wonder how Orlean's Florida experience would turn out and if he would be convicted for illegal orchid poaching.

Another structural technique that I appreciated in this book is that the ending of some of her chapters set up the topic sentence for her next chapter. This is a great way to improve the piece's flow and weave the chapters together in a smooth way. An example of this is the ending on page thirty-three when Laroche says,

> "I really have to watch myself, especially around plants. Even now, just being here, I still get that collector feeling. You know what I mean. I'll see something and then suddenly I get that *feeling.* It's like I can't just have something – I have to have it and learn about it and grow it and sell it and master it..." (Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*).

Continuing onto the next chapter, the first sentence is, "You would have to want something very badly to go looking for it in the Fakahatchee Strand" (*The Orchid Thief*, 34). She takes the determination and desire that Laroche experiences with collecting things, using that desire that people feel to start the next chapter. Having a similar component at the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next chapter makes the writing seamless and encourages the reader to keep reading. Once the audience is interested, they do not want to suddenly switch topics or have the beginning of chapters catch them off guard.

There were many sentences in *The Orchid Thief* that would immediately grab my attention and remind me how interesting her writing is. One of them was, "The botanical complexity of orchids and their mutability makes them perhaps the most compelling and maddening of all collectible living things" (53). This sentence reveals the passion and difficulty

of collecting orchids and how people dedicate their lives to breeding and collecting the perfect flowers. It made me stop and think about how people like John Laroche obsess over orchids, while people who are like me have never thought about orchids unless they happen to pass one in a flower shop briefly. I was reminded about how the power of creative nonfiction can change someone's perception about a topic they may never have been interested in or known about. All of the people that Orlean met had their own unique flowers, and their collections represented their personalities. There are so many breeds and species of orchids that people collected them based on their interest or love for specific flowers. Not everyone liked and hated the same flowers, making the hobby unique to every individual who collected them. Another one of my favorite statements included, "Plant crimes showed up all the time in the Miami police blotter between the usual reports of assaults and stickups and stolen vehicles" (*The Orchid Thief,* 154)." This moment adds some humor to the story because plants of crimes are associated with assaults and car thefts, which people consider to be more serious crimes. However, orchid collectors and enthusiasts view these plant crimes as devastating and awful crimes. Some hybrid orchids are worth a ton of money, and people also breed orchids themselves that cannot be bought from a store. If someone's collection is stolen or ruined, it might destroy years of work and collecting. This hobby was an expensive and competitive one. Plant crimes were also illegal to preserve the wildlife and reservation land of tribes and not only applied to orchids. Orchid poaching is a crime in Florida because they have specialized habitats and species that would be destroyed by poaching. However, people still do it to make money because orchids are one of the most popular and in-demand flowers in markets all over the world. Orlean describes this problem that Florida has with its nature laws and plant crimes. Before reading this book, I did not know any of the information above and how orchids were such a lucrative trade.

I was introduced to writing samples of *The Orchid Thief* in a literary journalism class, where I also discovered many of Orlean's other writing endeavors. Learning about the book's subject and how the project took shape from an article she wrote for the New Yorker amplified my interest in the creative nonfiction genre. It was the first book-length work by Orlean that I have read and helped me create the topic for my thesis project. I am always fascinated by Orlean's writing and how it can stimulate a learning environment while telling a compelling story.

THE LIBRARY BOOK

The Library Book is another well-known book by Orlean about the 1986 fire of the Los Angeles Public Library. She tells the story of Harry Peak, a suspect accused of starting the fire, the fateful day of the fire, the supportive and dedicated staff, and the history of libraries. The book contains a lot of factual information while maintaining a narrative structure and storyline. Libraries are places where people can read, learn, and develop interests in a comfortable and peaceful environment. Visiting a library is something that almost everyone has done, but it is not dwelled on or deeply thought about. For some people, like the staff and regular customers of the Los Angeles Public Library, it is a routine or daily activity. Although libraries are not an ordinary thing, the library fire sure was.

A quote that reminds me of this book is that creative nonfiction "has 'a taste for littleness,' dwelling on the often-ignored minutiae of daily life, while at the same time it expands the importance of the writer's self" (Bishop & Starkey, 63). This reminds me of this book because libraries remind Orlean of her childhood. She has a personal connection to them, which means this book also serves as an expansion and exploration of herself. She talks about her memories of going to libraries with her mom and how she currently goes with her son. She said, "My mother and I walked in together, but as soon as we passed through the door, we split up and each headed to our favorite section. The library must have been the first place I was ever given autonomy" (*The Library Book,* 7). This topic was personal for Orlean and unlocked memories, and made room for reflection. A library was the first place she could go off on her own and explore her interests. She recalled, "It wasn't like going to the store with my mom, which guaranteed a tug-of-war between what I wanted and what my mother was willing to buy me; in the library I could have anything I wanted" (*The Library Book,* 7). Many people can relate to

begging parents for things that they wanted in stores and the disappointment of not having control of getting what you want. Libraries became a place of control for Orlean, where she was allowed to choose what she wanted. I had a similar experience to this growing up. My town library was where I began to love books and find an interest in young adult fiction. Going there when I was a kind was my favorite because I got to choose what I read. The feeling of autonomy as a kid was exhilarating. I am sure that many other people relate to this and connect to this book, which also draws them into the story. We can learn a lot from other people and their life experiences. What is unique about creative nonfiction is that the audience sees this emotional side of the writer and experiences their self-reflection with them. This type of writing connects us as humans and helps us relate to one another, not matter how different we may be.

In order to tell the story of the library fire, Orlean took a more narrative approach than *The Orchid Thief.* All of the events, conversation, and research were true, but the book itself felt almost like a fiction story with good characters and an interesting plot. There is usually a bad guy in stories, and in this case, it was Harry Peak. Orlean is not saying that he is a bad guy, but he was accused of being an arsonist and setting fire to the library, which did not help his reputation. The mystery of the case made Harry a compelling character. They never found out if he committed the crime, but I was captivated by the story of the court case just as much as the description of the library fire. Even the book's first sentence is about Harry Peak. Orlean wrote, "Even in Los Angeles, where there is no shortage of remarkable hairdos, Harry Peak attracted attention" (*The Library Book*, 1). The book's main topic is the library fire, and Harry was believed to have started it all, so it only fits that he should be introduced in the very first sentence. The audience is immediately told that Harry attracts attention in a city where people are already known for attracting much attention. The reader can only infer that this means Harry

has done something to become well-known, but they are not yet sure what this could be. The subsequent sentences go on to say, "'He was very blond. Very, very blond,' his lawyer said to me...Another lawyer who questioned Peak in a deposition, remembered his hair very well" (*The Library Book*, 1). Orlean subtly involves lawyers and depositions, so now the audience knows that he is involved in a court case. His questioning infers that he is being accused of something. Already on the first page, Orlean is creating the opportunity for questions to arise and allowing readers to come to inferences independently. This narrative technique makes the book seem similar to the fiction genre while creates tension and curiosity.

Like *The Orchid Thief*, Orlean transitions between chapters of historical information and research and chapters detailing the fire, the aftermath, and Harry. She creates smooth segways into her following chapters, just like in her other book, which allows the readers to digest research and follow the story simultaneously. An example of this is at the end of chapter eight when Orlean writes;

> "In Senegal, the polite expression for saying someone died is to say his or her library has burned....I came to realize it is perfect. Our minds and souls contain volumes inscribed by our experiences and emotions...a private library of a life lived. It is something that no one else can entirely share, one that burns down and disappears when we die" (*The Library Book*, 93).

The first sentence of chapter nine reads;

"People have been burning libraries for nearly as long as they've been building libraries" (*The Library Book*, 94). She goes from the traditional expression of burning a library to the physical sense of the burning of libraries. It creates a smooth transition. She utilizes this technique to switch between different subject areas throughout the book. Another technique at

the beginning of each chapter is her titles for each one. Before the first sentence of every chapter, she provides a small list of books or other resources whose titles indicate what the topic will be for the chapter. An example is chapter 26, where Orlean talks about Harry Peak's criminal defense attorney, Robert Sheahen. The books and DVD titles she chose for this chapter were:

True Stories of Crime from the District Attorney's Office,

Tom Bradley's Impossible Dream: The Educational Documentary,

In Praise of Litigation, and

Hold Your Tongue! The Layman's Guide to Libel and Slander. A Fascinating Exploration of the Realm of Defamation, Including an Analysis of Ideological, Racial, and Religious Libels

These titles all relate to the government, justice system, and litigation, which Orlean talks about when she mentions Peak's criminal defense attorney. The titles do not reflect everything Orlean will cover in each chapter, but they give the audience a little preparation for what they will read next. This is the first book I have read where this technique is used, and I thought it was a great addition because the book is about libraries and all these titles and kind of turns her book into a library (plays on its title *The Library Book,* which I think is clever). *The Library Book* is the most perfect and clever title out of her other book-length works I have read.

Orlean also does a terrific job detailing the day of the fire and giving the audience a glimpse into how the library's atmosphere was before it had caught fire. Although she was not there (or even knew about the fire at the time), her extensive research and interviews allowed her to piece together what people were doing that morning and what happened while the library was burning. One technique she used when doing this was inserting dialogue into the descriptions and including customers' actions. When reading it, I could not tell that Orlean was never there

when it happened. She included so much detail that it seemed like she experienced it. Orlean wrote,

> "On April 29, Central Library opened as usual at ten A.M., and withing minutes it was humming. About two hundred employees were already in place around the building...Sylvia Manoogian, a World Languages librarian, had just gotten a new car, so she parked it with extra care in the library lot before coming in for her shift. Two hundred or so patrons were inside, browsing the shelves or settling in at the reading tables. Four docents herded a large, giggly group of schoolkids on a tour of the building" (*The Library Book,* 19).

This is a great use of interviews, research, and resources. She was able to describe a day in the past that she never experienced herself and still detailed what patrons and staff were doing the morning of the fire. Involving specific people like Sylvia Manoogian makes the writing more realistic. Saying, "people were at the library before it caught on fire" is too general and does not create interest. As the audience, we know that it is a matter of time before the library catches fire, and when we read about people browsing and settling in, we cannot help but feel anxious or nervous for the people because they do not know that tragedy is about to strike. This detail and scene-setting captivates the reader and causes them to wonder what will happen next and if the patrons and staff will be okay.

Another one of my favorite things Orlean does is utilizing lists and numbers in her writing. My favorite example of this is, "It had required "1,400 tanks of air; 13,440 square feet of salvage covers; two acres of plastic sheeting; ninety bales of sawdust; more than three million gallons of water; and the majority of the city of Los Angeles's firefighting personnel and equipment..." (*The Library Book,* 31). Orlean is not shy about using lists, and it is one of my

favorite things about her writing. All the numbers and information in this example show the audience how knowledgeable she is and that she has done extensive research while also demonstrating how intense the fire was and what resources needed to be used to put it out. All this information at once puts the event into perspective for the audience who has most likely not experienced it or been there that day. She also put that information at the very end of a chapter which helps the audience remember and retain that information.

Orlean presents a more profound message of the library fire and the importance of both books and libraries. She does this by bringing her personal experiences into it, but she also talks about how books keep the human spirit alive and help us learn. Orlean said, "A book feels like a thing alive in this moment, and also alive on a continuum… a lifeline that continues as someone sits with it and marvels over it...They take on a kind of human vitality" (*The Library Book,* 56). Books are what hold the beliefs, values, stories, experiences, and emotions of humanity. Books and libraries exist all over the world. They help us connect, not matter what genre. Books may pass through many hands, and they become alive each time someone opens them. Orlean also said, "It declares that all these stories matter, and so does every effort to create something that connects us to one another, and to our past and to what is still to come" (*The Library Book*, 310). This restates my point that we all share a connection through libraries and books. We can use them to connect to people who came before us and to teach those who come after us.

At the very end of *The Library Book*, she says, "I realized that this entire time, learning about the library, I had been convincing myself that my hope to tell a long-lasting story, to create something that endured, to be alive somehow as long as someone would read my books, was what drove me on" (Orlean, 310). The library fire reminds us about the lost stories and archives burned and the words that we have lost forever. Nevertheless, it also reminds us of how valuable

books are and how they can keep the spirit of both the writer and reader alive. I learned so much valuable information about libraries that I had never known before. She turned something mundane into a passionate subject about knowledge and humanity.

SATURDAY NIGHT

Saturday Night is one of the most interesting books that Orlean has written. She traveled all over the United States to experience what an ordinary Saturday night looked like for all different kinds of people. This book is one of my favorites because she dives into the ordinary human experience by giving readers a glimpse into the lives of others. Anyone can relate to this book because we all have Saturday nights in common, and those all look different for everybody. A typical Saturday night for people will seem downright odd or unusual to others, but this book shows the true American lifestyle. Each chapter is a new experience in a new location, as she mingles with the locals and observes how they spend their time. Almost everyone is ecstatic for the weekend, with some people saying, "The week is just something I get through until Saturday night," or "It's the only time of the week you do whatever you want" (*Saturday Night,* 15-16). In a country where its citizens put so much energy and focus into the work week, Saturday nights are seen as the brief time to do anything you want; be productive, sleep all day, go out with friends, relax in a bath at home, whatever you feel like doing. This feeling of freedom is what almost all of us look forward to. Orlean said, "The nature of Saturday night owes a great deal to the powerful effect of anticipation" (*Saturday Night,* 21). The fact that almost all of us experience this is what makes the book so relatable and interesting.

I will start at the very beginning of the book, her first story location being Elkhart, Indiana. For those who do not know that "Elkhart was the one of the nation's capitals of cruising" (a social activity where people would recreationally drive their cars), it may seem like one of the most random or boring places that a person would choose to visit (*Saturday Night,* 4). But that is what immediately makes the story gain traction. By choosing a location like Elkhart instead of New York City, the location automatically makes the audience question why that town

is so unique, especially on a Saturday night. I became interested right away during my first time reading because I did not know that Elkhart or cruising existed.

Another structural choice that I noticed was that her chapters were in order of the places she traveled. The book was a linear timeline of the cities she went to and the people she met. It is like she is bringing the audience along with her on her trip. She also talked to a large variety of people and did not show any type of bias to whom she spent the Saturday nights with. She observed all different kinds of people; rich, poor, young, old, babysitters, mayors, restaurant owners, pastors, socialites, college students, inmates, and many others. Doing this allowed her to connect to all walks of life and get as many different experiences as possible. Her desire to learn and connect with ordinary people even caused her to attempt a meeting with a drug dealer who sells drugs for home recreational use. The people that she interviews are a large part of what makes the book so compelling. One of the most interesting things is people. We can learn so much from one another by looking at each other's lives, and we are easily entertained by others (which is probably why reality tv shows are so popular). We cannot help but relate our own experiences or compare ourselves to others.

All three books that I have discussed all share the same technique of transitions between narrative/story sections and research/fact-based sections. One of the significant parts of literary journalism/creative nonfiction writing is the research and information on the subject. The audience will not trust the writer if they feel that the writer does not know much about their subject. Especially with literary journalism, facts and research are necessary to inform the audience and expand on the subject area. Since the book's subject is Saturday nights, Orlean includes many interesting areas of research that readers may not have thought about previously. Some areas she talks about are the history of the five-day workweek, statistics on how crime is

way more likely to happen on Saturdays, statistics on television viewership on Saturday nights, and much more. She goes cruising, polka-dancing, to quinceaneras, to see lounge bands, interviews a 12-year-old babysitter, rehabs, on a college bus, to the Hilltop Steakhouse (one of the busiest restaurants in America that I am proud to have frequented as a child before it had shut down), to a prison, and a few other places. This is the book that I think shows the beauty within the ordinary the most. I never thought I would pick up a book that just talked about what people usually did on Saturday nights. However, with each story, I became fascinated with the people Orlean interviewed. It made me realize how everyone has their own unique life and completely unrelated experiences. It makes you see how big the world is and how many people there are. "On Saturday night, people get together, go dancing, go bowling, go drinking, go out to dinner, get drunk, get killed, kill other people, go out on dates, visit friends, go to parties, listen to music, sleep gamble…" (*Saturday Night,* xii). Every Saturday night, there are infinite possibilities of activities that people are doing and experiencing.

Orlean structured her chapters in the timeline in which she completed her travels, but the subjects of her chapters also contrasted between long-term activities and short-term activities, whether it was her intention or on accident. She juxtaposes her pieces with things that are fleeting with things that are more long-term. An example of this is her chapter Lounging, followed by Polka Dancing. Lounging is about Orlean's experience observing with a lounge band named No Means Yes. Throughout the chapter, we learn that the lounge band is not a continuous thing, with the band breaking up, getting back together, getting new members, and changing their names multiple times. The career of a lounge band was not a steady career for them. But in the next chapter, Orlean visits 82-year-old Cecilia, who has been polka-dancing at Blobs in Maryland for 29 years every Saturday night.

Cecilia's Saturday nights are a continuous and constant tradition, something she has done for a long time. The comparison between these two chapters reminds the audience that everyone has a different view about what their Saturdays look like, and some may have long-term traditions, while others go with the flow and see where the night takes them. It shows that there is no right way to experience a Saturday night. Orlean also touches upon this when she says, "The sensation that a Saturday night not devoted to having a good time is a major human failure and possible evidence of a character flaw" (*Saturday Night,* xiii). This is a common perception that she noticed among the general public and that people felt that they were wasting their Saturday night if they were not being productive or having a good time. Many people think that not having fun on a Saturday night means that something is wrong with them, but this is not the case. Not all Saturday nights may be filled with excitement or fun. Sometimes these nights might be sad, lame, or relaxing. Some people sacrifice their fun on Saturday nights like babysitters or spend their nights following their passion, like the lounge bands. Nevertheless, it is not a bad thing.

Orlean demonstrated her incredible talent for connecting with people in this book. Her field of work and genre requires her to do extensive research and observe and understand others. Building relationships and connections are a large part of her job. She chose a topic that raised questions for her, something that she wanted to get a deeper understanding of. It is incredible how she can develop these subjects that most people would not give a second glimpse. When discussing her reasons for creating this book, she said,

> "I wanted to know what determines how Americans spend Saturday night. Is it mainly regional? Is it a matter of age and marital status? Relative wealth? Urban versus suburban

> versus rural? Is there such a thing as a typical Southern Saturday night, or a middle-aged Saturday night, or a working-class Saturday night?" (*Saturday Night,* xiii).

I enjoy how deeply she has thought about this topic and how many questions she has about something regular. She also says, "I liked the contrariness of examining leisure in an era that is obsessed with work, and writing about average citizens in an era that celebrates celebrity" (*Saturday Night,* xiv). The public focuses a lot on celebrity lives and their lifestyle, and Orlean redirects that attention to ordinary people like us. Writing about something that people often forget about makes them pay attention. This book is one of my favorite literary collections by Orlean, and I admire how passionate she is about the human experience.

CONCLUSION

Susan Orlean's work is so unique and monumental in the creative nonfiction genre. She has a talent for discovering a story in the most mundane things and diving into research about these topics. A quote about creative nonfiction I like is, "The personal essay is conversational…It values honesty and confession" (Bishop & Starkey, 63). Orlean's writing is conversational, honest, and draws you into the facts. She puts personal connections into her books, especially in *The Library Book*. She was the first creative nonfiction author I was introduced to, and I immediately fell in love with her writing. Her passion for knowledge, connections with people, and her perception of the world impressed me. I realized how powerful her writing was when I read her pieces on taxidermy and orchids and was drawn into the story. Being introduced to creative nonfiction opened up a whole new world to me, and I am thankful for my college experience, or else that would not have happened. The genre that I mainly read up until college (and still do read) is young adult fiction, which shares similar narrative techniques with creative nonfiction. But the unique thing about Orlean's writing compared to fiction is the honesty and truthfulness. "Our lives are portable – we bring them with us wherever we go – so there is never a sense of being removed from the subject matter in the way a fiction writer may find herself separated from a character she wants to write about" (Bishop & Starkey, 67). When writing creative nonfiction, the truth is right in front of us; we know the information, have lived the experiences, and now need to figure out the right way to put it on the page in a compelling way. Fiction can be more difficult because it comes from the writer's inspiration and imagination. Creative nonfiction has opened up a world of possibilities for me and has taught me that we can learn so much from the experience of others.

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