

# *An Interview with Susan Orlean: “The Nature of the Curious Mind”*

*John Boe*

*Like many people, I discovered Susan Orlean in The New Yorker. Time and again, I would be grabbed by an interesting beginning and find myself immersed in an article on a subject I thought I had no real interest in (show dogs, a grocery store, a hair salon, a record store). Then I would look to see the author, and it would always be Susan Orlean. She is able to make an amazing range of subjects compelling. It is a tribute to her storytelling ability that she is one of the rare nonfiction writers whose work has been turned into movies (The Orchid Thief into Adaptation, “The Surf Girls of Maui” into Blue Crush).*

*She began as a writer after graduating from the University of Michigan, getting a job writing music reviews and features for Willamette Week in Portland and also writing for national publications like Rolling Stone and the Village Voice. Subsequently she moved to Boston, writing for the Boston Phoenix and then the Boston Globe, where, as a cultural outsider, she wrote a regular column about New England; these columns were collected in a now out-of-print book Red Sox and Bluefish: And Other Things That Make New England New England (last time I looked it was going for \$134.80 and up on Amazon). She subsequently published a fascinating collection of stories of what Americans do on Saturday night, Saturday Night, then moved to New York and became a staff writer for The New Yorker. While she primarily publishes in The New Yorker, she also occasionally writes for other magazines (like Vogue and Outside).*

*In 1998 she published her best known book, The Orchid Thief. A number of her magazine profiles were collected in The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup : My Encounters with Extraordinary People. And, more recently, her travel writing has been collected in My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who’s Been Everywhere.*

*I interviewed Susan Orlean at her beautiful Boston home. While she is probably my favorite non-fiction writer, I was nonetheless surprised at how very knowledgeable and articulate she was about her own writing. Talking with her was for me a Holden Caulfield experience: getting to talk with a favorite writer and finding the author just as good in person as on the page.*

**WOE:** I appreciate you talking to me because I know how busy you are with your new book, *My Kind of Place*, and soon to be new baby and a deadline as well.

**ORLEAN:** Normally it wouldn’t be so much of an issue, but I’ve had a horrible time with this story that’s due tomorrow. It’s finally rolling, but I’ve had a lot of trouble concentrating and I just suddenly went into a panic and cancelled basically everything.

**WOE:** My whole family loves your writing. We all have had the experience of starting an article on the damndest subject—a hair salon, a show dog, a grocery store—and thinking, “How can I find this so interesting?” and then discovering, “Oh! It’s a Susan Orlean piece.”

**ORLEAN:** That’s my secret pleasure. It’s a sort of contrarian impulse, I suppose, to seduce people into reading about something that they didn’t think they cared about—not just for the trick of it but because I find the subjects interesting so I think, “Well, you’re not going to believe how interesting this is. Hang in there! You’ll see it’s amazing!”

When I wrote *The Orchid Thief*, a fair number of orchid people bought the book, which I expected. But I loved the people who said to me, “God, I never thought I’d read a book that was about flowers.” And I said, “Well, I never thought I’d write a book about flowers.” Being drawn in is the nature of the curious mind. That’s the

fundamental issue for me, the nature of curiosity, and how I can bring it out in people. People tend to turn away from things they don't know and things they don't think they're going to care about—which is a huge world crisis. It's a political and philosophical issue that the world is becoming more and more xenophobic in every sense, not only fearing strange people, but also fearing unknown things. That's a dangerous impulse.

**WOE:** You show a lack of fear, not only in traveling around the world but in talking to strangers. You've written about how being the stranger at a cocktail party is one of people's biggest fears and how that experience is much like what you do for a living. When I read about your picking up the two Georgia Tech fraternity boys and going to a frat party with them, to pick just one example, I did admire your courage. Does that courage come naturally to you or have you skilled yourself to be able to approach strangers, as a journalist has to do?

**ORLEAN:** I think I became a writer because that is my natural instinct and because I'm a writer I've had to nurture that instinct. I also think when you're working on a story versus when you're just a civilian, you can think of your courage as like the phenomenon of lifting a car up if it's squishing a baby: suddenly you have this superhuman strength. I think you have superhuman self-confidence when you're working on a story.

When I worked on *The Orchid Thief*, I went walking through the swamp and when I went back to look at the swamp I couldn't believe I'd ever gone in. I honestly had a moment of thinking, "Did I make that up?" I mean, never, NEVER, could I have imagined stepping into this swamp. It was the most forbidding, creepy environment I could imagine. And yet I did go in, sort of like a hunter being captured by the prey quality of it. I remember at one point walking after LaRoche in the swamp thinking, "What kind of idiot would go hiking through a swamp just to get some dumb flower?" Then I thought, "What kind of idiot would go hiking through a swamp just to get one story?" It was exactly parallel. The naturalness of that passion to know something makes it easy for me.

I'm not a shy person, but I think everybody has a reserve about doing something scary: There's nothing scarier than approaching, say, teenage boys, and saying, "Talk to me." They're the scariest people in the world. One of the most intimidating moments I had with a piece was about a Manhattan high school. It was not so specifically a matter of racial difference, although with the exception of some teachers I was the only white person in the school. But teenage high school kids are cliquish and clannish and often not so nice or not very open to strangers. To go up to them and say, "Hi. Talk to me" causes every fundamental sort of primal discomfort. But somehow when I'm working on a story, I feel like I have a Superman outfit on. It can't really hurt me as a person, even if I feel awkward or rejected. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with me.

**WOE:** I love the lifting the car off the baby analogy. You're passionate for your story like a mother for her baby, so you're going to walk through a swamp or lift up a car. That makes perfect sense.

**ORLEAN:** And later you look back and think, "My God, that thing weighs ten thousand pounds—how could I have lifted it?" It is a different state of mind where you put your ego aside or whatever in you becomes sensitive when you feel rejected or awkward. I was asked recently whether I traveled alone for pleasure a lot and I said, "No, never. Are you kidding?" Do I travel alone for work? Of course, all the time, and that doesn't faze me.

**WOE:** Recently I was teaching a journalism class and we were using *The Bullfighter Checks Her Makeup*. We spent a class looking at the leads of each piece. One way you get me into the subject I don't think I care about is by starting off so strong. Are you really conscious of looking for a strong lead?

**ORLEAN:** I'm very conscious of its importance. I can't rest until I have a lead that thrills me. The problem is that I can't write the second, third, fourth, fifth sentences until I have the first. That's part of the problem with the story I was just working on. I had all the material and a million scenes in my head that I knew I had to write and that would have been relatively easy to write. But I couldn't start until I started.

I think it's the nature of a really good striptease act, that you've got to choose very carefully which item of clothing you're going to take off first. Because it's got to be enough but not too much, and it has to be arresting so that you think, "Hmm. Well, what comes next?" I'm not sure where my leads come from. Often they're not specifically on the topic, or they're almost preambles to the story—although the lead I just wrote ended up being very straightforward. But I feel I know when they work, even if they're kind of oblique and seem a little off topic. Sometimes if I feel that I'm echoing something I've done before, then I actually don't do it. Any time you have a longish career you've got this fear of repeating yourself.

I do think a lead has to be intuitive. There has to be something intuitively real about it even if it seems

eccentric or off-topic. I've been asked a million times about the lead to "The American Man, Age 10" ["If Colin Duffy and I were to get married, we would have matching superhero notebooks."] and I've said, "You know, it's not like I set off thinking this is going to be a story about marrying a ten-year-old." The lead came from an emotional response. It was a story about being inside his head and seeing the world the way the ten-year-old would see it. But I'm not a ten-year-old boy, so I guess the next closest thing was imagining that I was in his world as his bride.

**WOE:** The marriage metaphor works so well, perhaps because you spent a week as a woman with this boy, which is sort of like being married.

**ORLEAN:** It would be totally different if a guy had written the piece. And it would be different if I wrote about a ten-year-old girl. And also, I really grew to adore this kid. He was just enchanting, but I don't mean that in a weird, romantic way. So I had this feeling of loving him and thinking he was wonderful. But did it come out of some deliberate expectation? Not at all. It was really a gut, intuitive response. And also I was seeing the world through the slightly cracked view of a ten-year-old, which is somewhat real and quite a lot unreal, that funny combination of what's possible and what's not possible. It seems to me at that age you're kind of conflating childhood and adolescence, and it doesn't quite make sense, but it's utterly entrancing.

The piece to me was very much about the poignancy about the cusp of childhood, and the fact that at ten you are every day moving rapidly into being a teenager, and the sort of magic of childhood and how engaging it is. I felt so charmed by that magic, caught up in this magical world that was also at the same time vanishing.

**WOE:** Like the twilight at the end of the story. The ending isn't heavily symbolic but it's sort of like a novel's symbol where you could ruin it by trying to say what it means, but still you feel it has a meaning that fits.

**ORLEAN:** Exactly. It's funny because my husband reads that piece often and he cries at the end. And he says it's something about this feeling of loss or poignancy.

**WOE:** One of the other things you do so well are the capsule descriptions of people, the two-line perfect physical descriptions, like in the beginning of *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's missing all his front teeth." In reading such descriptions for the first time I take them for granted, but in rereading your work, I realize how hard that is to do. Are you naturally visual, or have you worked on this?

**ORLEAN:** I am very visual. But I also have learned over time that descriptions require tremendous economy. You can't just go on and on and on. Most of the time you have a very brief moment of wanting to say "This is what this person looks like."

The description should also work to provide more than just the visual. So the LaRoche description immediately prepared you for the fact that this guy was unusual, that everything about him was one standard deviation to the left of average. A good looking guy who's also missing all of his teeth says to me, "I don't really care what the world thinks of me. I'm going to sort of be the way I want to be." A description has to both give you economically something very vivid and also tell you something about the person that's beyond just what he or she looks like.

**WOE:** The LaRoche description, which is also the lead of the whole book, has the simile "skinny as a stick." Another thing you do remarkably well is the simile. To me you're the queen of the similes: "my house decorated as if it was owned by a midranking official of the Chinese Communist party" or looking "like a cross-dressing Tibetan heavyweight boxer." Like your descriptions, your similes don't necessarily jump out saying, "Look, here's a simile! Here's a metaphor!" I just read it and I'm seeing.

**ORLEAN:** It's something I've worked on a lot over the years. I think I've learned a certain discipline about using them only when they have an internal logic. You have to earn the right to use a simile, in a sense, and they have to be really strong. I also sometimes love resurrecting a cliché. I loved "Skinny as a stick" because it's a cliché that's gotten beyond people's comfort in using it and yet it absolutely works. And also in his case—because of his whole being in the world of nature—it had an extra little echo that I liked, comparing him to something in the natural world.

The problem is that people either overuse similes and metaphors or use ones that have no real logic, where

you don't know what the comparison is so it doesn't get you anywhere. Figures of speech always have to advance the reader in a sense, so that when you get done reading you feel that much more sure you know what you're looking at. I've spent a long time working on one and making sure that it worked. Sometimes it'll stop me. I'll be stuck working on it for an hour, making sure I've got the right one and that it really works, or finding some tweak to it that will make it pay off.

**WOE:** Some of them have a big, funny payoff and I sort of say "wow" and some of them just describe the scene so well. "Water sounding like applause" is one phrase that struck me, that again I read without thinking until I read a second time and said "Oh, that's actually figurative language." When I read that, I heard the water without even thinking of the metaphor.

**ORLEAN:** Some of them just come very naturally, but I'm disciplined about it. There's a sort of truth test that they have to pass or they're not good. I get whiplash when I read a really bad simile. Years ago on one of my first jobs, my editor wanted to write a piece, so he asked me to edit it since he couldn't edit it himself. It was about a prison administrator. And he used this description where he said the man was wearing steel rimmed glasses: "the rims of his glasses resembled the bars in the prison behind him." It was such a tortured comparison. I remember thinking, "My God, this is awful." And you read that kind of comparison a lot.

**WOE:** It slows you down, when you read those things.

**ORLEAN:** Sometimes you can read over something that works well very quickly, which is a compliment to the work. But you also don't want people to miss the point. Often similes just don't make sense. And in the little bit of teaching I've done, sometimes I say to people, "Does it really?" Sometimes the sense gets lost in a sort of mad scramble to write something that sounds good.

**WOE:** I also think of you as the queen of lists. In so many pieces you have these wonderful lists, in the grocery store story or in *The Orchid Thief* or in your list of *Saturday Night* songs. Does this list-making come out of your gathering such a lot of material for a piece?

**ORLEAN:** Yes, but I think it's also a kind of subset of my general curiosity about the interesting way things come together in the world. Those lists can be rhythmic, ending up being a kind of musical passage in a piece. One of my all-time favorites I was able to pull off was in the piece I did about the gospel group. I had the names of all of these groups, and it was like a daisy chain because each name was similar to the next name and then the next name and the next name. And part of it was because groups picked their names out of the same set of ideas about what a gospel group should be named. But my list was also meant to be musical. I just wanted it in there for that reason.

It was also something that I had to learn not to overdo. My longtime editor at *The New Yorker* used to really be tough with me and say, "You have to remove one of these lists. You have too many." Or, "You can have three but you can't have five." Because, obviously, it can be something that you can overdo. But lists do show the thingness of life, just the nature of stuff.

**WOE:** Your work, not just in the lists, does have the thingness of life. So *The Orchid Thief* is about a place and a single person and many people and flowers and the history of orchid collection and other stuff as well. That book expands into so much. Your list-making proclivity seems to fit your general fascination with thingness.

**ORLEAN:** Certainly *The Orchid Thief* came out of this feeling, where here is this one little incident, but crammed into it are a million different worlds, the orchid collectors, the Indians, the whole history of Florida and land development. I guess it's like Bruegel, where in this corner a man and a woman are making love, and there's a cow over here giving birth to a calf, and there's somebody over here selling cheese, and it's this madness. To me that's sort of the nature of life. This was very much the sensation I had when I first moved to New York. I would sometimes think, "All day long in my apartment building there are a million lives going on!"

Did you ever read that John Cheever story "The Enormous Radio?" That story has same feeling of us all leading our lives. It's just that kind of fullness. And I think it's also very much an American sense of these disparate elements brought together, sometimes in a very crowded way, and sorting themselves out and bumping into each other and learning to coexist. I feel that so much. And obviously it's not just American. I think of the piece I wrote about the Khao San Road, where there's this explosion of stuff and kids and vendors and

sounds, all on this one street. I love that feeling, of life boiling over.

**WOE:** And you're able to be so sympathetic to such a range of people and things. You write about Thomas Kinkade, the painter of light and you don't make fun of him!

**ORLEAN:** Is that my aesthetic sensibility? No, not at all. Do I think that there's kind of a bit of a sleight of hand in this whole limited edition market? Absolutely. And yet I thought, this is so interesting because millions of people love this, so what's it about?

Sometimes it's just that I love to know about the things that I don't personally find appealing and yet have managed to appeal to others in a huge way. It's funny, some people have said to me about Kinkade, "Boy, you really gave it to him." And I said, "No I didn't!"

A lot of what people responded to were his own qualities. And the fact is I respect him in the sense that he's an incredibly smart guy, he's very shrewd, and he's figured something out. I guess I don't find it hard to suspend my own personal choices about what I do or read or hang on my wall. In that way I'm a real populist. I like to know what's behind the things that people care about.

I've been asked, "How is it that you can feel empathetic?" I have a very simple answer, which is, "I do." I'm curious, I want to know what goes on in the world of Thomas Kinkade. I don't have to take a deep breath and think "Okay, don't laugh," because I'm really curious. I also find that when I'm working on a story, I'm very taken in by it—not that I lose my objectivity or ability to still remember what I like and what I don't like. But I think when you try to immerse yourself in a subject, it becomes what you're thinking about and what you're sorting out in your head. It just becomes what's on your mind, very consuming, in a good way.

**WOE:** Another thing you do so well in representing people is dialogue. So I'm surprised to learn you don't tape.

**ORLEAN:** I take notes fast. Part of the reason I don't tape is that it's so impractical. In certain cases I have, like with Thomas Kinkade I was told I had an hour. I was very aware that he scrutinized the interview carefully. So I taped it and he taped it. He was going to be very careful about being quoted properly. And knowing that I had such a limited amount of time, I thought, "I'm going to bring a tape recorder just to be careful." But normally I spend so much time with people that it would be impractical to tape. I would be taping days and days.

And so much of what I talk about has nothing to do with the story. So on some level taping is just impractical. But I also try to only take the notes that seem necessary as quotes. And I miss a certain amount, that's just a fact of life. There have been times where I've looked back and thought, "Why didn't I..." It's just that a conversation went on that I didn't ever think I'd be quoting. So I listened, I absorbed it, and I learned what the person was saying, but I didn't write it down. And then, obviously, I couldn't use it as a quote. So it's a little bit of a guessing game: I'll take notes when I think there's a quote that I might use as a quote. I'm not the world's fastest note taker, nor am I the best. I wish I were and I wish I were better. I haven't figured out an alternative that would work. I don't think taping would work.

**WOE:** I love how sometimes when things are getting fast in dialogue, you'll turn it into play form, speakers' names with colons. I first saw that in prose years ago, when I read John Dos Passos. I thought then, wow, what a thing, I'm reading a novel and suddenly I get to read a play. I don't recall seeing many other writers do this.

**ORLEAN:** There are times when it just seems natural to do it, Sometimes the convention of quotation—he said so and so, she said so and so—is so clunky. I just don't like it.

I try to be really picky about the quotes. If there's something I can say without a quote, I'd rather do it that way. So I'm only using the ones that are really good for their own purpose and not just to deliver information. If someone is simply giving a fact, that's not a good use of a quote. It's better to use them only when, as with description, they serve another purpose. They give you more of a sense of the person because of the nature of what they're saying or how they said it, rather than just a quote saying, "I'm thirty years old." Why not just say they're thirty years old?

A lot of this is about storytelling. If you had a group of people sitting at a dinner table, and you wanted to tell them a story, you'd be very careful. You're so aware that at any minute one of them is going to say, "I'm going to go get more pie." Instead, it's as if everything has to be purposeful to keep people's attention and to give them a richer and richer sense of what the story is that's being told. You would never at a dinner party tell a story by saying, "She said, 'I'm thirty years old and I live on Main St.'" You'd say, "She's about thirty, she lives on

Main St. and then she said to me, 'Damn.'" If you have a sense of the audience, you know that everything has to have its payoff.

**WOE:** You do have people saying really interesting fun things, even things that wouldn't usually get recorded, like in your article on the hair salon, where there are just wows of sentences. And I feel the real people behind the voices. This must come from spending lots of time.

**ORLEAN:** There is no way you can substitute the value of time spent. For one thing, the more time you spend, the more you know what you're talking about. For me that's always the tough thing: what's the story here? I love writing from a position of confidence, when I really know the subject so I could tell you almost off the top of my head, without looking at notes. That's maybe the best evidence to me that I've done enough reporting. I don't have to constantly look at notes to know what the story is.

So there's a lot of wasted time. When I did the story in Paris about the record store, I wasted tons of time! I was there for days. By the time I left I thought I really knew the scene, I really knew what the story was. So it was very comfortable for me to write it the way I would have told it if I were coming back from the trip and saying to friends, "Oh I had the best time. I spent a week at a record store and it was so funny. First this guy would come in and . . . ." Because when you really know something, you're telling it out of your heart. The notes are only for when you think "Okay, I really want a great quote from that cab driver from Congo." If you really know the story, your tone can become more natural. (That's of course a trick because if you work really hard, each sentence is very deliberate.) But the overall effect should be almost an intimate telling of a story, as if you were saying, "Here's a cool place I went that I'd like you to know about."

**WOE:** You do have that intimate story teller's voice. But you also have a lot of humor. There are laughs in almost every one of your pieces. Did humor come naturally to you or did you have to work on it?

**ORLEAN:** A lot of people imitate writers they admire. But the people you really admire have gotten to a point where their writing truly reflects their nature. I think of someone like John McPhee, where I think there's a somewhat melancholy tone to his work. And then when I met him—not that I know him well at all—I thought, "Oh! Well he's a slightly melancholy guy." It's very natural. Or Ian Frazier, whom I really admire—his pieces have a slightly whacked kind of quality. Then you meet him and you realize, well he's a little kooky. That's really who he is. I think humor comes from that same place. I don't write jokes, but I think that, at the risk of sounding like I'm complimenting myself, that humor just comes naturally to me. To me most things, even if they're poignant, have some element of humor.

**WOE:** You've even written pure humor pieces, which I love: "The Shiftless Little Loafers," and the dog giving you the manicure, and the being in love with Dick Cheney piece (which may not be quite as funny after the election as it was before). There are not many people who do pure humor.

**ORLEAN:** It's so hard, in a way, just because it's performance. It's wonderfully rewarding when it works, but it's unbelievably difficult and scary. And there's nothing like turning in a humor piece and thinking this is just a total disaster. The fact is there's a real craft to it. For me they're sort of a luxurious thing where you suddenly have a great idea and you feel like you can figure out how to write it. There's a little bit of magic.

**WOE:** There's nothing funnier than children. I think you'll soon be having a lot more humor in your daily life.

**ORLEAN:** It's funny, somebody said that to me and I thought, "Good." Actually last night I was washing, because we'd gotten a lot of little socks and t-shirts and things and they all needed to be washed before they could be used. And when I took them out of the washing machine I was just cracking up because they're so tiny. There were these little socks this big and I was laughing and laughing at the thought that there would be this person who would wear a sock this big. And these little t-shirts! I said to my husband, "Are these the wrong size? They're so little!" And he was cracking up because you just don't have any proportion. You just can't quite imagine a little seven-pound person. With each sock I'd pull out, I would just crack up. So yes, I'm looking forward to that part of it.

**WOE:** I can't help but wonder the direction your writing will take from having a baby around.

**ORLEAN:** I'm curious. A lot of people said to me, "Are you going to write about being a mother?" And I said I don't tend to write much about my own personal life. I mean I assume that my writing changes in some subtle

ways depending on what's going on in my life. But I haven't written a lot that's just strictly first person. So I don't anticipate that, but you never know.

**WOE:** You mentioned Ian Frazier and John McPhee and you've written about reading a Mark Singer piece that sort of opened up a kind of writing for you. What other writers have you learned from or been inspired by?

**ORLEAN:** Well, I have a pile of books on my desk and as I was struggling to get this story started, I went to to all of my inspirations and put their books on my desk and flipped through them.

**WOE:** Who are they?

**ORLEAN:** The people who I really learned a lot from are Joan Didion, Mark Singer, John McPhee, certainly, and Calvin Trillin.

**WOE:** I was guessing you were going to say Calvin Trillin, from your style of writing.

**ORLEAN:** An early book of his called *Killings* is sitting on my desk right now, where I've been sort of rubbing it to try and get started on this piece. I should add Tom Wolfe too. I guess everybody goes through their Tom Wolfe phase when they start writing. I don't feel like I write like him at all, but certainly I really was inspired to do this kind of work by reading his work. But I think that can be dangerous because everybody ends up imitating him a bunch in the beginning, which usually doesn't work.

**WOE:** There's something about your voice—a human, non-affected not obviously literary voice—that is in its own unique way suggestive of Tom Wolfe, with that our generation, contemporary feel.

**ORLEAN:** His journalism was so stylized that I think it became very seductive for a lot of people. I also really admire Joseph Mitchell and Lillian Ross. Then there are lots of people who I've read less extensively but I look to and think "Wow!" like Leibling and others of *The New Yorker* tradition. I also read tons of fiction and I think there's a lot to learn from that as well.

**WOE:** I know you said somewhere your favorite book was *The Sound and the Fury*. I don't see the Faulkner influence in your writing.

**ORLEAN:** We are pretty different creatures. But there's a certain authenticity to his voice. Maybe what's instructive about it is to try and find who you are and your natural way of telling a story. Reading such great writing, if you dream about being a writer, you learn. And also just the language and the vividness, though I don't see a direct line in the inheritance there.

**WOE:** Did any teachers help you in your writing when you were in school?

**ORLEAN:** I had two very good English teachers in high school who inspired me with their discipline about writing and writing well and reading good work. I knew I wanted to be a writer even then. They were both significant to me because they made me think, "Wow, this really is something I want to do." In college I was studying literature so the work was a little less about writing than about reading. I was actually taking poetry seminars so I was writing poetry. That was actually very useful to me.

**WOE:** How was studying writing poetry useful to you in becoming a nonfiction prose writer?

**ORLEAN:** Poetry teaches you about economy of language, efficiency of description, and about telegraphing ideas. Prose can be so flabby, but poetry is lean and mean—at least the poetry I read and loved and learned from. One word can do a lot of work in a poem. And for that matter, one word can do a lot of work in a piece of narrative non-fiction, if you have the right word. That's what it taught me to strive for.

**WOE:** What kind of a writer did you set out to be coming out of college?

**ORLEAN:** I started as a provisional kind of music critic. I was a rock music critic. When I first started writing someone said to me, "You should write about what you know," and the only thing that I knew a lot about coming out of college was rock music. It is really hard to write about—the descriptive language is so impoverished. There are only so many times you can describe the way a guitar sounds. Then you think, "Oh my God, this is horrible." I love music and I love being able to write about it now, but not as a critic. I'm not cut out to be a critic, I'm much more comfortable as a reporter.

Editors were really the teachers who had the biggest influence on me. My very first editor had a huge influence on me in terms of emphasizing the value of reporting, the value of thinking, the principles of doing non-fiction writing. I felt lucky that I started somewhere where writing was taken very seriously, where even feature stories were taken as serious things. You're trying to look at the world and figure it out: this is important. That was a great, rigorous way to begin, for which I'm very grateful. And I'm certainly grateful to my first editor at *The New Yorker*, Charles McGrath (Chip McGrath), who I worked with for about eight years. Working at a place like that and being around people who are doing such great work, you just feel like you have to raise yourself up. And also you're seeing and reading such great stuff. Having an editor who was both very tough and extremely encouraging helped me develop and find who I was as a writer.

**WOE:** At what stage in your writing process do editors get involved?

**ORLEAN:** I have a terrible self-consciousness about not liking to show things until I think they're done—which creates problems because it means I have two levels, for there's always someone in my life that I show things to in the rawest stage. Usually it's my husband, who is a really good reader, a good editor, and a good audience.

I can be vulnerable and show him things when they're in a very raw stage. But I like to give them to my editor when I feel they're really polished. And I've almost always had very good editors who often really helped me make the piece better. Only rarely have I said—as I almost did this week—"Look, this is only really a very first draft, but take a look and tell me if I'm way off."

I remember when I was working on the Felipe Lopez profile and I started with this lead that I really liked about white men in suits following Felipe Lopez everywhere he goes. I thought this was a little risky, so I better make sure if it was going to work, whether it could be seen as somehow offensive and was going to throw off the whole piece. So I showed it to Chip way before I was into the piece, and I said, "You have to read it and don't comment a lot on it. Just tell me if it's okay that I'm going in this direction."

Some people give really raw, early drafts to their editor. That's just not comfortable for me. I really want to turn it in when I think wow, I've really got it done. But then it is a little harder if they say, "Well, no, you don't, actually."

**WOE:** You've taught journalism, I know, at the University of Oregon, at least briefly. How did you go about it?

**ORLEAN:** Well, that was just like a three-day seminar. I've enjoyed doing those short courses. I'm doing teaching at Bread Loaf this summer, which is two weeks, so that's a nice chunk. For one thing, it's been a nice experience for me to hear myself say out loud the things I function on internally. It's interesting for me to do a little editing. I think I do so much intuitively that for me it's a good exercise in laying out more openly what I think it is that works and doesn't work. I almost took a teaching job that would have been more extensive this upcoming year. Then I panicked and thought I wouldn't have enough time if I'm going to write a lot, keep my pace at all up to what it's been,

**WOE:** Now one of the remarkable things about your being pregnant is your "Fertile Grounds" piece, where you went to Bhutan with a group of women who were hoping that the trip would, magically, help them become pregnant. I couldn't help but think after hearing that you were pregnant, how amazing life is! What do you make of that fact?

**ORLEAN:** It's very funny, as a matter of fact. Somebody else had asked me about it and I said, "Well, I was there a while ago, so I can't absolutely say that it was connected, but why not?"

I realized the other day, I should really tell Tovya (the woman who led the trip) because I think she would find it very interesting. And there was a moment where I thought, I wonder if we should use a Bhutanese middle name for the baby. Then I thought I'm not sure my husband would go for this, though it seems like a good idea. That piece is in the current book and I read it on a few of my stops in the current book tour.

It was very interesting because it was one of the few times where I would "break the fourth wall"—isn't that the term? It was quite funny. But there was a little bit of a delay between being in Bhutan and being pregnant.

**WOE:** I have a couple of final questions, both about books. When is *Red Sox and Bluefish*, your collection of *Boston Globe* columns about Boston, going to be reprinted? It's \$144 on Amazon!

**ORLEAN:** It's something actually that I'd like to do. I'd also like to get *Saturday Night* reprinted because I have



the rights now.

**WOE:** That's such a great book. I think about Saturday nights in so many different ways now. You're not an explainy writer, but meaning comes out anyway.

**ORLEAN:** That's really what I wanted. I've talked to my agent a little bit about possibly doing a reprint of that, with *Red Sox and Bluefish* also. *Red Sox and Bluefish* is such a little book and it's harder to get something so tiny reprinted. But on the other hand I have a heart attack when people say to me, "Well actually, I went and I spent \$200." I want to say, "Don't do it!" And also I want to say, "By the way, I don't get any of that money. I hope you realize that it has nothing to do with me." But it was never printed in a large quantity and that's why they can make such crazy prices.

**WOE:** I hope *Saturday Night* is reprinted because I think a lot of people would love it.

**ORLEAN:** There's really no reason it won't happen, especially because I just changed publishers. It may be a sort of ideal time to do it because they could put it out in the interim between the new book and when I get my next book done.

**WOE:** I've read at least three different accounts about what your next book is going to be: the gospel choir in Harlem, the lady and the tigers, and a third one, Rin Tin Tin.

**ORLEAN:** I'm really doing the book on Rin Tin Tin. The lady and the tigers fell through because she would not talk to me. As much as I was confident I could convince her to talk to me, she flat out refused. That was just that. There was no way. I had assured Random House I could talk her into it and she just wouldn't do it. It was really frustrating. It was one thing to do the piece without her talking to me. It didn't really matter that much. But to make a whole book would have been impossible. You can't really do a book about a person who won't talk to you unless they're dead.

The gospel choir was a little bit of a harder decision. It had more to do with that I spent a ton of time there and a lot of time working and getting to know people. And then there were legitimate issues of privacy and people really not wanting to be part of a book. And I felt ultimately that I really just had to respect that. This was their private life. I think they would have been game for a story in a magazine, but they didn't want a book. It was too personal.

**WOE:** But Rin Tin Tin is progressing?

**ORLEAN:** I've done a lot of work on it already. It's an amazing story, a fascinating story that spans practically a century. The original Rin Tin Tin was born in 1918, and Rin Tin Tin 10 is still here and out in the world. It's going to be an interesting different kind of story for me because there's so much historical stuff. I've really enjoyed that. I've had the best time going through these archives and trying to imagine this world I'm learning about.

John Boe teaches at UC Davis.