

The Most Beautiful Party in Town

I never before realized that the story of a botanical garden . . . could read as if it were the drama of a pulp crime novel.

Margaret “Meg” Lowman, *It’s a Jungle Up There*

As the party swirled around her, Meg Lowman had no idea how much peril she was about to face. She believed she had climbed to the pinnacle of success.

Actually, she was standing on a precipice.

The soiree Lowman was presiding over on this warm spring evening, the annual Orchid Ball, had a reputation as Sarasota’s biggest black-tie event. The local newspaper’s society columnist had dubbed it “the most beautiful party in Sarasota.” It was also Selby Gardens’ biggest fund-raiser. The staff worked on it for months, figuring out how to feed and entertain hundreds of wealthy and well-connected people, coaxing them to pull out their wallets.

Since it was an outdoor event, intended to showcase the gardens as well as put the attendees in a giving mood, the weather conditions had to be dry. Sometimes it had been cold enough to prompt the women to get their furs out of storage. Sometimes it had been so hot that no one wanted to dance or even move around. But always, for nineteen years, the ball had remained precipitation-free. It became something of a joke among the employees: “Marie Selby would *never* let it rain on the Orchid Ball!”

But on the ball’s twentieth anniversary in 2001, the ghost let them down. Just as the guests arrived, the skies opened up and rain fell in cold sheets.

The Selby staff, many of them clad in kimonos in keeping with the theme of “Under an Asian Moon,” splashed through the mud to set up tents over the tables.

In 2002, though, the ghost of Marie Selby was apparently back on the job. The *Sarasota Herald-Tribune’s* society columnist later declared that the 2002 Orchid Ball was “a perfect no-rain ‘Rendezvous in Rio’ right here in our own exotic backyard. . . . A capacity crowd filled a tent flushed with every color in the spectrum that produced a fiesta atmosphere throughout . . . with ribbons, banners, flags, and Carmen Miranda–type mannequins.”

More than four hundred people showed up for the shindig, handing their keys to the valet out front, walking through the stately mansion that served as the reception area, then emerging from the back door to stroll along the torch-lit path past the koi ponds to the main party area. Defying the humidity, women in sparkling gowns twirled on the checkerboard dance floor. Paunchy men in tuxedos knocked back cocktails under the giant banyan tree. Real estate moguls and mortgage-rate gamblers rubbed shoulders with theater angels and gallery geeks. Everyone munched on conch fritters, nut-encrusted sea bass, and Brazilian-style beef. It was the quintessential society soiree in a town rich enough and artsy enough to support its own opera company and annual film festival, a town so diverse that it provided a muse for both cynical noir grandmaster John D. MacDonald and silly comedic genius Pee-Wee Herman.

The one anomaly in this scene was Lowman herself. She wasn’t one of the tanned-and-toned trophy wives. She wasn’t one of the elderly widows who bankrolled causes around town. Nor was she a go-getter Chamber of Commerce type with power pearls and a gym membership. Although orchids galore decorated the tables, the most exotic flower of the night had to be Lowman.

At forty-eight years old, she wore her straight blond hair in an easy-care style that framed her oval face. She had a prominent chin, a flat nose, and a lean and muscular frame. Although she wore an elegant gown, she would have been more comfortable in filthy khakis and muddy boots. Her eyes were the giveaway. They were bright blue, filled with curiosity and an impish sense of humor. Behind them, though, lay a steely determination to overcome whatever challenge she faced.

Lowman was actually the biggest celebrity at the party. She was one of the pioneers in her field, the study of life in the world’s jungle canopies—a field that, until she came along, had been dominated by men. She had written a memoir called *Life in the Treetops: Adventures of a Woman in Field Biology*, about trying to juggle her duties as a mom while pursuing her research.



At Selby Gardens, Meg Lowman emphasized forest canopy research and conservation—to the consternation of orchid enthusiasts. Photo courtesy of the *St. Petersburg Times*.

When Yale University Press published it in 1999, the book earned a front-page rave in the *New York Times*' Sunday book section. The reviewer called it "a funny, unassuming, and deeply idiosyncratic chronicle of her trials and triumphs."

As she made plain in her book, Lowman was a resourceful woman who was as comfortable living outside civilization as she was living in it. As a child in upstate New York, she packed her bedroom with birds' nests, bugs, rocks, and shells she had found. In the fifth grade, her wildflower collection earned her second place in a state science fair, and her course was set. She went on to earn a master's degree in Scotland, then traveled alone to Australia in the 1970s to study for her Ph.D. There she launched her first treetop studies in its tropical forests. To prepare for scaling the trees, she solicited advice from cave explorers on the proper rigging for her climbs. She sewed her first harness out of seatbelt webbing.

Her biggest scientific challenge, she wrote in her book, was the 200-foot-tall gympie-gympie, also known as the "giant stinging tree." Its leaves and twigs are covered with fine, hollow hairs that contain a powerful poison. Every time she climbed one to study its insects, no matter what precautions she took, she would always come away with her hands covered in red inflammations. Over time, Lowman wrote, she got used to the fiery stings. However, when she showed up one day to find the ground around the trees covered in highly venomous Australian brown snakes, she tiptoed away and picked a new study area that appeared to be snakeless.

She was willing to make sacrifices for her science, even sacrifices of an intensely personal nature. At one point her research led her to spend two weeks in a Cameroon jungle living with three dozen male researchers and a score of local pygmy tribesmen. The researchers “slept in hammocks, butt to butt, 40 people in a row,” she told a reporter later. When she went to take a shower, that’s when all the men decided it was time to climb on the roof and work on the pipes. She stuck it out anyway.

In Australia she married a sheep rancher and had two children, whom she toted along on her forest expeditions, scrambling down to the ground to nurse them and then climbing back into the treetops again. But she repeatedly failed in her efforts to reconcile her scientific pursuits with the Aussie ideal of a subservient housewife. Her father-in-law, in particular, couldn’t understand why she didn’t make it her top priority to have a hot meal waiting on the table when her man walked in the door. Ultimately the couple divorced.

In short, Lowman had plenty of experience in dealing with any hazard, from pygmies and piranhas to male chauvinist pigs. She was probably the only person at the Orchid Ball who had ever eaten crickets as hors d’oeuvres, not to mention the only mother there whose sons had adopted a pet tarantula. Very little could faze her—she thought.

In 1992, after she had spent a stint teaching at Williams College, Selby Gardens hired her as conservation director. Lowman didn’t know anyone in Florida, and the job description gave little detail as to her duties. She took the job because she could use the position to further her rain forest research. She could also use it as a convenient place to roost while converting her personal journals into her first book. As an added benefit, Sarasota offered a good school system for her two boys.

Lowman’s two worlds collided seven years later. She had just returned from grubbing around in the tropical mud of Queensland for two weeks, studying seedlings as part of a long-term project on rain forest biodiversity. Thanks to the glowing reviews of *Life in the Treetops*, she flew straight from Australia to Los Angeles to meet with Hollywood agents who were interested in turning her life story into a movie.

Lowman was soaking all the jungle crud off in a bubble bath at the Beverly Hills Wilshire Hotel when the phone rang. The call came from Sarasota. Selby’s trustee board wanted to promote her to executive director.

Lowman hesitated. She hadn’t planned to stay at Selby longer than five years, and she was already going on seven. But she had met a new love, a gray-bearded divorce attorney from St. Petersburg named Michael Brown, who was six years her senior.

Brown first encountered Lowman on a blind date. It wasn't your usual dinner-and-a-movie outing. She took him to Selby Gardens, and they climbed a tree. Brown became so entranced by her that he accompanied her on a trip to the Peruvian rain forest. They had a magical time, listening to jaguars howling at 2:00 a.m. He got along well with her sons, too. So he moved his practice to Sarasota, and they wed.

Still, Lowman had figured on leaving Selby and returning to teaching while continuing her research. Taking this promotion would mean cutting back on her scientific studies and taking on more administrative duties. Worse, she had no experience running a botanical garden. In fact, she had never run anything bigger than a sheep ranch. It sounded like a recipe for disaster.

She explained to the search committee that her degree was in botany, not business. They said they were fine with that. They promised to hire a chief operating officer to handle Selby's day-to-day operations. What they didn't mention was that they had run advertisements for an executive director in the *Wall Street Journal* and horticultural publications and were discouraged by the quality of applicants. Then someone on the board came up with the idea of promoting their resident celebrity scientist. What the board members told her they wanted was "a CEO with scientific credibility who could articulate a botanical mission to donors," Lowman wrote later.

Wooing the donors turned out to be a major part of the job—and a major downfall of her predecessor, she was told by the board members. He was a scientist, too. Like Lowman, he had never run a botanical garden before taking over Selby.

In his five years at Selby, Lowman's predecessor "had experienced personality conflicts with donors, his budget had been in the red, [and] deferred maintenance was at a critical stage," Lowman was told by the board. How critical? The roof of the administration building leaked badly, and a family of raccoons had moved into the third floor.

So when he left, the board decided their new leader was someone already on the fifty-member staff, someone who had made a splash in the book-publishing world and might even become a darling of Hollywood. Stories about and reviews of *Life in the Treetops* mentioned Selby, showing she could really put the place on the map. She had already been featured in a children's book and profiled in a *National Geographic* television special. The woman was a guaranteed publicity generator. Surely, they thought, that would lead to more grants and donations.

Lowman concluded that what the board really had in mind was a CEO

who could serve as “a cheerleader for plants.” So she took the job—and, as with the jungle flora and fauna she studied, Lowman figured out how to adapt to this new world she now inhabited.

She gave up swinging in the trees to give speeches to the Rotary Club. She hired Selby’s first marketing director to think of ways to promote the place. She hired a development director to line up more donations and grants. She dedicated herself to something she called “friend-raising”—making personal connections with people who were in a position to hand over big sums of cash to Selby.

She took a management course at Duke University and signed up for a program created by the Florida Chamber of Commerce called Leadership Florida, where up-and-coming business executives and civic activists met state officials and industry leaders and studied the Big Issues. Most of the other classmates in Leadership Florida were pro-business Republicans whose politics didn’t jibe with her more liberal leanings. She struck up a friendship with the other big liberal in the class, a frizzy-haired lawyer from Tallahassee named Robert Rivas. He had a sardonic sense of humor and sat on the board of the state chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. The contacts she made in Leadership Florida would turn out to be important ones for her future—though not in the way she expected.

By 2002, the veteran tree climber had become skilled as a social climber. Her face became the face of Selby, the two synonymous in the public mind. With her in charge, each Orchid Ball became like a gift to the community’s leaders, a magical evening to show them how special Selby was—if they kept the dollars flowing.

Now, as she greeted all the guests at the rain-free Orchid Ball, Lowman could reflect on three years of what seemed to her to be spectacular success.

Thanks to increased donations and grants, the gardens’ budget was back in the black. It would finish its fiscal year showing revenue of more than \$3.4 million and a profit of \$400,000. Given the economic turmoil that had plagued the nation following the 9/11 terrorist attacks the previous fall, this seemed to her like a major victory. She had boosted the paying membership numbers by nearly 50 percent in the past three years. The number of private events such as weddings that paid to use the gardens’ facilities had increased to the point that it was yielding \$20,000 more in profit than it had in 1999. Clearly this garden was growing.

Lowman wasn’t just focused on Selby’s future, either. She had taken steps to renew a connection to Selby’s historic past by inviting Carlyle “Carl” Luer to rejoin the board of trustees. Luer, a retired doctor in his eighties, had been

one of Selby's original board members when it first opened but he had quit during a dispute twenty years before. At Lowman's request, he readily agreed to return to the garden he loved so much.

There were other marks of success that gave her a sense of a job well done. Lowman was in heavy demand as a speaker, not just around Sarasota but throughout the country. Wherever she went, she talked about that unknown world in the treetops and how important canopy science was to saving the rain forest—and burnished Selby's gleaming reputation as a scientific institution, of course.

During the Orchid Ball, the newspaper's society columnist asked Lowman for a quote about the party. Lowman replied that when she first arrived in Sarasota in 1992, she regarded science as the sole answer to the world's ecological problems.

"But I now realize that through events such as this, and the fantastic volunteers here at Selby, there are other ways to spread our conservation message," Lowman said over the clatter of glasses and silverware.

Still, there were intimations of the trouble that was brewing, hints that flickered around the edges of this perfect party like the shadows cast by the tiki torches.



Lowman felt like she was pouring her heart and soul into the job, all day, every day. Before, when Lowman spent days on end in the jungle, she could take her kids with her. Now she spent so much time working—both in the office and out promoting Selby—that she started missing family events. She missed a parent-teacher conference here, a sailing regatta there—precious moments of family time lost to the grind of the job.

Not everything was rosy at work, either. Some Selby staffers weren't thrilled with the changes she had made. They complained that she frequently told employees what they wanted to hear and then went her own way. They grumbled about how her pursuit of dollars had boosted the number of visitors lined up for admission each day, which would probably lead to idiot tourists trampling some of the gardens' plants. They regarded her as disorganized and flighty, changing direction frequently or failing to give them any in the first place. They were convinced that the only cause she was truly interested in promoting was Meg Lowman, not Selby Gardens. Inevitably, gossip spread that Lowman's efforts to woo some male donors led to wooing of a more physical kind.

The people most skeptical about Lowman's changes were her fellow