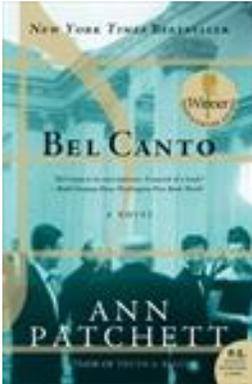


# Bel Canto

By Ann Patchett



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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*"How much does a house know?"*

In the vice president's mansion in an unnamed South American country, a lavish party is taking place to celebrate the birthday of a visiting Japanese businessman. An American opera singer is entertaining the guests, dignitaries and high-ranking officials from around the world, when suddenly the room is plunged into darkness. Terrorists invade the mansion and set in motion a series of events that irrevocably alters the life of every person involved. For Mr. Hosokawa, the Japanese businessman in whose honor the party is thrown, the time in captivity is rife with paradox. He never had any intention of doing business with the host country and so feels guilty for having accepted the invitation under false pretenses—solely to meet Roxane Coss. His feelings of guilt however give way to an undeniable happiness. He is held against his will, and yet under no other circumstances would he have become acquainted with the renowned opera singer who has long captivated him.

The only woman not released by the terrorists, Roxane Coss is the central figure in the story. As much as Gen, Mr. Hosokawa's translator and a gifted linguist, makes it possible to overcome the language barriers, it is Roxane's exquisite voice that bridges the chasm between the hostages and the terrorists.

Every person in the house, regardless of their knowledge and understanding of opera, recognizes the sheer splendor of Roxane's singing and understands that they, in the midst of this terrifying situation, are witness to an awe-inspiring talent. Her singing and the practice routine she devises allow her to maintain a hold on her previous life -- and, by extension, her fellow hostages are able to do so as well. Her singing is their only link to the world they have left behind, and because of this the power that Roxanne holds is greater than that of the gun-wielding terrorists.

Just as the hostages have no contact with the outside world, the narrative keeps the reader focused on the events taking place inside the mansion. As time passes, the boundaries between hostage and terrorist begin to blur. Friendships are formed; passions flare, and mutual interests and talents are discovered. As the days become weeks and the weeks flow into months, an uneasy rhythm marks the time spent in captivity as the world is reduced to the four walls of the Vice President's mansion.

Much the same as an opera takes the listener through various stages of emotions; *Bel Canto* delivers the same impact for the reader. The beauty of the music is always present -- "soon enough the days were divided into three states: the anticipation of her signing, the pleasure of her signing, and the reflection of her singing" -- in stark contrast to the harsh reality of the situation. Mesmerizing with its lyrical prose, *Bel Canto* builds to an unexpected and poignant crescendo that resonates with emotion.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe Roxane Coss. What is it about her that makes such an impression on the other hostages and the terrorists? Is it merely that she is famous? How does her singing and the music relate to the story?
2. Even though he is given the opportunity to leave the mansion, Father Arguedas elects to stay with the hostages. Why does he decide to stay when he risks the possibility of being killed? As the narrative states, why did he feel, "in the midst of all this fear and confusion, in the mortal danger of so many lives, the wild giddiness of good luck?" (pg. 74). Isn't this an odd reaction to have given the situation? What role does religion play in the story?
3. There are numerous instances in the story where Mr. Hosokawa blames himself for the hostages' situation. He says to Roxane, "But I was the one who set this whole thing in motion." Roxane replies with the following: "Or did I?" she said. "I thought about declining.... Don't get me wrong. I am very capable of blame. This is an event ripe for blame if I ever saw one. I just don't blame you." Is either one to blame for the situation? If not, who do you think is ultimately responsible?
4. Roxane and Mr. Hosokawa speak different languages and require Gen to translate their conversations. Do you think it's possible to fall in love with someone to whom you cannot speak directly?
5. "Roxane Coss and Mr. Hosokawa, however improbable to those around them, were members of the same tribe, the tribe of the hostages.... But Gen and Carmen were another matter" (pg. 294). Compare the love affairs of Gen and Carmen and Roxane and Mr. Hosokawa. What are the elements that define each relationship?
6. We find out in the Epilogue that Roxane and Gen have been married. How would you describe their relationship throughout the story? Thibault believes that "Gen and Roxane had married for love, the love of each other and the love of all the people they remembered" (pg. 318). What do you think of the novel's ending? Did it surprise you? Do you agree with Thibault's assessment of Gen and Roxane's motivations for marrying?
7. The garua, the fog and mist, lifts after the hostages are in captivity for a number of weeks. "One would have thought that with so much rain and so little light the forward march of growth would have been suspended, when in fact everything had thrived" (pg. 197). How does this observation about the weather mirror what is happening inside the Vice President's mansion?
8. At one point Carmen says to Gen, "Ask yourself, would it be so awful if we all stayed here in this beautiful house?" (pg. 206). And towards the end of the story it is stated: "Gen knew that everything was getting better and not just for him. People were happier." Messner then says to him, "You were the brightest one here once, and now you're as crazy as the rest of them" (pg. 302). What do you think of these statements? Do you really believe they would rather stay captive in this house than return to the "real" world?
9. When the hostages are finally rescued, Mr. Hosokawa steps in front of Carmen to save her from a bullet. Do you think Mr. Hosokawa wanted to die? Once they all return to their lives, it would be nearly impossible for him to be with Roxane. Do you think he would rather have died than live life without her?

10. The story is told by a narrator who is looking back and recounting the events that took place. What do you think of this technique? Did it enhance the story, or would you have preferred the use of a straight narrative?

## CONVERSATION: ANN PATCHETT

*taken from PBS: NewsHour*



GWEN IFILL: The book is “Bel Canto,” this year’s Penn Faulkner winner for fiction. The author, Ann Patchett, has set her novel in an unnamed South American country where guests at a lavish party have been taken hostage at the Vice President’s mansion. The fiction closely echoes a real event.

In 1996, terrorists took 400 people hostage at the Japanese ambassador’s residence in Lima, Peru. Both stand-offs lasted for months, but in Patchett’s retelling, the clash of language, culture, and fear behind the mansion’s walls also becomes a story about the power of music and the power of redemption.

Ann Patchett, welcome and congratulations.

ANN PATCHETT: Thank you very much.

GWEN IFILL: What was it that happened in 1996, at this hostage taking in Peru, that suggested this novel to you?

ANN PATCHETT: Well, I definitely have a theme running through all my novels, which is people are thrown together by circumstance and somehow form a family, a society. They group themselves together. So as I’m watching this on the news, it was as if I was watching one of my own novels unfold. I was immediately attracted to the story.

GWEN IFILL: One of the critics— and you got a lot of very good criticism about this book— wrote, and it struck me, he described this as a novel about the power of music, also about the power of love which is not quite the same thing although related. What is the relationship between these two things as you tell it in this novel?

ANN PATCHETT: I think it’s all about beauty. It’s all about the call to some higher form of life and existence. All of these people... half the people, the terrorists are very poor, very young, coming from a life of terrible struggle. The other half, the hostages, are very wealthy, very driven, strong, powerful businessmen for the most part. But they are two groups of people that have never had a moment to slow down and reflect. During this period that they’re held hostage for four months, they’re taken outside of society totally, and they’re left to sit and think and reflect. And the thing that they most reflect on is on is opera music.

GWEN IFILL: That is interesting to me. What about opera? What is it that placed itself in the setting? And how were you drawn to it?

ANN PATCHETT: When I was watching all of this unfold on the news— and the book is about 98% fiction— I thought this is so operatic what’s happening in Lima. The only thing that’s missing from this story is an opera star hung up with the rest of these people, which is the nice thing about being a novelist instead of a journalist. When you see a story that is crying out for an opera singer, you just stick an opera singer into the story.

GWEN IFILL: Were you an opera fan?

ANN PATCHETT: No, I didn't know anything at all about music, but I knew enough to know something was operatic when I saw it. So I buckled down and started doing my research and became an opera fanatic during the course of writing this book, and I'm still an opera fanatic.

GWEN IFILL: Really?

ANN PATCHETT: The people who grew up with it I think are more controlled and tasteful. The people who come to it in their middle 30s, it's like being a religious convert: You become frantic on the subject. I now corner people at cocktail parties and talk to people about opera.

GWEN IFILL: Just like the people in your novel.

ANN PATCHETT: Exactly.

GWEN IFILL: You talk about the protagonists, both sides end up being protagonists. Even the terrorists end up being protagonists. Could you read a passage for us about one of them — Carmen, who becomes one of the central kind of sympathetic figures in the book.

ANN PATCHETT: Sure. Of course in my book there is a terrorist named Carmen.

"There was one other person there who understood the music, but she was not a guest. Standing in the hallway, looking around the corner to the living room was Carmen, and Carmen, though she did not have the words for it, understood everything perfectly. This was the happiest time of her life and it was all because of the music. When she was a child dreaming on her palette at night, she never dreamed of pleasures like these. None of her family left behind on the mountains could have understood that there was a house made of bricks and sealed glass windows that was never too hot or too cold. She could not have believed that somewhere in the world there was a vast expanse of carpet embroidered to look like a meadow of flowers or that ceilings came tipped in gold or that there could be pale marble women who stood on either side of a fireplace and balanced the mantelpiece on their heads. And that would have been enough. The music and the paintings and the garden, which she patrolled with her rifle, but in addition, there was food that came every day, so much food that there was always some wasted no matter how hard they tried to eat it all. There were deep white bathtubs and an endless supply of hot water pouring out of curved silver spigots. There were stacks of soft white towels and pillows and blankets trimmed in satin and so much space inside that you could wander off and no one would know where you had gone. Yes, the generals wanted something better for the people but weren't they the people? Would it be the worst thing in the world if nothing happened at all? If they all stayed together in this generous house? Carmen prayed hard. She prayed while standing near the priest, in hopes that it would give her request extra credibility. And what she prayed for was nothing. She prayed that God would look on them and see the beauty of their existence and leave them alone."

GWEN IFILL: That is how the terrorists were seduced into their setting and ended up staying there for months and months. But also, the hostages were also seduced in a way into the comfort of this creation that you've written for them, this place, this comfortable place where they didn't have to worry about their lives. How did you avoid kind of the clichés of just writing about Stockholm Syndrome?

ANN PATCHETT: I read a lot about Stockholm Syndrome. Patty Hearst was a huge childhood fascination of mine. I've always followed her story. I think that the differences, with the Stockholm Syndrome people are somehow fooled into thinking that they identify with their captors. In this book, they actually do. I don't think that it is a syndrome. I think that they have so much compassion for these people, who are mostly children who take them hostage, and they spend so much time together, they play chess together, they play soccer together. They enjoy the music together. They really do find their common humanity.

GWEN IFILL: Even though this book begins— and I don't think I'm giving anything away— it begins and ends with kind of a burst of violence, none of your heroes seem particularly heroic and none of your villains seem particularly mean.

ANN PATCHETT: One of my great shortcomings as a novelist is that I have no talent for villains whatsoever. Any time I have someone who I think, "a-ha, this is my villain," once I've written about them for three pages I fall in love with them. I think that whenever you get close enough to see who someone really is, you can find out the soft spots, the tender spots in their character. So I do... I fall for them all.

GWEN IFILL: One of your main characters is the translator, the one person in the room who can speak these tower of Babel of languages which have been assembled for this big party.

ANN PATCHETT: Gen, yes.

GWEN IFILL: I wonder if this isn't the story about the power of language as well as of music and of love.

ANN PATCHETT: Well, it's about the power of language originally; how much everyone wants to be able to communicate through their own language and the traditional means they've always communicated before. But I think that it's also about going beyond language. And they come to realize finally they can communicate through their love of music, they can communicate through romantic love. They find ways to rise above language. So Gen is incredibly necessary at the beginning of the book, but in a way he falls off towards the end.

GWEN IFILL: Was there any peril for you in trying to fictionalize, even though you say it was 98 percent fiction in the end, fictionalize something that had its roots in a real terrorist incident?

ANN PATCHETT: It didn't seem a problem to me. And what was interesting was when I sent this book around to different editors— of course it didn't come with a piece of paper from me saying, this is based on the takeover of the Japanese embassy— no one knew. Not one person recognized the real events of the story. I think that since the book has been out and it is in the publicity materials so it turns up in the reviews of the book, everyone knows.

But it's the reason that I call the country "The Host Country" instead of Peru, because I thought by the time this book comes out no one is going to remember this. Tragedy, in my experience, is always replaced by tragedy. We hold one crisis close to our heart until the next crisis comes along and it obliterates the one before. So we tend not to remember things that happened six years ago in South America.

GWEN IFILL: Were you surprised to win this award?

ANN PATCHETT: I was so beyond being surprised. I was... just to be nominated was incredible. And I knew about the nomination probably a month before I found out that I had won. And then I won. It's so wonderful and I'm so inarticulate in the face of it. I keep thinking if my career goes bust next week and I never do anything, I'll always have this and I'll always be so proud of it.

GWEN IFILL: It hardly seems likely, Ann Patchett. Thank you very much for joining us.

ANN PATCHETT: Thank you.