Bel Canto

Winner of the Orange Prize
National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist

"Bel Canto is its own universe. A marvel of a book."
—Robb Forman Dew, Washington Post Book World

ANN PATCHETT

Author of The Magician's Assistant
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Bel Canto
A Novel
by Ann Patchett
Publisher: Perennial

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.

Discussion Questions

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?
Ann Patchett
1963-

Nationality: American
Place of Birth: Los Angeles, CA

Award(s):
Award for Fiction, Trans-Atlantic Henfield Foundation, 1984; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, Iowa Journal of Literary Studies, 1986, for "For Rita, Who Is Never Alice"; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, Columbia, 1987, for "The Magician's Assistant's Dream"; residential fellow of Yaddo and Millay Colony for the Arts, both 1989; James A. Michener/Copernicus Award, University of Iowa, 1989, for work on Patron Saint of Liars; residential fellow, Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, RI, 1990-91; Mary Ingraham Bunting fellowship, 1993; Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best work of fiction, 1994, for Taft; Tennessee Writers Award of the Year, Nashville Banner, and Guggenheim fellowship, both 1994, both for The Magician's Assistant; one of Salon.com's favorite books of the year, and nominee for National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction category, both 2001, and finalist for P.E.N./Faulkner Award, 2002, all for Bel Canto; Orange Prize for fiction, 2002, for Bel Canto.


WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:
NOVELS

The Patron Saint of Liars, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1992.

Taft, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1994.


OTHER


Media Adaptations: The story "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica" was adapted as a play; The Patron Saint of Liars was filmed for television by CBS, 1997.

"Sidelights"

Author of the novels Taft and Bel Canto, Ann Patchett is one of the most interesting and unconventional writers of her generation. Patchett's power as a writer seems to derive from her unusual ability to make believable the voices of a sweeping array of characters, running the gamut from a Catholic nun to a black blues drummer to a gay magician.

In 1984, on her twenty-first birthday, Patchett published her first story, "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica," a narrative set in the 1940s about a black family with eight children. Patchett, a white woman from Nashville, Tennessee, had actually written it two years earlier when she was a sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College. "Because I was nineteen, I had the courage and confidence to approach such subject matter with authority," she told Elizabeth Bernstein in an interview for Publishers Weekly. Patchett described the origins of her diverse characters in moments of fantasy. "I never thought it was strange to pick these topics," she recounted to Bernstein. "I just really believe that using your imagination is the one time in your life you can really go anywhere."

The Patron Saint of Liars, Patchett's first novel, shows just such imagination. It tells the story of a young pregnant woman who flees from a dull marriage, driving across the country to find a new, different, and unexpected sense of family at St. Elizabeth's, a Roman Catholic home for unwed mothers in Kentucky. Critics point out that the novel may strain belief at times, in particular because it provides no contextual sense of hotly debated social issues surrounding marriage and reproduction in the Catholic Church. However, as Alice McDermott, reviewing the novel in the New York Times Book Review, pointed out, Patchett's project is to write "a made up story of an enchanted place." Comparing The Patron Saint of Liars to a fairy tale, McDermott explained that "the world of St. Elizabeth's, and of the novel itself, . . . retains some sense of the miraculous, of a genuine, if unanticipated, power to heal."

Her next novel, Taft, also received critical praise, though reviewers disagreed as to whether or not this work exceeded Patchett's achievement in The Patron Saint of Liars.
Taft's action centers around a Memphis blues bar called Muddy's. The black, middle-aged bartender, Nickel, who narrates the story, becomes imaginatively and practically entangled in the life of a white working-class teenager, Fay Taft, and that of her family. Focusing on their relationship, Patchett weaves a multi-layered narrative about unconventional kinds of love and improvisational familial ties.

In her critically acclaimed third novel, The Magician's Assistant, Patchett continues to explore the themes of unorthodox love, abandonment and transcendence and the surprising places people go to feel at home. The protagonist and title character, Sabine, has long been in love with the gay magician she assists. As the narrative opens, Parsifal, the magician, who is afflicted with AIDS, dies suddenly from a stroke. Sabine and Parsifal had entered into an unusual marriage, and upon his death she is embraced by his family, a family she had not known existed. Sabine meets her estranged in-laws, and together they try to put together the pieces of Parsifal's past. As Sabine shares her grief, she finds a hint of redemption and a way to transform herself. Veronica Chambers, reviewing The Magician's Assistant for Newsweek, called it "a '90s love story wrought with all the grace and classic charm of a 19th-century novel."

By the time her fourth novel was released, Patchett had earned a reputation for quality. That reputation was sealed with the publication of Bel Canto. Loosely based on a real-life 1996 hostage crisis in Lima, Peru, Bel Canto--an opera term that means "fine singing"--takes place in an unnamed South American country, where the vice-presidential palace is the scene for a birthday reception honoring a prominent businessman, the chairman of a huge Japanese electronics concern. "The poor host country was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense, hoping that Hosokawa might help with training, trade, a factory--something that will make it look like the nation is moving away from drug trafficking," according to Seattle Times critic Valerie Ryan.

One of the star guests at this party is Roxane Cross, a revered American opera soprano who has agreed to perform for her biggest fan, Hosokawa. As the lights dim following her aria, the peace is shattered by the invasion of terrorists. The electronics tycoon, the diva, the vice president and sixty dignitaries are taken hostage. "In a marvelously loopy touch," noted David Kipen in San Francisco Chronicle, "the president has begged off to watch his favorite telenovela." Negotiations reach a stalemate, but inside the mansion hostages and guerillas are oblivious to the action. Instead, as the siege stretches to four-and-a-half months, hostages and terrorist form bonds of friendship and even love inside the mansion; "pretty soon, nobody wants to kill anybody," in Kipen's words. But some characters will be killed.

Thematically, Bel Canto is "similar to my other works in that people are thrown together by circumstance," Patchett told David Podgurski in a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel interview. "But I wanted to write a truly omniscient third-person narrative, a 'Russian' novel. . . . I wanted all of the drama as I saw it unfold on television--it seemed so operatic--and to have all that and yet keep it within a narrative that wasn't a potboiler."
She needn't have worried. Bel Canto received warm notices from many reviewers, among them Salon.com's Laura Miller. "With this scenario, you'd expect [Bel Canto] to be populated by the kind of romantic figures found in books and movies like Chocolat, cartoonish outlines that invite the reader to stop inside and fancy herself the embodiment of, say, Joyous Sensuality or the Human Spirit. Instead, the characters Patchett has created are just that, characters; they're not empty enough to 'identify' with." Guardian contributor Alex Clark applauded Patchett's range. "With bravura confidence and inventiveness she varies her pace to encompass both lightning flashes of brutality and terror and long stretches of incarcerated ennui," he stated. "The novel's sensibilities extend from the sly wit of observational humor to subtle, mournful insights into the nature of yearning and desire."

What was it about the real-life crisis that inspired Patchett's interest in a fictional retelling? In an essay for First Person Book Page, she recalled her absorption in the unfolding events of 1996: "Very few disasters happen in slow motion: plane crashes, school shootings, earthquake--by the time we hear about them, they're usually over. But the story in Lima stretched on, one month, two, three. . . ." During that, she added, "I couldn't stop thinking about these people. There is no such thing as a good kidnapping, but I heard the hostages played chess with their captors. I heard they played soccer. There were rumors of large pizza orders." To Patchett, the story had "all elements I was interested in: the construction of family, the displacement from home, a life that was at once dangerous and completely benign."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS


PERIODICALS

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 26, 2001, Greg Changnon, review of Bel Canto.

Booklist, June 12, 2001, Gilbert Taylor, review of Bel Canto, p. 1848.


Newsday, October 18, 1997.

Newsweek, October 13, 1997, p. 78.


OTHER


Guardian Unlimited, http://books.guardian.co.uk/ (July 14, 2001), Alex Clark, "Danger Arias."

Salon.com, http://www.salon.com/ (June 22, 2001), Laura Miller, "Bel Canto by Ann Patchett."*  

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2003.  
Gale Database: Contemporary Authors