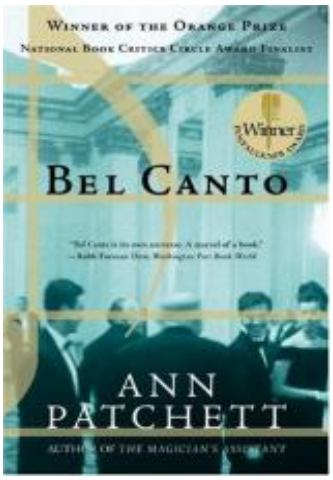
Bel Canto

by Ann Patchett



About the 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 singing, the pleasure of her singing, 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 Guide

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?

Author Bio

Ann Patchett is the author of novels, works of nonfiction and children's books. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the PEN/Faulkner, the Women's Prize in the UK, and the Book Sense Book of the Year. Her novel, THE DUTCH HOUSE, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her work has been translated into more than 30 languages, and *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. President Biden awarded her the National Humanities Medal in recognition of her contributions to American culture. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is the owner of Parnassus Books.

Critical Praise

" Bel Canto has all the qualities one has come to expect from a classic Ann Patchett novel: grace, beauty, elegance, and magic. "

?**Madison Smartt Bell**

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