



2002 WINNER

BEL CANTO BY ANN PATCHETT

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

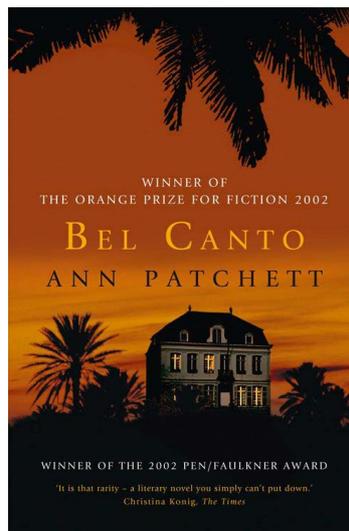
Ann Patchett is the author of seven novels, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, *Taft*, *The Magician's Assistant*, *Bel Canto*, *Run*, *State of Wonder* and *Commonwealth*.

She was the editor of *Best American Short Stories, 2006*, and has written three books of non-fiction – *Truth & Beauty*, about her friendship with the writer Lucy Grealy, *What Now?* an expansion of her graduation address at Sarah Lawrence College, and *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, a collection of essays examining the theme of commitment. In 2019, she published her first children's book, *Lambslide*, illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser. In November, 2011, she opened Parnassus Books in Nashville, Tennessee. She lives in Nashville with her husband, Karl VanDevender, and their dog, Sparky.

PLOT SUMMARY

In an unnamed South American country, a world-renowned soprano sings at a birthday party in honour of a visiting head of a Japanese electronics company. Alas, in the opening sequence, a ragtag band of 18 terrorists enters the vice-presidential mansion through the air conditioning ducts. Their quarry is the president, who has unfortunately stayed home to watch his favourite soap opera. Not finding their target, the terrorists take the party hostage and issue demands to the government.

Swiss Red Cross negotiator Joachim Messner arrives to wrangle over terms and demands, but, despite the expectations of the hostages who think they will soon be killed, the women are all freed except for Roxane Coss, but the siege continues. Days stretch into weeks, and weeks into months. Joined by no common language except music, the hostages and their captors forge unexpected bonds. Time stands still, and the hostages and terrorists, who have become close, realise that the only likely outcome is that the terrorists will be killed. When the inevitable happens, the group has changed as if to be almost unrecognisable, and the story ends with both tragedy and love.



WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Unexpectedly for a novel about a hostage situation, *Bel Canto* has a humorous tone which sometimes verges on black humour and, occasionally, lulls us into a sense of familiarity with the situation of the characters, leaving us unprepared when violence or trauma occurs. Patchett depicts the flaws and humanity of both hostages and terrorists; when the hostages are asked to lie on the floor, many of them feel a strange sense of relief, and some even fall asleep. The terrorist taking the soprano Roxane Coss to the bathroom leads her there tenderly, amazed by her talent. Joachim, the negotiator, treats the terrorists as a rather everyday situation

and doesn't appear frightened by them at all. Over time, the group coalesces into a group of humans rather than them/us.

One of Patchett's themes seems to be music's ability to bring people together; Katsumi Hosokawa's love for opera becomes both the reason that the people come together, and Roxane Coss' singing unites the group, turning months in captivity into a strange period of beauty. Translator Gen Watanabe is the only person in the group who speaks everyone's different languages: he acts as a kind of conduit for the group to communicate with itself. In the end, it seems fitting that he marries Coss, the other person who could communicate with all of the group through her singing.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Bel Canto, rather oddly, depicts a traumatic situation as something ultimately positive, transformative and even romantic. What are your thoughts about this? Why would Patchett introduce the slightly farcical tone that she uses in the novel? Is it a surprising tone to use against the context of a terrorist situation? And has our view of terrorism changed in the years since 2002, when this novel won the Women's Prize for Fiction – both what terrorism looks like to us now, and how we feel about it? Patchett's terrorists are often depicted as young, ignorant and sometimes even gentle. Does this lend the novel a sense of humanity, or do you think it seems naïve?



QUESTIONS

Compare the relationships of Roxane Coss and Mr Hosokawa and Gen Watanabe and Carmen. How do they differ and how are they similar?

Do you sympathise with the people wanting to stay in the house and not return to the real world, or are they deluded? Is everyone suffering from a kind of Stockholm Syndrome?

Why do you think Gen and Roxane get married? Was that surprising? Simon Thibault seems the only person who wants the siege to end so he can return to his happy domestic life. Is he the only one who has something good to go back to?

NEXT STEPS

Listen to a piece of opera, perhaps one of the arias described in the novel, and write a poem or short descriptive piece inspired by it. What emotions does it evoke? Could you attribute colours, smells, tastes and textures to what you hear? Don't censor yourself too much – let the associations flow, perhaps as you listen to the piece of music and make some

abstract notes, then use those notes to craft your poem or other form of writing. If the music evokes some specific memories for you too, then use those.

For something more in-depth, research the story behind one opera. Get the main beats of the story – the type of characters, the main events, what the dramatic climax is – ie a death, coming together of lovers etc – and use them to write a short story (or something longer). You can see modern examples of where this has been done with Shakespeare plays like *The Taming of the Shrew* in the movie *Ten Things I Hate About You* or with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in *Bridget Jones' Diary*. Think about what modern solutions or types of characters could replace the ones in whichever opera you choose. Have fun!

“ 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 ”

ANN PATCHETT,
AUTHOR

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE DUTCH HOUSE BY ANN PATCHETT
THE MUSE BY JESSIE BURTON