



BEL CANTO

Study guide for Book groups

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126 days

72 hostages

14 terrorists

ONE common language.

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OVERVIEW

Chicagoans have a rare opportunity this fall and winter to read and discuss **Ann Patchett's** novel *Bel Canto* (inspired by the Peruvian hostage crisis of 1996–97)—and to experience the world premiere of the opera *Bel Canto*, by rising–star composer **Jimmy López** and librettist **Nilo Cruz**, a Pulitzer Prizewinning playwright. The internationally acclaimed soprano **Renée Fleming** curated the new opera.

Bel canto means beautiful singing in Italian; a beautiful singer is key to Patchett's story and of course to the opera. The novelist listened to Fleming's recordings (and others) as she wrote, but the two met and became close friends only after *Bel Canto* was published in 2001. A decade later, as Lyric Opera's creative consultant, Fleming searched for a suitable composer to transform the story, which led her to López—and the discovery that he was a teenager in Lima when the actual crisis took place.

Patchett set her novel in a fictional South American capital; López returned the story to Lima and introduced some details from the original events, while Cruz transformed the expansive narrative into tautly poetic libretto. Central to both the novel and the opera are themes of confinement, isolation, created community, and the power of music to communicate and heal.

The materials that follow will guide readers through both the novel and the opera, and inspire conversations about their similarities and differences.

THE NOVEL

Bel Canto

ISBN: 9780060838720

HarperCollins 2001

By **Ann Patchett**

SYNOPSIS

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, the opera singer. 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.

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An **exciting**
chance to explore
a thought–provoking
story **on the page** and
on the stage.

The only woman not eventually 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. All those in the house, regardless of their knowledge and understanding of opera, recognize 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 (except through the Red Cross representative; the story takes place before

the universal availability of cell phones), 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 as an opera takes the listener through various stages of emotions, *Bel Canto* delivers similar 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”) and 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.

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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 do 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?” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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?” 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.”

What do you think of these statements? Do you really believe this accidental community of hostages and terrorists 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?

- 11** Is Patchett too “soft” on terrorism, as some critics charged when *Bel Canto* was published in May 2011 (prior to the WTC attacks of Sept. 11)?

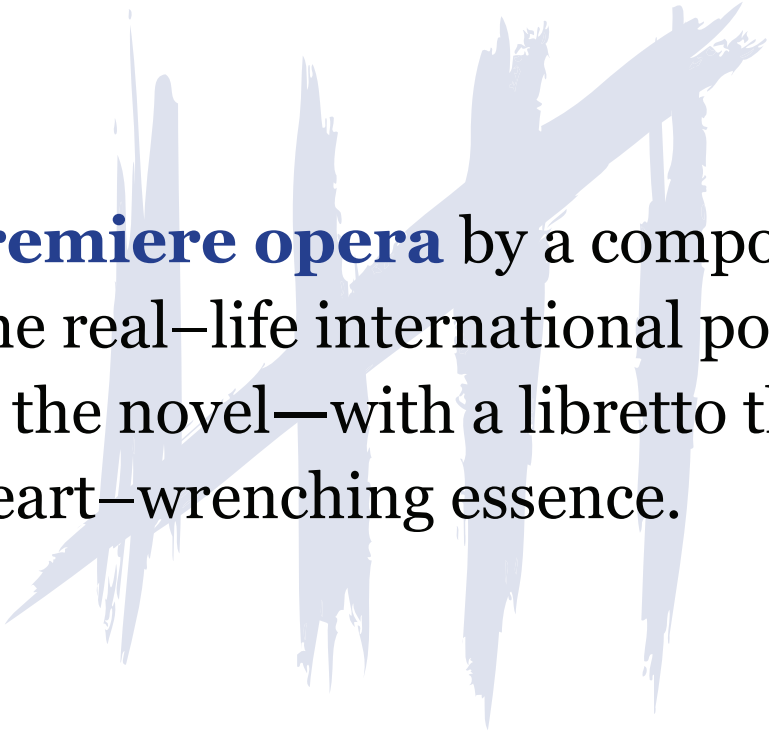
- 12** How would current technology—laptops, cellphones, etc.—change the shape of the story?

A bestselling, prizewinning novel by
a living author for whom this work
was a game-changer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Patchett is the author of six novels: *State of Wonder*; the *New York Times* bestselling *Run*; *The Patron Saint of Liars*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year; *Taft*, which won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize; *The Magician's Assistant*; and *Bel Canto*, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Orange Prize, the BookSense Book of the Year, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is also the author of two works of nonfiction: the *New York Times* bestselling *Truth & Beauty* and *What now?* Patchett has written for many publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Gourmet*, *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, and the *Washington Post*. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

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A **world-premiere opera** by a composer directly affected by the real-life international political crisis that inspired the novel—with a libretto that distills the story to its heart-wrenching essence.

THE OPERA

Bel Canto

Music by **Jimmy López**

Libretto by **Nilo Cruz**

Based on the novel by **Ann Patchett**

Commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago

General Director

Anthony Freud

Music Director

Sir Andrew Davis

Creative Consultant

Renée Fleming

World-premiere performances

Dec. 7, 2015—Jan. 17, 2016

Opera in two acts in

Spanish, English, Japanese, Russian,

German, French, Latin, and Quechua

TIME and PLACE

1996, A stately two-story mansion in Lima, Perú.

Characters

Roxane Coss SOPRANO
an American soprano

Katsumi Hosokawa BASS
the chairman of an electronics corporation in Japan

General Alfredo TENOR
the leader of the terrorist organization MRTA

General Benjamín BASS
second in command of MRTA

Joachim Messner BARITONE
a representative from the Red Cross

Gen Watanabe TENOR
Mr. Hosokawa's translator

Carmen MEZZO
a young woman member of MRTA

Christopf TENOR
Roxane's accompanist

Rubén Iglesias TENOR
the vice president of Peru

Father Arguedas BARITONE
a Catholic priest

César COUNTERTENOR
a young man and member of MRTA

Simon Thibault BARITONE
the French ambassador

Edith Thibault MEZZO
his wife

Victor Fyodorov BASS
a Russian diplomat

Ismael TENOR
a young man and member of MRTA

Beatriz SOPRANO
a young woman and member of MRTA

German woman SOPRANO
a diplomat

The Spanish ambassador to Peru
TENOR

A soldier of the Peruvian army
BARITONE

Additional terrorists
16-VOICE CHORUS

Additional hostages
32-VOICE CHORUS

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

When Peruvian terrorists storm a high-profile party, international guests are caught in a political crisis. Trapped together, hostages and captors form unlikely relationships. Love, friendship, and a utopian community gradually flourish within the mansion walls confining the disparate group for 126 days. Roxane Coss, a world-renowned opera diva, becomes the focus of everyone's hopes and fears; her music is seen as both a threat and an asset by the terrorists. Roxane and Hosokawa, a Japanese tycoon, fall in love; his interpreter, Gen, and a female terrorist, Carmen, are also forced to keep their love a secret. The couples' dreams and hopes for the future are abruptly shattered when the army storms the mansion to liberate the hostages, leaving many casualties behind. Their love, however, lives on in the form of music.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Comparing the novel with the opera

- 1** In adapting a novel to an opera (or a play, or a film), changes are inevitable for both practical and artistic reasons.

What might some of those changes be? Why do you suppose they might be necessary?

- 2** Are there any major differences in the *Bel Canto* story between the opera and the novel? If so, what are they?

- 3** What about differences in the smaller details? How do they affect the story, characters, and outcomes?

- 4** One notable difference between the novel and the opera is that the opera conclusively identifies the setting as corresponding to the actual historical events, while the novel purposely obscures many such connections. Based on the opera synopsis:

A. What changes have been made to the story to achieve greater historical accuracy?

B. What else could be done to further increase the accuracy?

C. What might the motivation be to make the opera more historically accurate than the novel? (The opera's director and designers are taking pains to accurately reproduce many historical details in the set, props, and costumes as well.)

- 5** How would you expect Roxane Coss's musical performances, practicing, and teaching (her work with Cesar, for example) to be portrayed musically? If you were the composer, would you willingly use another composer's music in your opera?

- 6** Generally in opera, the action stops at dramatically significant or climactic points for one or more of the characters to sing about how they feel about what's going on. These emotional outpourings—the expressive highpoints of the opera—usually become its most famous tunes and musical highlights. Where do you predict that these outpourings (arias, duets, trios, choruses, etc.) will occur in *Bel Canto*?

- 7** Compare the opera's ending to the ending of the novel:

A. What are the differences?

B. Are the dramatic conclusions and implications the same or different?

C. Are there other ways the opera could have ended?

- 8** How have the events of 9/11 and subsequent acts of political terrorism internationally made the opera and the novel more timely and/or timeless?