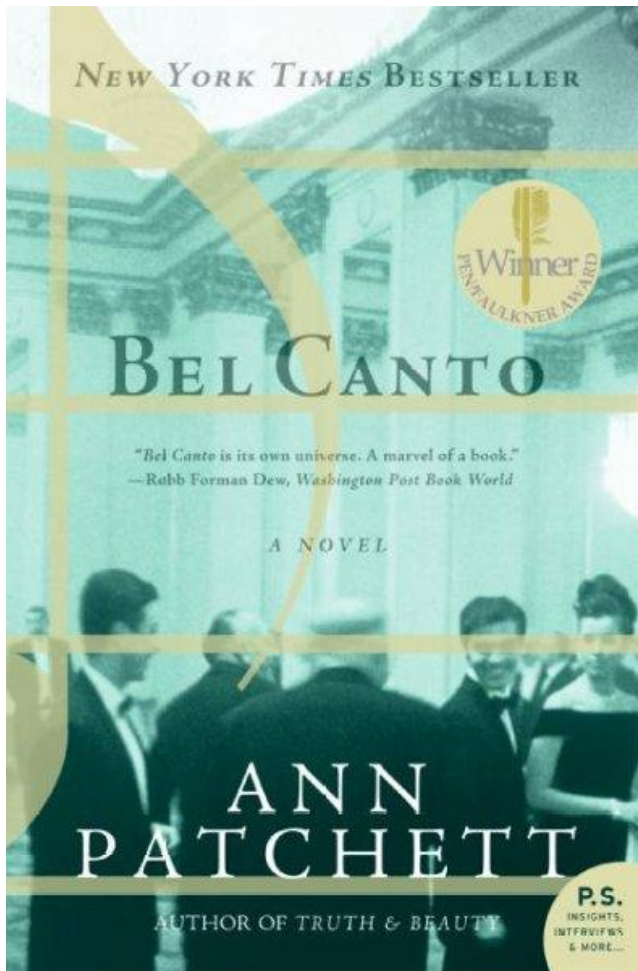


About the book...



Somewhere in South America, at the home of the country's vice president, a lavish birthday party is being held in honor of Mr. Hosokawa, a powerful Japanese businessman. Roxanne Coss, opera's most revered soprano, has mesmerized the international guests with her singing. It is a perfect evening -- until a band of gun-wielding terrorists breaks in through the air-conditioning vents and takes the entire party hostage. But what begins as a panicked, life-threatening scenario slowly evolves into something quite different, as terrorists and hostages forge unexpected bonds and people from different countries and continents become compatriots. Friendship, compassion, and the chance for great love lead the characters to forget the real danger that has been set in motion and cannot be stopped.

About the author... <http://www.harpercollins.com/author/microsite/About.aspx?authorid=20650>



Ann Patchett was born in Los Angeles in 1963 and raised in Nashville. She attended Sarah Lawrence College and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. In 1990, she won a residential fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she wrote her first novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars*. It was named a *New York Times* Notable Book for 1992. In 1993, she received a Bunting Fellowship from the Mary Ingrahm Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College. Patchett's second novel, *Taft*, was awarded the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for the best work of fiction in 1994. Her third novel, *The Magician's Assistant*, was short-listed for England's Orange Prize and earned her

a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her next novel, *Bel Canto*, won both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize in 2002, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. It was named the Book Sense Book of the Year. It sold more than a million copies in the United States and has been translated into thirty languages. In 2004, Patchett published *Truth & Beauty*, a memoir of her friendship with the writer Lucy Grealy. It was named one of the Best Books of the Year by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. *Truth & Beauty* was also a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and won the *Chicago Tribune's* Heartland Prize, the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Alex Award from the American Library Association.

She was also the editor of *Best American Short Stories 2006*.

Patchett has written for numerous publications, including the *New York Times* magazine, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *Gourmet*, and *Vogue*. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband, Karl VanDevender.

REVIEWS

The New Yorker

An impoverished South American country hosts a birthday extravaganza for a Japanese industrialist in the hope of securing new foreign investment. The lure? An internationally renowned lyric soprano. Indeed, when Roxane Coss sings, even the ragtag terrorists who are about to flood through the air-conditioning vents and take the guests hostage hold their breath, transported by the beauty of her voice. Patchett's tragicomic novel—a fantasia of guns and Puccini and Red Cross negotiations—invokes the glorious, unreliable promises of art, politics, and love. Against this grand backdrop, the smallest gestures bloom with meaning: a pretty governess stitching up the cheek of her employer with her sewing kit; a young terrorist discovering the tyranny of wearing a watch; an exasperated French diplomat risking his life to peel an eggplant with a proper knife.

Booklist

Readers curious about the emotional flow between hostages and their takers should cotton to this novel based on the 1996 Tupac Amaru takeover of the Japanese ambassadorial residence in Lima, Peru. It traces the hostages' adjusting attitudes during the torpor of a months-long siege. Relief from their tedium takes the form of luscious world-class soprano Roxane Coss, who had been entertaining an international assortment of diplomats and businesspersons when the terrorists took the Peruvian vice president's house. Everybody loves her, eventually--a Russian diplomat, the Japanese tycoon who paid for her performance, one of the

teenage hostage-takers, and so on. The medium for all professions of admiration and love is polylingual Gen Watanabe. As Watanabe flits from conversation to conversation, Patchett develops the characters' thoughts. Watanabe, for example, takes a shine to a child-soldier terrorist, Carmen, who comes to share the fate of an operatic earlier bearer of her name. Unhurriedly, even languorously, Patchett brings readers into the minds of the characters.

Entertainment Weekly (<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,256647,00.html>)

The party at the home of the vice president of an unidentified South American country is well under way. Political dignitaries, the president of a Japanese electronics corporation, and a comely opera singer are unaware of the terrorists lurking in the air-conditioning vents overhead. The reader experiences a flutter of panic. But rest assured that Patchett ("The Magician's Assistant") is too subtle an author to write a hammy thriller. Ostensibly the story of a months-long hostage crisis, **Bel Canto** is more a meditation on the unlikely allegiances that form in extreme circumstances. An elegant businessman plays chess with his teenage captor; a soprano unites a divided room with Puccini. One approaches the final pages with a heavy heart for several reasons, not the least of which being that this fine read has come to an end.

Discussion questions <http://www.annpatchett.com/belcanto-guide.html>

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?

Readalikes

Fiction

- *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, by Ann Packer. Review excerpted from Publisher's Weekly. "On Memorial Day, Carrie Bell and her fiancé, Mike Mayer, drive out to Clausen's Pier for their annual ritual, a picnic with their friends, a trip they make the way a middle-aged couple might, in grudging silence. Before their resentments can be aired, Mike dives into too shallow water, suffering injuries that change their lives. If Mike survives, he will survive as a quadriplegic, and Carrie faces unexpected responsibilities. Ultimately, Carrie does what is both understandable and unthinkable. She leaves her hometown of Madison, Wis., and shows up on the doorstep of a friend in New York City. There she discovers a different world, different friends and a different self. The hovering question--what will Carrie do? Abandon Mike or return to him?--generates genuine suspense."
- *A Maiden's Grave*, by Jeffrey Deaver. Review excerpted from Library Journal. "A bus carrying eight deaf children and their teachers stops in the middle of the Kansas countryside, a car wreck directly ahead. Soon, three escaped killers rise out of the nearby cornfields and take children and teachers hostage. Pursued by the police, the convicts are forced to hole up in an abandoned slaughterhouse. There they threaten to shoot a child every hour until their demands are met."
- *Emilie's Voice*, by Susanne Dunlap. Summary from <http://www.emiliesvoice.com/voice.html>. "Emilie is the daughter of a poor luthier in Paris. Her angelic voice is discovered by the real-life composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier, who is captivated both by her singing and her pure beauty. Hoping that she will be his ticket to fame and fortune, Charpentier introduces her to Parisian society. But her life takes an abrupt turn when she is taken to Versailles and becomes embroiled in the power struggle between Louis XIV's current mistress, and the woman who would eventually become his second wife."
- *Amsterdam* by Ian McEwan. Summary from Publisher's Weekly. "Two longtime friends meet at the cremation of the woman they shared, beautiful restaurant critic and photographer Molly Lane. Clive Linley, a celebrated composer, and Vernon Halliday, the editor of a financially troubled London tabloid. . . Mourning the manner of Molly's agonizing death, which left her mad and helpless at the end, each man pledges to dispatch the other by euthanasia should he be similarly afflicted. Immediately afterwards, both Clive and Vernon are enmeshed in a crisis. . . ."

Non-fiction

- *Guests of the Ayatollah*, by Mark Bowden. Review excerpted from Publisher's Weekly: "Assessment as America's number one enemy, Mark Bowden's new book is particularly timely. *Guests of the Ayatollah* chronicles the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by student militants, who held 66 American staffers hostage from November 1979 till January 1981, seizing this nation's attention in the process. In the aftermath of 9/11, with wars raging in Iraq and Afghanistan, that event seems to belong to the remote past, but as Bowden points out, it was "America's first confrontation with Islamo-fascism," while the hostages (who were released alive) were "the first victims of the inaptly named War on Terror." Although some may dispute those points, his portrayal of the hostage takers and their fanatical devotion to establishing a religious utopia could easily apply to members of al-Qaeda and other Muslim terrorist groups. Bowden's analysis of militant Islam is clear, current and dead-on."
- *An Evil Cradling*, by Brian Keenan. Summary taken from Wikipedia: "...an autobiographical book by Keenan about his five years as a hostage in Beirut. The book revolves heavily around the great friendship he experienced with fellow hostage [John McCarthy](#), and the brutality that was inflicted upon them by their captors. It was the 1991 winner of the [Irish Times](#) Literature Prize for Non-fiction."
- *Taken on Trust*, by Terry Waite. Product description from Amazon.com: "In his prison cell in Beirut, where he spent 1,460 days in solitary confinement, Terry Waite wrote his autobiography in his head. Here he reveals the inner strength that helped him endure the savage treatment he received, his constant struggle to maintain his faith, and his resolve to have no regrets, no false sentimentality, no self-pity."