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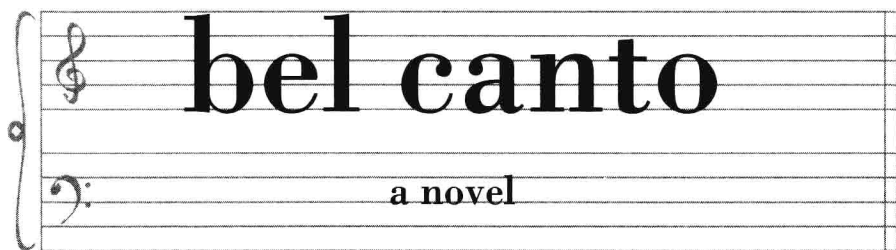


BEL CANTO

"*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*



Ann Patchett



Perennial

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PRAISE FOR

bel canto

"Elegantly alluring. . . . A novel that begins with a kiss and absolutely deserves one. . . . A book that works both as a paean to art and beauty and a subtly sly comedy of manners." —*New York Times*

"*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

"As her readers now eagerly anticipate, Ann Patchett can be counted on to deliver novels rich in imaginative bravado and psychological nuance. . . . Patchett's ability to evoke a sense of place . . . is near magical in itself." —*Publishers Weekly*

"A novel that showcases her profound understanding of the heart." —*Bookforum*

"*Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett should be on the list of every literate music lover. The story is riveting, the participants breathe and feel and are alive, and throughout this elegantly told novel, music pours forth so splendidly that the reader hears it and is overwhelmed by its beauty. Ann Patchett is a special writer who has written a special book." —Lloyd Moss, *WXQR*

"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." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"Patchett doing what she does best. . . . What gives this novel its power is Patchett's flair for sketching the subtleties of her characters' behavior." —*New York Times Book Review*

"The most romantic novel in years. A strange, terrific, spell-casting story. . . . Blissfully romantic . . . with engaging wit and brilliant writing about love, Patchett has crafted a seductive, romantically charged novel." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Patchett's tragicomic novel—a fantasia of guns and Puccini and Red Cross negotiations—invokes the glorious, unreliable promises of art, politics, and love." —*The New Yorker*

“*Bel Canto* invites readers to explore new and unfamiliar territory, to take some emotional risks rather than stand with Rolland among those ‘already saved.’”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“The author has taken what could have been a variation on *The Lord of the Flies* scenario and fashions instead a ‘Lord of the Butterflies,’ a dreamlike fable in which the impulses toward beauty and love are shown to be as irrepressible as the instincts for violence and destruction. . . . In more ways than one, *Bel Canto* is about finding beauty in unexpected places.”

—*New York magazine*

“You’ll find a few hours of entertainment and maybe even a strange yearning to be kidnapped.”

—*Time Out*

“*Bel Canto* is certainly pleasurable to read.”

—*Newsday*

“Thanks to Patchett’s narrative know-how, readers won’t want to let the novel go until they finish it.”

—*San Diego Union-Tribune*

“*Bel Canto* moves elegantly through its paces; captors and captives alike stumble on the most elusive liberty: the freedom to be.”

—*New York Daily News*

“Patchett’s writing is at turns both gentle and powerful. She writes of music and emotion and hardship so eloquently that the reader longs to be taken captive in the household as well.”

—*Telluride Watch*

“A provocative and enchanting look at the power art has to suspend real life and to create a better world, one in which the differences between people can be erased and the barriers to our best selves can be hurdled.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“With the right soundtrack, with the right singer singing the right music, all battlefields can become utopias.”

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“*Bel Canto* means, literally, fine singing. Patchett’s song is fine, indeed. . . . Positively spellbinding.”

—*Seattle Times*



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About the Author

ANN PATCHETT is the author of three previous novels, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year; *Taft*, which won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize; and *The Magician's Assistant*. She has written for many publications, including *Elle*, *GQ*, *The Paris Review*, *Gourmet*, and *Vogue*. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

Also by Ann Patchett

The Patron Saint of Liars

Taft

The Magician's Assistant

**For
Karl VanDevender**

*Fonti e colline chiesi agli Dei;
m 'udiro alfine,
pago io vovro,
ne mai quel fonte co 'desir miei,
ne mai quel monte trapassero*

"I asked the Gods for hills and springs;
They listened to me at last.
I shall live contented.
And I shall never desire to go beyond that spring,
nor shall I desire to cross that mountain."

—Sei Ariette I: Malinconia, ninfa gentile
Vincenzo Bellini

*Sprecher: Ihr Fremdlinge! was sucht oder fordert ihn von uns?
 Tamino: Freundschaft und Liebe.
 Sprecher: Bist du bereit, es mit deinem Leben zu erkämpfen?
 Tamino: Ja.*

Speaker: Stranger, what do you seek or ask from us?
Tamino: Friendship and love.
Speaker: And are you prepared even if it costs you your life?
Tamino: I am.

—*The Magic Flute* by
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

bel canto



*W*hen the lights went off the accompanist kissed her. Maybe he had been turning towards her just before it was completely dark, maybe he was lifting his hands. There must have been some movement, a gesture, because every person in the living room would later remember a kiss. They did not *see* a kiss, that would have been impossible. The darkness that came on them was startling and complete. Not only was everyone there certain of a kiss, they claimed they could identify the type of kiss: it was strong and passionate, and it took her by surprise. They were all looking right at her when the lights went out. They were still applauding, each on his or her feet, still in the fullest throes of hands slapping together, elbows up. Not one person had come anywhere close to tiring. The Italians and the French were yelling, "*Brava! Brava!*" and the Japanese turned away from them. Would he have kissed her like that had the room been lit? Was his mind so full of her that in the very instant of darkness he reached for her, did he think so quickly? Or was it that they wanted her too, all of the men and women in the room, and so they imagined it collectively. They were so taken by the beauty of her voice that they wanted to cover her mouth with their mouth, drink in. Maybe music

could be transferred, devoured, owned. What would it mean to kiss the lips that had held such a sound?

Some of them had loved her for years. They had every recording she had ever made. They kept a notebook and wrote down every place they had seen her, listing the music, the names of the cast, the conductor. There were others there that night who had not heard her name, who would have said, if asked, that opera was a collection of nonsensical cat screechings, that they would much rather pass three hours in a dentist's chair. These were the ones who wept openly now, the ones who had been so mistaken.

No one was frightened of the darkness. They barely noticed. They kept applauding. The people who lived in other countries assumed that things like this must happen here all the time. Lights go on, go off. People from the host country knew it to be true. Besides, the timing of the electrical failure seemed dramatic and perfectly correct, as if the lights had said, *You have no need for sight. Listen.* What no one stopped to think about was why the candles on every table went out as well, perhaps at that very moment or the moment before. The room was filled with the pleasant smell of candles just snuffed, a smoke that was sweet and wholly unthreatening. A smell that meant it was late now, time to go to bed.

They continued the applause. They assumed she continued her kiss.

Roxane Coss, lyric soprano, was the only reason Mr. Hosokawa had come to this country. Mr. Hosokawa was the reason everyone else had come to the party. It was not the kind of place one was likely to visit. The reason the host country (a poor country) was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense for a foreigner who had to be all but bribed into attending was that this foreigner was the founder and chairman of Nansei, the largest electronics corporation in Japan. It was the fondest wish of the host country that Mr. Hosokawa would smile on them, help them in some of the hundred different ways they needed helping. That could be achieved through training or trade. A factory (and this was the dream so dear its name could hardly be

spoken) could be built here, where cheap labor could mean a profit for everyone involved. Industry could move the economy away from the farming of coca leaves and blackhearted poppies, creating the illusion of a country moving away from the base matter of cocaine and heroin, so as to promote foreign aid and make trafficking of those very drugs less conspicuous. But the plan had never taken root in the past, as the Japanese, by nature, erred on the side of caution. They believed in the danger and the rumors of danger countries such as this presented, so to have Mr. Hosokawa himself, not an executive vice president, not a politician, come and sit at the table was proof that a hand might be extended. And maybe that hand would have to be coaxed and begged. Maybe it would have to be pulled from its own deep pocket. But this visit, with its glorious birthday dinner replete with opera star, with several meetings planned and trips to possible factory sites tomorrow, was a full world closer than they had ever come before and the air in the room was sugared with promise. Representatives from more than a dozen countries who had been misled as to the nature of Mr. Hosokawa's intentions were present at the party, investors and ambassadors who might not encourage their governments to put a dime into the host country but would certainly support Nansei's every endeavor, now circled the room in black tie and evening gown, making toasts and laughing.

As far as Mr. Hosokawa was concerned, his trip was not for the purposes of business, diplomacy, or a friendship with the President, as later would be reported. Mr. Hosokawa disliked travel and did not know the President. He had made his intentions, or lack of intentions, abundantly clear. He did not plan to build a plant. He would never have agreed to a trip to a strange country to celebrate his birthday with people he did not know. He was not much for celebrating his birthday with people he did know, and certainly not his fifty-third, which he considered to be a number entirely without note. He had turned down half a dozen strong requests from these very people, for this exact party, until the promised gift was the presence of Roxane Coss.

And if she was the present, who would decline? No matter how far away, how inappropriate, how misleading it might prove to be, who would say no?

But first remember another birthday, his eleventh, the birthday on which Katsumi Hosokawa first heard opera, Verdi's *Rigoletto*. His father had taken him to Tokyo by train and together they walked to the theater in a steady downpour. It was October 22 and so it was a cold autumn rain and the streets were waxed in a paper-thin layer of wet red leaves. When they arrived at the Tokyo Metropolitan Festival Hall, their undershirts were wet beneath coats and sweaters. The tickets waiting inside Katsumi Hosokawa's father's billfold were wet and discolored. They did not have especially good seats, but their view was unobstructed. In 1954, money was precious; train tickets and operas were unimaginable things. In a different time, such a production would have seemed too complicated for a child, but this was only a handful of years after the war and children then were much more likely to understand a whole host of things that might seem impossible for children now. They climbed the long set of stairs to their row, careful not to look down into the dizzying void beneath them. They bowed and begged to be excused by every person who stood to let them pass into their seats, and then they unfolded their seats and slipped inside. They were early, but other people were earlier, as part of the luxury that came with the ticket price was the right to sit quietly in this beautiful place and wait. They waited, father and son, without speaking, until finally the darkness fell and the first breath of music stirred from someplace far below them. Tiny people, insects, really, slipped out from behind the curtains, opened their mouths, and with their voices gilded the walls with their yearning, their grief, their boundless, reckless love that would lead each one to separate ruin.

It was during that performance of *Rigoletto* that opera imprinted itself on Katsumi Hosokawa, a message written on the pink undersides of his eyelids that he read to himself while he slept. Many years

later, when everything was business, when he worked harder than anyone in a country whose values are structured on hard work, he believed that life, true life, was something that was stored in music. True life was kept safe in the lines of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* while you went out into the world and met the obligations required of you. Certainly he knew (though did not completely understand) that opera wasn't for everyone, but for everyone he hoped there was something. The records he cherished, the rare opportunities to see a live performance, those were the marks by which he gauged his ability to love. Not his wife, his daughters, or his work. He never thought that he had somehow transferred what should have filled his daily life into opera. Instead he knew that without opera, this part of himself would have vanished altogether. It was early in the second act, when Rigoletto and Gilda sang together, their voices twining, leaping, that he reached out for his father's hand. He had no idea what they were saying, nor did he know that they played the parts of father and daughter, he only knew that he needed to hold to something. The pull they had on him was so strong he could feel himself falling forward out of the high and distant seats.

Such love breeds loyalty, and Mr. Hosokawa was a loyal man. He never forgot the importance of Verdi in his life. He became attached to certain singers, as everyone does. He made special collections of Schwarzkopf and Sutherland. He believed in the genius of Callas above all others. There was never a great deal of time in his days, not the kind of time such interest clearly merited. Custom was that after having dinner with clients and completing paperwork, he would spend thirty minutes listening to music and reading librettos before falling asleep. It was impossibly rare, maybe five Sundays a year, that he found three consecutive hours to listen to one opera start to finish. Once, in his late forties, he ate a spoiled oyster and suffered a vicious bout of food poisoning that kept him home for three days. He remembered this time as happily as any vacation because he played Handel's *Alcina* continually, even while he slept.

It was his eldest daughter, Kiyomi, who bought him his first

recording of Roxane Coss for his birthday. Her father was a nearly impossible man to buy gifts for, and so when she saw the disc and a name she did not recognize, she thought she would take a chance. But it wasn't the unknown name that drew her, it was the woman's face. Kiyomi found the pictures of sopranos irritating. They were always peering over the tops of fans or gazing through veils of soft netting. But Roxane Coss looked at her directly, even her chin was straight, her eyes were wide open. Kiyomi reached for her before she even noticed it was a recording of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. How many recordings of *Lucia di Lammermoor* did her father own? It didn't matter. She gave her money to the girl at the counter.

When Mr. Hosokawa put the CD in the player and sat down in his chair to listen, he did not go back to work that night. It was as if he was a boy in those high seats in Tokyo again, his father's hand large and warm around his own. He set the disc to play over and over, skipping impatiently past anything that was not her voice. It was soaring, that voice, warm and complicated, utterly fearless. How could it be at once controlled and so reckless? He called Kiyomi's name and she came and stood in the doorway of his study. She started to say something—yes? or, what? or, sir?—but before she could make out the words she heard that voice, the straight-ahead woman from the picture. Her father didn't even say it, he simply gestured towards one speaker with his open hand. She was enormously pleased to have done something so right. The music praised her. Mr. Hosokawa closed his eyes. He dreamed.

In the five years since then he had seen eighteen performances featuring Roxane Coss. The first was a lucky coincidence, the other times he went to the city where she would be, creating business to take him there. He saw *La Sonnambula* three nights in a row. He had never sought her out or made himself to be anything more than any other member of the audience. He did not assume his appreciation for her talent exceeded anyone else's. He was more inclined to believe that only a fool would not feel about her exactly how he felt. There was nothing more to want than the privilege to sit and listen.

Read a profile of Katsumi Hosokawa in any business magazine. He would not talk in terms of passion, as passion was a private matter, but opera was always there, the human interest angle to make him appear more accessible. Other CEOs were shown fly-fishing in Scottish rivers or piloting their own Learjets into Helsinki. Mr. Hosokawa was photographed at home in the leather chair he sat in when he listened, a Nansei EX-12 stereo system behind him. There were the inevitable questions about favorites. There was the inevitable answer.

For a price that was considerably more than the entire cost of the rest of evening (food, service, transportation, flowers, security) Roxane Coss was persuaded to come to the party, as it fell in between the end of her season at La Scala and the beginning of her appearance at Teatro Colón in Argentina. She would not attend the dinner (she did not eat before she sang) but would arrive at the end of the meal and perform six arias with her accompanist. Mr. Hosokawa was told by letter that he could make a request upon accepting the invitation, and while the hosts could make no promises, the request would be given to Miss Coss for her consideration. It was Mr. Hosokawa's selection, the aria from *Rusalka*, which she had just completed when the lights went out. It was to be the end of the program, though who is to say if she might have sung an encore or even two had the lights remained on?

Mr. Hosokawa chose *Rusalka* as a measure of his respect for Miss Coss. It was the centerpiece of her repertoire and would require no extra preparation on her behalf, a piece that surely would have been included in the program had he not requested it. He did not seek something achingly obscure, an aria from *Partenope* perhaps, so as to prove himself an aficionado. He simply wanted to hear her sing *Rusalka* while standing close to her in a room. *If a human soul should dream of me, may he still remember me on awaking!* His translator had written it out for him from the Czech years ago.

The lights stayed off. The applause began to show the slightest downward sweep. People blinked and strained to see her again. A