



LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

Q&A with Author Ann Patchett

Bestselling author Ann Patchett first made headlines in 1992 when her debut novel, The Patron Saint of Liars, was named a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. She won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize in 1994 for her novel Taft, and the 2001 novel Bel Canto received the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Orange Prize, the Book Sense Book of the Year Prize, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her most recent novel, State of Wonder, was published in 2011. Her non-fiction works include 2005's Truth and Beauty, a memoir detailing her friendship with writer Lucy Grealy. A 1994 recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship, Patchett is also the Tennessee Williams Fellow in creative writing at the University of the South. She lives in Nashville.

Q: What was it about the Peru hostage crisis that captured your interest and imagination?

AP: My books in one sense are very different from one another, but in another they are all exactly the same. They're about captivity, isolation, a group of strangers thrown together who can't leave. For example, it's a home for unwed mothers in *The Patron Saint of Liars*, a research station in the Amazon in *State of Wonder*, and the vice president's palace in South America in *Bel Canto*. Each novel is all about confinement. I keep coming back to the book that had an enormous influence on me: [Thomas Mann's] *The Magic Mountain*. Right away when I heard the news in Peru, I thought, "It's my story, the story of confinement." Also because it was such an un-terrifying terrorist situation: it was a takeover where the terrorists were teenagers who kept asking for more soccer balls and take-out pizza. I was very attracted to that.

Q: Renée Fleming has said, "At the end of the period that these people are together, they create a utopian society. A lot of Ann's books have a utopian end, which is one of the reasons why I love this one."

AP: I'm much more of a utopian than a dystopian. I find that basically when people are removed from society, they find happiness. One review of *Bel Canto* said, "Instead of *Lord of the Flies*, it was *Lord of the Butterflies*."

Q: How did you decide to add the character of a soprano to the hostages? What does she represent?

AP: In the true story, they let all the women go: the staff, most of the hostages, and all the women. When I decided to write this story, I thought, "They'll keep one woman. That would be very compelling. But who? It would be the most important woman at the party. Why? Because she's the entertainment. What is she doing? A pianist? No, a singer. An opera singer would be the most international." That was my thought process. I knew nothing about opera. I'd never been to an opera or even listened to an opera.

Q: Did you listen to Renée Fleming's recordings and base the character on her?

AP: That's one of the myths that have evolved over time. I did listen to Renée, of course, because I went to record stores and thumbed through the CDs and I was bound to stumble on her recordings. I also listened to a lot of Maria Callas.

But what really connected me so strongly to Renée is that my editor in the UK is a fellow named Christopher Potter who is a brilliant opera aficionado. When he read the manuscript for *Bel Canto*, the signature aria that I had originally was *La Wally*. Christopher said, "You can't have that because you're ripping it off the movie *Diva*." And he was absolutely right! So I said, "You pick something out for me that's going to make me sound really smart, something obscure and *in the know* - and he picked [Dvořák's] 'Song to the Moon' from *Rusalka*." That's what made everybody think the character was Renée. That's *her* signature aria.

I had a very hard time getting into opera until I found a book by Fred Plotkin. I didn't make a connection until reading his *Opera 101*. Then I started going to operas in the prescribed way Fred maps out in the book. I also listened to hours and hours of opera lectures on tape. Slowly I clawed my way up. I went to New York City Opera because I could never afford the Met. They did a lot of Handel, and so I became very devoted to Handel opera.

Q: What are some of the journeys this book has taken you on - politically, musically and personally?

AP: The best thing that *Bel Canto* has brought to my life has been my relationship with Renée. She is my girlfriend, my pal. I can remember the first couple of times she would say, "Let's go have dinner. Let's go to the movies," and I would think, "What are you talking about?" That has been the greatest thing.

When I think about all the ways this book has changed my life: I've gone from midlist to bestselling author, I've bought a house, I have the financial security to do nothing but write novels. It has certainly put me in the world of opera, and I've had opportunities to see opera all over the world. People take me seriously as someone who knows something about opera (which is appalling), and

I've become a kind of spokesperson. But all of those things are secondary to my friendship with Renée, and that is the great prize of this book.

Q: How did you meet Renée?

AP: I was doing a radio show on WQXR in New York City with Mary Jo Heath during the *Bel Canto* book tour back in 2001. She asked, "If you could meet any person in the world of opera, who would that be?" I said, "I don't know. I guess Renée Fleming." But the truth is that Renée has given me so much through her art that I would never expect her to give me something personally. After we got off the air, Mary Jo said, "'Renée is a really good friend of mine and she would love to meet you. I'm going to set up a lunch.'"

So the first time we met was several months later in 2001 when I was in New York again taking care of my friend Lucy Grealy. I got a call from someone on Renée's team that she would like to have lunch with me at the Cantina at the Met [Opera]. I didn't have any clothing that didn't have blood on it, and I'd been sleeping in a chair in a hospital for a week. I looked like hell when I went to meet Renée. It was comical and lovely and probably set the stage for our friendship.

One of the things that I love about Renée is that she is the most consistently lovely person - down to her socks. I have seen her over the years in so many circumstances that any mere mortal would find very trying. She is gracious every single time to every single person. If I go to Kinkos with her at 9 AM on a Sunday morning, she looks like she could go onstage at the Met. She says people have certain expectations about what their soprano is supposed to look like. Novelists don't have that gene.

I'm so glad that I didn't meet Renée when I was writing *Bel Canto* because it would have been overwhelming. It was better to imagine the soprano than to see one up close!

Q: There has been talk for years of making *Bel Canto* into an opera or a film. How does it feel that it's happening now at Lyric?

AP: Personally, I don't believe it! Anyone who has ever tried to make anything out of *Bel Canto* has failed. I don't feel bad about this. The book has been very successful, and I'm not upset it's not a Broadway musical, which almost happened twice. It's almost been an opera. At one point you could go online and buy tickets at Santa Fe Opera. That project fell apart at a very late date. Bringing *Bel Canto* to the stage has been like herding cats...But if anybody can get the job done, it's Renée and Lyric Opera.

That's how I like to think of it – that there's a reason it's happening now. Whatever was lost before is gained now.

So I am absolutely thrilled about this and about Lyric. It seems just a perfect fit. It's an opera company I've always admired, and I think that if anybody can break the spell and get *Bel Canto* into three dimensions, it's going to be Renée and it's going to be Lyric."

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