

## Reading Guide Questions

Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!

### Introduction

*"How much does a house know?"*

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. 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. The only woman not 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.

Every person in the house, regardless of their knowledge and understanding of opera, recognizes 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, 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 the same as an opera takes the listener through various stages of emotions; Bel Canto delivers the same 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 singing, the pleasure of her singing, and the reflection of her singing" -- 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.

## 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 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." Messenger 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 stay captive in this house than return to the 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?

**Why did Patchett title her novel *Bel Canto*? What is the significance of opera in the novel?**

*Bel canto* is a term from opera that means "beautiful song." The novel opens and closes with opera. In the beginning of the novel, Roxanne Coss has just finished singing at Katsunmi Hosokawa's birthday party when terrorists burst in and take everyone hostage. At the end of the novel, Coss is giving voice lessons to Cesar, a young terrorist, when government troops storm the mansion and kill the terrorists. In between, the lives of the hostages and the terrorists are punctuated by beautiful song. Opera serves as a metaphor for life's beauty, which persists even in the face of death. Opera also stands for the strength of art against brute power. Before Coss starts singing each day, the generals control the situation. But once she begins to sing, her music takes over, and the hostages and terrorists are drawn together as they listen to her. When two of the generals say they ought to be in charge of when Coss does and doesn't sing, General Benjamin tells them they should first try to control a bird. Opera also gives the novel its form. Like many operas, *Bel Canto* is a story of passionate, otherworldly love affairs that end in tragic death.

**At the beginning of *Bel Canto*, the narrator tells us that the hostages will live and the terrorists will die. How does this revelation change the way we read the novel?**

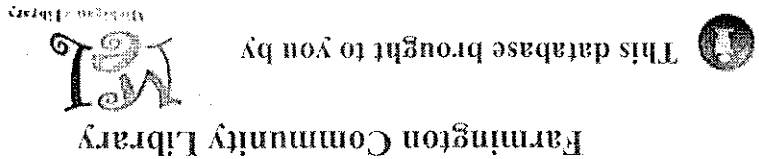
From the very beginning of *Bel Canto*, the narrator tells us how the story will end. In Chapter One, the narrator says, "It was the unspoken belief of everyone who was familiar with this organization and with the host country that they were all as good as dead, when in fact it was the terrorists who would not survive the ordeal." By telling us the ending, Patchett forces us to pay attention to the relationships between the characters, rather than the unfolding of the plot. Unencumbered by nervousness about whether or not the story will end happily, we are free to pay attention to details and think carefully about the relationships that develop. If *Bel Canto* is read as an allegory for life in general, knowing that the terrorists will die stands for humans' knowledge that everyone, including themselves, will die one day. The inevitability of death does not cause us to despair, just as the inevitability of the terrorists' deaths does not cause us to throw down the novel in disgust. Instead, we take a keen interest in our own lives, just as we take a keen interest in characters whose fate we already know.

**Describe Watanabe and Carmen's relationship with language. How does language inhibit and ultimately help them?**

Watanabe and Carmen are the two characters who have the most trouble expressing themselves. Watanabe is a language genius who helps everyone else communicate, but when it comes to speaking for himself, he is often at a loss. Carmen may be a terrorist, but she is a shy terrorist. She is so nervous about asking Watanabe for language lessons that she must fortify herself by praying to her patron saint, Saint Rose, and asking her to fill her mouth with the words she needs.

Carmen says to Watanabe, "Teach me to read. . . . Teach me to make my letters in Spanish." At their language lessons, "They spoke of vowels and consonants. They spoke of diphthongs and possessives. She copied letters into a notebook." As they work on these basic elements of language, Carmen and Watanabe gradually gain the means of expressing themselves. Their growing ability to communicate culminates when they make love. When they are together, they are no longer as shy as they are during the day. They are confident and expressive. From

the language lessons, both Carmen and Watanabe gain the ability to speak to each other heart to heart.



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'Bel Canto,' by Ann Patchett; HarperCollins (318 pages, \$25).

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Byline: Marta Salii

What is the point of the arts, anyway? Are literature and music mere frills that might make life sweeter, but do no more? Or are they essential?

"Bel Canto," the fourth novel from Ann Patchett, presents a world in which opera, standing in here for all the arts, is absolutely central to the characters' very survival. Music becomes the means by which the characters become understood to each other — and to themselves. And, once understood, they become transformed into their highest, best selves.

That may seem fabulous, and "Bel Canto" has its fable-like elements. But Patchett doesn't push the fantastic too much. Rather, she seems interested in translation in all its definitions and in just what it is that art can do.

"Bel Canto" was inspired by a terrorist act, the 1996 takeover of the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru, by the organization Tupac Amaru. That takeover started when rebels stormed a cocktail party, and lasted for several months, until the guerrillas were all killed or captured.

In "Bel Canto," the Latin American country is unnamed, though like the Peru of 1996, it has a president of Japanese parentage. The country is poor and very much wants foreign investment, so it woos the chairman of the Japanese Nansai Corp., hoping he will build a factory there. Katsumi Hosokawa has no such intentions and has resisted the politicians' advances so far, but then they tempt him with a birthday party at which they promise the American lyric soprano Roxane Coss will sing. They have figured out that the workaholic Hosokawa has one passion, opera, embodied in one singer, Coss.

Hosokawa accepts the invitation, and he is gathered at the vice president's mansion with nearly a hundred politicians, diplomats and businessmen when 18 terrorists stream through the air-conditioning ducts. They are there for the president, they shout. They want freedom "for the people," or failing that, for some comrades held in prison.

But President Matsuda isn't at the party. He's at home, watching his favorite soap opera, "The Story of Maria," on television. It's the episode in which Maria might escape her kidnappers, and he can't be expected to miss that.

That's the first hint this will be a novel about the mesmerizing power of art, though to put the president in the thrall of a soap opera may sound as though it's a setup for satire. To Patchett's credit she doesn't make too much comedy out of the parallels — Hosokawa and opera, Matsuda and soap opera, Hosokawa and Roxane, Matsuda and Maria — leaving them untouched to demonstrate that devotion can come on many levels.

The terrorists are utterly befuddled upon being confronted with dozens of hostages, none of whom they want. They

dither until the next day, when a Swiss Red Cross volunteer named Joachim Messner calmly appears at their door and suggests that they free all the women, who consist of wives (apparently there are no women among the diplomats' ranks) and Coss. The terrorists agree, but then shake off their confusion for an instant to insist that Coss stay. She is, after all, their one celebrity and so their one bargaining chip.

What happens next is a standoff that is both a touch fantastic and yet deeply alluring. The terrorists shoot no one and seem not very eager to shoot anyone. The hostages attempt no escapes and seem not very eager to attempt any escapes. Each day Messner appears with the same old demands from the government, which he never presses on the rebels, and leaves each day with the same old demands from the terrorists, which he never presses on the government. Food and toilet paper get quietly replenished, as if the vice president's mansion had been turned into a four-star spa and all the inhabitants were on a long-needed sabbatical.

Even the weather contributes to the fairy tale. For weeks the city is beset by a foggy drizzle that never quite turns into rain, muting the sounds of the governments' bullhorns outside and enwombing the rebels and the hostages within the walls of the vice president's garden. It becomes quite cozy there, every need met, listening to Coss sing aria after aria day after day.

Is it any wonder that, in this fantasy world, love and friendship bloom? More than one of the hostages falls in love with Coss; she eventually falls in love with one of them. Love blossoms between Hosokawa's shy young translator, Gen, and an even shier terrorist, the beautiful teenager Carmen. The hostages, who are French, Dutch, Japanese, German, Italian, Russian and American and who seldom speak each others' languages, become friends with each other.

The hostages even befriend the terrorists, such as when the vice president offers antibiotics to the shingles-afflicted terrorist leader. (Even more remarkable, those are the antibiotics the vice president got to treat a cut sustained when a terrorist struck him on the face, during the bad first day of the capture.)

How is it possible that the differences among all these people are bridged?

Patchett sets up several translators — bridge-builders — among her cast. First is the amazing Gen, who is fluent in an incredible number of languages and blessed with the empathy to translate hundreds of conversations each day. Gen is an obvious bridge, but he soon comes to believe that his language skills are not what are bringing the hostages and rebels together.

Second is Messner, who is appointed to bring the siege to a peaceful conclusion. But his willingness and hard work are not enough, signaled by his name ("messing up?") and by his insistence on neutrality (a dig at the Swiss?).

So the answer must come from Roxane Coss — whose name rhymes with and reminds us of "Red Cross" — who speaks a language everyone in the room is ready to hear: music. It's in the figure of Coss that Patchett's fantasy elements get the clearest expression. Coss' singing is not merely charismatic; like Circe's, it has the power to make every man who hears her fall in love, even those who have never heard opera before. (A charming scene, which Patchett rightly avoids playing for comedy, has one of the Russians declaring his sudden mad love for Coss through Gen's patient translation.)

Her singing emboldens Carmen to ask Gen to teach her to read. It empowers another one of the young terrorists, Cesar, to sing himself and to discover that he has a great gift. It teaches the vice president to put aside his political ambitions to vow to become a more doting father.

Her singing even makes the terrorists put down their guns during a tense moment, when she launches into "O mio babbino caro," the show-stopping aria from Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi." Opera fans make big claims about their beloved art, but few would say singing can stop bullets.

There are other fabulous threads to the story — Gen is a genius, Carmen is a Venus, a captive priest is a saint — and

they are heightened by the contrast with Patchett's matter-of-fact style, which is more news bulletin than fairy tale. The matter-of-factness helps with the epilogue, which tries to explain what happened after the inevitable moment when the government finally became fed up with the rebels and burst into the mansion. The epilogue is not as successful as the rest of the novel; some readers will think that Patchett misjudged some of her key characters' motivations.

Others will see that the epilogue aptly captures the disappointment when a fantasy collides with the outside world. After all, not even a fantasy as delightful as "Bel Canto" can last forever.

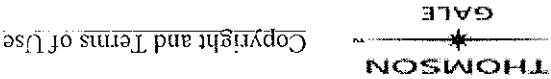
But while it does last, Patchett's novel is a provocative and enchanting look at the power art has to suspend real life and to create a better world, one in which the differences between people can be erased and the barriers to our best selves can be hurdled.

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## Ann Patchett

1963-

Entry Updated : 04/29/2003  
Birth Place: Los Angeles, CA

Personal Information  
Career  
Writings  
Media Adaptations  
Sidelights  
Further Readings About the Author

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**Career:** Freelance writer. Ecco Press, editorial assistant, 1984; Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, writer-in-residence, 1989-90; Murray State University, Murray, KY, visiting assistant professor, 1992; University of the South, Nashville, TN, Tennessee Williams fellow in Creative Writing, 1997.

**Awards:** Award for Fiction, Trans-Atlantic Henfield Foundation, 1984; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies*, 1986, for "For Rita, Who Is Never Alice"; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, *Columbia*, 1987, for "The Magician's Assistant's Dream"; residential fellow of Yaddo and Millay Colony for the Arts, both 1989; James A. Michener/Copernicus Award, University of Iowa, 1989, for work on *Patron Saint of Liars*; residential fellow, Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, RI, 1990-91; Mary Ingraham Bunting fellowship, 1993; Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best work of fiction, 1994, for *Taft*; Tennessee Writers Award of the Year, *Nashville Banner*, and Guggenheim fellowship, both

1994, both for *The Magician's Assistant*; one of *Salon.com's* favorite books of the year, and nominee for National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction category, both 2001, and finalist for P.E.N./Faulkner Award, 2002, all for *Bel Canto*; Orange Prize for fiction, 2002, for *Bel Canto*.

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

### NOVELS

- *The Patron Saint of Liars*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1992.
- *Taft*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1994.
- *The Magician's Assistant*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Bel Canto*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2001.

### OTHER

Work represented in anthologies, including *Twenty under Thirty*, edited by Debra Spark, Scribner (New York, NY), 1987; *Twenty for the Nineties*, edited by Monica Wood, J. Weston Walch (Portland, ME), 1992; and *The Anthology of the Fine Arts Work Center*, Sheephead Press, 1993. Contributor of stories to *Columbia*, *Seventeen*, *Southern Review*, *Paris Review*, *New Madrid*, *Epoch*, and *Iowa Review*. Contributor of nonfiction to *GQ*, *Outside* and *Vogue*. Editor, *Sarah Lawrence Review*, 1983-84; fiction editor, *Shankpaainter*, 1990-91.

**Media Adaptations:** The story "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica" was adapted as a play; *The Patron Saint of Liars* was filmed for television by CBS, 1997.

### "Sidelights"

Author of the novels *Taft* and *Bel Canto*, Ann Patchett is one of the most interesting and unconventional writers of her generation. Patchett's power as a writer seems to derive from her unusual ability to make believable the voices of a sweeping array of characters, running the gamut from a Catholic nun to a black blues drummer to a gay magician.

In 1984, on her twenty-first birthday, Patchett published her first story, "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica," a narrative set in the 1940s about a black family with eight children. Patchett, a white woman from Nashville, Tennessee, had actually written it two years earlier when she was a sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College. "Because I was nineteen, I had the courage and confidence to approach such subject matter with authority," she told Elizabeth Bernstein in an interview for *Publishers Weekly*. Patchett described the origins of her diverse characters in moments of fantasy. "I never thought it was strange to pick these topics," she recounted to Bernstein. "I just really believe that using your imagination is the one time in your life you can really go anywhere."

*The Patron Saint of Liars*, Patchett's first novel, shows just such imagination. It tells the story of a young pregnant woman who flees from a dull marriage, driving across the country to find a new, different, and unexpected sense of family at St. Elizabeth's, a Roman Catholic home for unwed mothers in Kentucky. Critics point out that the novel may strain belief at times, in particular because it provides no contextual sense of hotly debated social issues surrounding marriage and reproduction in the Catholic Church. However, as Alice McDermott, reviewing the novel in the *New York Times Book Review*, pointed out, Patchett's project is to write "a

made up story of an enchanted place." Comparing *The Patron Saint of Liars* to a fairy tale, McDermott explained that "the world of St. Elizabeth's, and of the novel itself, . . . retains some sense of the miraculous, of a genuine, if unanticipated, power to heal."

Her next novel, *Taff*, also received critical praise, though reviewers disagreed as to whether or not this work exceeded Patchett's achievement in *The Patron Saint of Liars*. *Taff*'s action centers around a Memphis blues bar called Muddy's. The black, middle-aged bartender, Nickel, who narrates the story, becomes imaginatively and practically entangled in the life of a white working-class teenager, Fay Taff, and that of her family. Focusing on their relationship, Patchett weaves a multi-layered narrative about unconventional kinds of love and improvisational familial ties.

In her critically acclaimed third novel, *The Magician's Assistant*, Patchett continues to explore the themes of unorthodox love, abandonment and transcendence and the surprising places people go to feel at home. The protagonist and title character, Sabine, has long been in love with the gay magician she assists. As the narrative opens, Parsifal, the magician, who is afflicted with AIDS, dies suddenly from a stroke. Sabine and Parsifal had entered into an unusual marriage, and upon his death she is embraced by his family, a family she had not known existed. Sabine meets her estranged in-laws, and together they try to put together the pieces of Parsifal's past. As Sabine shares her grief, she finds a hint of redemption and a way to transform herself. Veronica Chambers, reviewing *The Magician's Assistant* for *Newsweek*, called it "a '90s love story wrought with all the grace and classic charm of a 19th-century novel."

By the time her fourth novel was released, Patchett had earned a reputation for quality. That reputation was sealed with the publication of *Bel Canto*. Loosely based on a real-life 1996 hostage crisis in Lima, Peru, *Bel Canto*--an opera term that means "fine singing"--takes place in an unnamed South American country, where the vice-presidential palace is the scene for a birthday reception honoring a prominent businessman, the chairman of a huge Japanese electronics concern. "The poor host country was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense, hoping that Hosokawa might help with training, trade, a factory--something that will make it look like the nation is moving away from drug trafficking," according to *Seattle Times* critic Valerie Ryan.

One of the star guests at this party is Roxane Cross, a revered American opera soprano who has agreed to perform for her biggest fan, Hosokawa. As the lights dim following her aria, the peace is shattered by the invasion of terrorists. The electronics tycoon, the diva, the vice president and sixty dignitaries are taken hostage. "In a marvelously loopy touch," noted David Kipen in *San Francisco Chronicle*, "the president has begged off to watch his favorite telenovela." Negotiations reach a stalemate, but inside the mansion hostages and guerrillas are oblivious to the action. Instead, as the siege stretches to four-and-a-half months, hostages and terrorist form bonds of friendship and even love inside the mansion; "pretty soon, nobody wants to kill anybody," in Kipen's words. But some characters will be killed.

Thematically, *Bel Canto* is "similar to my other works in that people are thrown together by circumstance," Patchett told David Podgurski in a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* interview. "But I wanted to write a truly omniscient third-person narrative, a 'Russian' novel. . . . I wanted all of the drama as I saw it unfold on television--it seemed so operatic--and to have all that and yet keep it within a narrative that wasn't a potboiler."

She needn't have worried. *Bel Canto* received warm notices from many reviewers, among them *Salon.com*'s Laura Miller. "With this scenario, you'd expect [*Bel Canto*] to be populated by the kind of romantic figures found in books and movies like *Chocolat*, cartoonish outlines that

invite the reader to stop inside and fancy herself the embodiment of, say, joyous Sensuality or the Human Spirit. Instead, the characters Patchett has created are just that, characters; they're not empty enough to 'identify' with." *Guardian* contributor Alex Clark applauded Patchett's range. "With bravura confidence and inventiveness she varies her pace to encompass both lightning flashes of brutality and terror and long stretches of incarcerated ennui," he stated. "The novel's sensibilities extend from the sly wit of observational humor to subtle, mournful insights into the nature of yearning and desire."

What was it about the real-life crisis that inspired Patchett's interest in a fictional retelling? In an essay for *First Person Book Page*, she recalled her absorption in the unfolding events of 1996: "Very few disasters happen in slow motion: plane crashes, school shootings, earthquakes--by the time we hear about them, they're usually over. But the story in Lima stretched on, one month, two, three. . . ." During that, she added, "I couldn't stop thinking about these people. There is no such thing as a good kidnapping, but I heard the hostages played chess with their captors. I heard they played soccer. There were rumors of large pizza orders." To Patchett, the story had "all elements I was interested in: the construction of family, the displacement from home, a life that was at once dangerous and completely benign."

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## Ann Patchett

1963-

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[Further Readings About the Author](#)

**Personal Information:** Family: Born December 2, 1963, in Los Angeles, CA; daughter of Frank (a police captain) and Jeanne Ray (a nurse; maiden name, Wilkinson) Patchett. Education: Sarah Lawrence College (Bronxville, NY), B.A., 1984; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1987. Politics: "Roosevelt Democrat." Religion: Roman Catholic. Addresses: Home: Nashville, TN. Agent: Lisa Bankoff, International Creative Management, 40 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

**Career:** Freelance writer. Ecco Press, editorial assistant, 1984; Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, writer-in-residence, 1989-90; Murray State University, Murray, KY, visiting assistant professor, 1992; University of the South, Nashville, TN, Tennessee Williams fellow in Creative Writing, 1997.

**Awards:** Award for Fiction, Trans-Atlantic Henfield Foundation, 1984; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies*, 1986, for "For Rita, Who Is Never Alice"; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, *Columbia*, 1987, for "The Magician's Assistant's Dream"; residential fellow of Yaddo and Millay Colony for the Arts, both 1989; James A. Michener/Copernicus Award, University of Iowa, 1989, for work on *Patron Saint of Liars*; residential fellow, Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, RI, 1990-91; Mary Ingram Bunting fellowship, 1993; Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best work of fiction, 1994, for *Taft*; Tennessee Writers Award of the Year, *Nashville Banner*, and Guggenheim fellowship, both 1994, both for *The Magician's Assistant*; one of *Salon.com's* favorite books of the year, and nominee for National Book Critics Circle Award in fiction category, both 2001, and finalist for P.E.N./Faulkner Award, 2002, all for *Bel Canto*; Orange Prize for fiction, 2002, for *Bel Canto*.

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

### NOVELS

- *The Patron Saint of Liars*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1992.
- *Taft*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1994.
- *The Magician's Assistant*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Bel Canto*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2001.

### OTHER

Work represented in anthologies, including *Twenty under Thirty*, edited by Debra Spark, Scribner (New York, NY), 1987; *Twenty for the Nineties*, edited by Monica Wood, J. Weston Walch (Portland, ME), 1992; and *The Anthology of the Fine Arts Work Center*, Sheepshead Press, 1993. Contributor of stories to *Columbia, Seventeen*, [http://galenet.galegroup.com/servelet/LitRC?vrn=3&OP=contains&locID=metronet\\_mncl&srchtp=ath...](http://galenet.galegroup.com/servelet/LitRC?vrn=3&OP=contains&locID=metronet_mncl&srchtp=ath...) 2/26/04

*Southern Review*, *Paris Review*, *New Madrid*, *Epoch*, and *Iowa Review*. Contributor of nonfiction to *GQ*, *Outside* and *Vogue*. Editor, *Sarah Lawrence Review*, 1983-84; fiction editor, *Shankpainter*, 1990-91.

**Media Adaptations:** The story "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica" was adapted as a play; *The Patron Saint of Liars* was filmed for television by CBS, 1997.

## "Sidelights"

Author of the novels *Taft* and *Bel Canto*, Ann Patchett is one of the most interesting and unconventional writers of her generation. Patchett's power as a writer seems to derive from her unusual ability to make believable the voices of a sweeping array of characters, running the gamut from a Catholic nun to a black blues drummer to a gay magician.

In 1984, on her twenty-first birthday, Patchett published her first story, "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica," a narrative set in the 1940s about a black family with eight children. Patchett, a white woman from Nashville, Tennessee, had actually written it two years earlier when she was a sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College. "Because I was nineteen, I had the courage and confidence to approach such subject matter with authority," she told Elizabeth Bernstein in an interview for *Publishers Weekly*. Patchett described the origins of her diverse characters in moments of fantasy. "I never thought it was strange to pick these topics," she recounted to Bernstein. "I just really believe that using your imagination is the one time in your life you can really go anywhere."

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By the time her fourth novel was released, Patchett had earned a reputation for quality. That reputation was sealed with the publication of *Bel Canto*. Loosely based on a real-life 1996 hostage crisis in Lima, Peru, *Bel Canto*--an opera term that means "fine singing"--takes place in an unnamed South American country, where the vice-presidential palace is the scene for a birthday reception honoring a prominent businessman, the chairman of a huge



Japanese electronics concern. "The poor host country was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense, hoping that Hosokawa might help with training, trade, a factory--something that will make it look like the nation is moving away from drug trafficking," according to *Seattle Times* critic Valerie Ryan.

One of the star guests at this party is Roxane Cross, a revered American opera soprano who has agreed to perform for her biggest fan, Hosokawa. As the lights dim following her aria, the peace is shattered by the invasion of terrorists. The electronics tycoon, the diva, the vice president and sixty dignitaries are taken hostage. "In a marvelously loopy touch," noted David Kipen in *San Francisco Chronicle*, "the president has begged off to watch his favorite telenovela." Negotiations reach a stalemate, but inside the mansion hostages and guerrillas are oblivious to the action. Instead, as the siege stretches to four-and-a-half months, hostages and terrorist form bonds of friendship and even love inside the mansion; "pretty soon, nobody wants to kill anybody," in Kipen's words. But some characters will be killed.

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# Ann Patchett

## Biography

Ann Patchett was born in Los Angeles in 1963, the youngest daughter of her nurse mother and police officer father. At the age of six, she and her mother and sister relocated to Nashville, Tennessee.

While attending Sarah Lawrence College, Patchett took fiction writing classes with Alan Gurganus, Russell Banks, and Grace Paley. She sold her first story to the *Paris Review*, where it was published before her graduation. Patchett then went on to attend the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop.

In 1990, Patchett won a residential fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. It is there that she wrote her first novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, which received a James A. Michener/Copernicus Award for a book in progress. In 1993, she received a Bunting Fellowship from the Mary Ingraham 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 in 1994. In October of the same year, just three days after the official release of *The Magician's Assistant*, Patchett was awarded the Nashville Banner Tennessee Writer of the Year Award. *The Patron Saint of Liars* was adapted into a TV movie for CBS in 1997. *Taft* has been optioned by Morgan Freeman for a feature film for which Patchett wrote the screenplay. Patchett has also written for numerous publications, including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Elle*, and *Gourmet*.

Ann Patchett's most recent awards, received for *Bel Canto*, include the PEN/Faulkner Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist. Patchett currently lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

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A Conversation with  
Ann Patchett

## A Conversation with Ann Patchett

What inspired you to write *Bel Canto*?

Usually it's hard to pin down the exact point at which you come up with an idea for a novel, but this one is easy: December 17, 1996, the night that the terrorist organization Tupac Amaru took over the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru. I'm sure I didn't know that day that this story would turn into *Bel Canto*, but I was completely focused on it from the start. It had so many elements that were compelling to me: confinement, survival, the construction of family. For a long time I'd wanted to find a way to experience the things I read about in the paper, to grieve for disasters that had no immediate effect on my life. Turning a tragedy I knew nothing about into this novel was part of that process.

Were you an opera aficionado prior to writing *Bel Canto*?

I wasn't. I knew as much about opera as I did about baseball, which is to say nothing. But once I came up with the character of Roxane Coss I threw myself into learning about it whole-heartedly. The best thing I did was to buy a book called *Opera 101* by Fred Plotkin. It tells you how to listen and what to listen to. It takes you through everything you need to know step by step. It was my bible. Then I listened to a 28-hour lecture series called "The History of Opera." I also started playing opera all the time and attending operas whenever possible. I absolutely fell in love with opera. It's been such a wonderful bonus of writing this book. I feel like I learned a second language.

Roxane Coss is a fascinating character. Is she modeled on an actual opera singer?

She's modeled on the only opera singer I know personally, a woman named Karol Bennett. Karol and I were both fellows at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College in 1990-91. Physically, Karol and Roxane are very similar, small women with huge personalities. Karol commanded any room she walked into. It was as if music surrounded her even when she wasn't singing. I admired her greatly. The funny thing is that now I know Roxane so much better than I ever knew Karol. For Roxane's singing I mostly listened to Rene Fleming. I didn't have any recordings of Karol singing so I gave my character Rene Fleming's voice.

The two love stories in the book are between Gen and Carmen and Roxane and Mr. Hosokawa, and yet in the end it is Roxane and Gen who are married. Did you envision the ending this way or did it evolve during the writing process?

Originally the book had a prologue that was written by Gen that said, basically, "This is the story of how I met my wife." That was the place from which I started the book. When I was finished, my friend Elizabeth McCracken (*The Giant's House*, *Niagra Falls All Over Again*) said that I should get rid of the prologue. Elizabeth is the only person who reads my work while I'm writing it and I trust her judgment completely, so the prologue went.

Aside from the Epilogue, the entire story takes place in one setting—the Vice President's mansion. Did you find it challenging to set the story solely in this location?

It would have been a lot more challenging if I had included the outside world. Things certainly got static keeping everybody inside. Most of the book happens in the living room with a few brief trips to the kitchen and the china closet, but it helped me since what I was trying to do was

establish the cessation of time. It's easier to stop time if you keep everyone in one place.

In one instance in *Bel Canto*, the character Fyodorov states, "Some people are born to make great art and others are born to appreciate it. Don't you think? It is a kind of talent in itself, to be an audience, whether you are the spectator in the gallery or you are listening to the voice of the world's greatest soprano. Not everyone can be the artist. There have to be those who witness the art, who love and appreciate what they have been privileged to see" (pgs. 218-219). How do you think this relates to writers and readers?

I believe literature takes place between the writer and the reader. You bring your imagination, they bring theirs, and together you make a book. It's a kind of literary chemistry, and what's great about this is that the book is going to be different for everyone who reads it. Fyodorov was acknowledging the talent of the audience, the importance of the person who listens, reads, sees. I believe this absolutely. He makes a case of the audience member who has trained himself to understand, to more fully appreciate the art. Fyodorov is the perfect reader.

**Why did you choose to construct the novel with a narrator looking back on the events that took place rather than as a straight narrative?**

You can either write in the present tense, which isn't something I'm interested in doing personally, or you can write in the past tense. If it is two minutes past the action or two months or two years, it's still the past. The narrative voice is always somewhat more informed than the characters because it has gone before the characters. It makes sense to me to use that voice to its fullest advantage. I think there's a level on which the reader has to know how this story is going to end, even if they don't associate the novel with the real events in Lima. It's a struggle between what we know is going to happen and what we want to have happen, which is something most of us encounter in our lives. I wanted the narrative structure to reflect this.

**How does *Bel Canto* differ from the other novels you've written?**

I could more easily tell you how it's similar to my other novels. I think what's different is that *Bel Canto* is more heroic because the circumstances are more dire. I'd like to believe that if you took the characters from my other books and placed them in this novel they would have been equally heroic, but I don't know. Also, the narrative structure in this book is much more ambitious. I've always wanted to write a book with a truly omniscient narrative voice that switched easily from character to character. It's the thing I'm most proud of in this book and the thing that probably no one will notice.

**What were some of the challenges you faced in adapting *Taft* into a screenplay? Would you like to see *Bel Canto* made into a movie?**

The challenges of adapting *Taft* into a screenplay all had to do with working with the production company of the film. Novels are written alone, screenplays are written by committee. I am a novelist. The work was easy but extremely frustrating, and I hope I have the sense not to do it again. I don't think *Bel Canto* is a logical choice for film because of the language issues, the oversized cast, and the suffocating location. It would take someone with a great deal of passion for the project to get it right. I would, however, love to see this book made into an opera.

**What writers do you admire? Have any of them influenced your work?**

Can we attach an additional file for this question? I'm sure everyone has influenced my work. What about a list of writers I wish would influence my work more? I would put Nabokov on the top of that list along with Gabriel Garcia-Márquez and Alice Munro. I don't see any of their brilliance in my work, and I wish I did. When I think of the people who did influence me, Chekhov, Welty, Updike, I only wish they would hurry up and influence me some more. I think the single book that influenced me the most was Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. In fact, **Bel Canto** is really an homage to *The Magic Mountain*. I've learned so much about plot from Raymond Chandler, how to be literary and keep the story clipping right along at the same time. I love that about Chandler. I learned about characterization from Chekhov and description from Joan Didion. Everything else I know about writing I learned from Elizabeth McCracken.

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## Ann Patchett's Tour Journal

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Each week she is on tour promoting **Bel Canto**, Ann Patchett will be talking to Bookreporter.com about her experiences:

*"As I understand it, I'm supposed to write about the experiences of book tour. This shouldn't be a problem since book tour is the only thing on my mind these days, and the people I know are getting pretty tired of hearing me talk about it. I also feel a great deal of freedom to speak frankly as I cannot imagine anyone would want to read anything that anyone has to say about book tour. If a tree prattles on alone in a forest does it make a sound?"*

*"Let's start back at the beginning..."*

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## Ann Patchett

1963-

Nationality: American  
Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2004.  
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## "Sidelights"

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## AWARDS

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## CAREER

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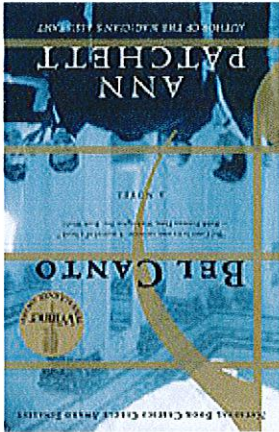
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**Review**

**BEL CANTO**  
**Ann Patchett**  
HarperCollins  
Fiction  
ISBN: 0060934417

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The old adage "Wherever you go, there you are" is perhaps the most fully realized in Ann Patchett's latest novel, BEL CANTO. When a group of international business and political hotshots gather together to pay homage to a big cheese with serious money (which he may or may not offer to help the failing economy of the small Latin country that is hosting this event), they not only get the pleasure of hearing perform the finest opera singer in the world, but also become the targets of a revolutionary group's kidnapping efforts. As Roxane Coss attempts to tame the twin beasts of her heart and the riled-up revolutionaries with song and style, every participant in this crazy drama has a grand revelation as they move towards an uncertain future.

Somehow Patchett manages to take what could have been a tired and tried idea (after all, the recent murders in the capital of Nepal speak for violence and high politics as being perfect bedfellows) and turns it into a character study of the inner workings of people not used to sharing their feelings, their soul's every turn. Instead, their love of opera, the reach of the music, the pain and pleasure it creates, manages to somehow unleash in all of them, politico and desperado alike, a dire and desperate desire to live, to be in the world. Roxane's mere presence, the sharing of her artistry, her command of the situation, manages to alter the lives of every single person in the Vice Presidential mansion. There are characters here that you will love, and some that you may revile, but each of them, in their own way, is complete and entrancing --- Patchett manages to make them extravagantly drawn individuals, whether they are the young woman revolutionary or the Vice President looking back over his life, full of mistakes, full of regrets.

The story tends to break down at some points under the weight of



the characterizations in tandem with the hard-lined violence. However, none of it is gratuitous and, eventually, when a box of sheet music is found and sorted through, the story really begins to soar. It is the power of art that transforms the story and, in so doing, the story becomes more artful and compelling. BEL CANTO is an interesting mix of the mundane and the magical.

--- Reviewed by Jana Siciliano

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*New Statesman* (1996), July 30, 2001 v130 i4548 p43

novel of the week. (Bel Canto)(Review) *RUTH SCURR*.

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BEL CANTO

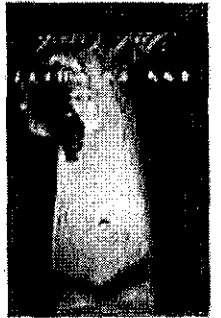
Ann Patchett

Fourth Estate, 318pp, [pound]10

The point of departure for Ann Patchett's new novel is the raid, in December 1996, on the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru, which lasted for more than four months and during which one hostage and 14 rebels were killed. Bet Canto, like *La Traviata*, opens on a wonderful party. In the unnamed capital of an underdeveloped country, the vice-president is hosting a birthday party for a Japanese industrialist. Mr Hosokawa has been seduced into attending the party, held in his honour, by the promise of a private performance from the world-famous soprano Roxane Coss. As the last notes of the aria from Dvorak's *Rusalka* settle on a rapt and prestigious international audience, the lights go out and another uninvited audience, ragged and gun-toting, bursts from underground and takes the whole party hostage.

This is a promising basis for a novel: a canny way to combine the austere desert island scenario with high culture, and a neat means of imposing the classical dramatic constraints on action, character and setting. Patchett is an astute and amusing observer of bourgeois shock, immediately dividing the female hostages into two groups: those who expect to survive and are careful not to crease their gowns as they lie down on the drawing-room floor, and those quicker to anticipate death or worse and abandon their sartorial preoccupations. She continues to divide and subdivide the group by temperament, nationality, religion and intellect, but soon the problem faced by the terrorists becomes Patchett's own: there are simply too many of these people and some of them must go.

For their part, the terrorists only meant to take a single hostage, President Masuda, who should have been at the party but wasn't, because it clashed with his favourite soap opera. They are a splinter organisation of impoverished outlaws, aiming to overthrow the government in the name of the people; most of them adolescents following a doughty old general, painfully disfigured by shingles. When General Alfredo collapses in an armchair, his face covered in blisters, sighing with relief because most of the hostages have been released and the remaining 40 will be much more manageable, Patchett's own relief is also audible. She gives very fleeting attention to the problem of establishing discipline and routine in such peculiar circumstances, noting that "a week after Mr Hosokawa's birthday party ended seems as good a place as any" to rejoin the story. And she homes in on the love interest that emerges, in true operatic style, between two couples: Hosokawa and Coss (sharing only the language of music); and Hosokawa's fantastically skilled translator, Gen, and a girl terrorist called Carmen.



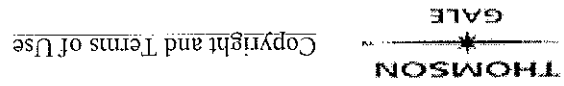
The best parts of this uneven novel are the most hammed-up and comically implausible. They offer a novelistic celebration of opera, where no one ever held wild improbability against a charming libretto. In the necessary absence

of music and singing, farce comes out on top. There is an excellent scene in the kitchen where a French hostage settles down to preparing coq sans vin, directing a line-up of terrorists wielding confiscated kitchen knives. But many of the more passionate and romantic scenes seem wooden and affected. "Her knees touched his legs. If he took even half a step back he would be on the commode." The beleaguered General Alfredo is far from convincing when he insists, "We are an army, not a conservatory." All around, people burst into song as they rediscover the importance of music. As a result, the community of prisoners and guards acquires a surprisingly anodyne, ad hoc identity as the weeks pass, making the predictable (and authorially predicted) bloody ending all the more baffling. It's like gunmen breaking into the Big Brother house and murdering the inmates: horribly silly.

**Named Works:** Bel Canto (Book) - Book reviews

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*The Bookseller*, June 14, 2002 p7(1)

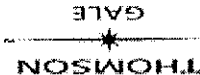
**Orange Prize for Fiction to Ann Patchett's Bel Canto (Fourth Estate) a surprise result. (Media Watch).** (Brief Article)

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2002 VNU Business Media

The Guardian called the awarding of the Orange Prize for Fiction to Ann Patchett's Bel Canto (Fourth Estate) a surprise result. Patchett beat the two favourites, Sarah Waters' Victorian melodrama Fingersmith (Virago), and Helen Dunmore's The Siege (Viking). "It ranks with Senegal beating France in the World Cup as one of the best results for us this summer," said one excited bookie.

**Named Works:** Bel Canto (Book) - Achievements and awards

Article A87868839



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Bel Canto (novel)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

*Bel Canto* is a 2001 novel by American author Ann Patchett, published by Perennial, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. It was awarded both the Orange Prize for Fiction and PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.<sup>[1]</sup> It was placed on several top book lists, including Amazon's Best Books of 2001.<sup>[2]</sup>

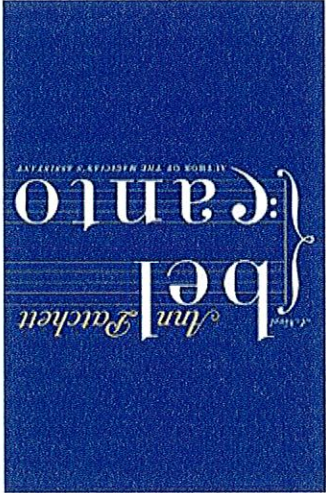
Based on the Lima Crisis,<sup>[3]</sup> this book is about a group of terrorists who hold high executives and people of high political standing hostage. It explores how the terrorists and hostages cope with living in a house together for several months.<sup>[4]</sup> Many of the characters form unbreakable bonds of friendship, while some fall in love.

Contents

- 1 Plot summary
- 2 Characters in "Bel Canto"
- 3 Setting
- 3.1 Location
- 3.2 Time
- 4 Themes
  - 4.1 Opera
  - 4.2 Community
- 5 Writing the Book
- 6 Footnotes

Plot summary

Set in an unnamed South American country,<sup>[5]</sup> the story begins at a birthday party thrown at the country's vice presidential home. The party is thrown for Katsumi Hosokawa, the visiting chairman of a large Japanese electronics company called Nansel. Performing is a famous American soprano, Roxane Coss.



Cover of the first edition of *Bel Canto* (2001)

|                  |                                                       |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Author           | Ann Patchett                                          |
| Cover artist     | Elizabeth Ackerman, Echos/Nonstock                    |
| Country          | United States                                         |
| Language         | English                                               |
| Genre(s)         | Thriller novel                                        |
| Publisher        | Perennial, HarperCollins                              |
| Publication date | 2001                                                  |
| Media type       | Print (Paperback and Hardback) & AudioBook (Cassette) |
| Pages            | 318 (Paperback)                                       |
| ISBN             | ISBN 0-06-093441-7                                    |

Near the end of the party, members of a terrorist organization break into the house looking for the President. When it is discovered that the President did not attend the party, the terrorist group decides to take the entire party hostage.

After determining they have too many hostages, the terrorists decide to release all of the hostages except those they deem most important and most likely to receive a large ransom.<sup>[6]</sup> This includes Hosokawa, Roxane, and the translator Gen.

Two major romantic relationships develop as the standoff drags on and serve as the backdrop to the rest of the story. The first is between Roxane Coss and Katsumi Hosokawa. Hosokawa is one of Roxane's biggest fans and he attended the party because Roxane was going to be singing. When they are placed in the house together, they develop a deep bond, even though they do not speak each other's language and thus cannot communicate verbally. The second relationship is between Gen Watanabe and the young terrorist Carmen. They must keep their love a secret because Carmen is forbidden to have relationships with a hostage. The two lovers meet in the china closet every night to practice Carmen's reading and eventually to make love.

At the end of the novel, the government breaks into the house and kills all the terrorists. All of the hostages are freed except for Mr. Hosokawa, who dies in the struggle.<sup>[7]</sup> The novel ends some time after the crisis we learn that Gen and Roxane were married in France.

Characters in "Bel Canto"

**Katsumi Hosokawa** is the founder and chairman of Nansel, the largest electronics corporation in Japan. It is in his honor that the initial birthday party is held that the hostages attend and that the terrorists invade. He is married with two daughters. A workaholic, his greatest love has been opera music since attending a performance with his father as a child. He fell in love with

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bel\\_Canto\\_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bel_Canto_(novel))



Roxane's voice before he fell in love with her person, and the host country's government bribes him into visiting by booking her to sing at the party. [8] He has a strong bond with his young translator Gen, who always anticipates his needs. He speaks little Spanish and must use Gen for all communication in the host country, though during the hostage period he resolve to learn ten new words every day. He falls in love with Roxane, but knows their relationship can only last for the duration of the standoff. He is gunned down in the final scenes by the soldiers of the host county, in his attempt to save Carmen. [7]

**Roxane Coss** is an internationally renowned American soprano. She is invited to perform at the party because the host country wanted to convince Mr. Hosokawa to attend the party. In her late thirties, she is a petite woman with dyed blonde hair. While not conventionally gorgeous, she possesses a rare charisma; every man in attendance is in love with her to some extent because of her ethereal singing voice. She is detained when all the other women are freed during the first few days. At first a prima donna who sets herself apart from the rest of the guests, she eventually begins to bond with the others when she receives a box of musical scores and begins singing to them every morning. She is especially touched by her relationships with Mr. Hosokawa, with whom she falls in love, Gen, whom she forms a strong bond eventually marries, Carmen, who sleeps in her bed, braids her hair, and comforts her, and Cesar, another young terrorist with a gifted singing voice whom she begins tutoring.

**Gen Watanabe** is Mr. Hosokawa's translator and assistant A quiet, sensitive and gifted young man who speaks all the major languages and many minor ones; he divides the languages he speaks into "extremely fluent, very fluent, fluent, passable and could read". [9] He is usually at the center of the action of the novel, since most of the multinational characters communicate through him. He cares deeply for Mr. Hosokawa, and though the other characters rely on him, he feels different from the rest of the hostages because among them he is the only one, besides perhaps Father Arguedas, the priest, who is not fabulously wealthy and powerful. He has only slept with three women in his life. [10] He begins tutoring Carmen when she asks him to teach her how to read and write in Spanish and English, and they begin meeting each night in the china closet, reading and eventually making love. When she leads him outside to the garden one night, he later regrets not walking into the street and taking her back to Japan with him. When the authorities come, he plans to tell them she is his wife in order to save her. Gen eventually marries Roxane and moves to Italy with her.

**Carmen** is the terrorist Gen loves. Carmen remains anonymous in the guise of a male terrorist for the first part of the novel. The leader of the organization, General Benjamin, notices what a beautiful young woman she has become and notes that, "had she been this pretty before, he never would have let her sign up" [11]. A Quechua-speaking Indian girl from the jungle, she often prays to Saint Rose of Lima. As he teaches her, Gen realizes that she is as smart as any of the women he knew from university, and she loves him deeply. She knows that after the standoff ends, she might never see him again, and together they build something unique and rare. In the ultimate shootout, she is gunned down before Gen can get to her. In the newspaper articles after the fact, there is no record of her ever existing.

## Setting

### Location

Most of the book takes place in the Vice President's house. [12] The house has two floors. On the first floor is the living room, which is a large space where the hostages gathered for the party. The room was decorated with all the most important artwork and was cleaned to the best of its ability because they were trying to convince Mr. Hosokawa and the other businessmen to invest in their country. Also on the first floor is the dining room, the kitchen, and the china closet where Gen and Carmen meet nightly. The first floor also contains a guest suite, which is where General Alfredo sleeps. [13]

On the second floor is a variety of rooms. In a hallway near the kitchen is a narrow and twisting staircase [14] that leads to the servants' quarters, which contains a door to the nursery. The nursery opens up to the second floor, and at the third door past the bathroom is Roxane's room. [15]. Mr. Hosokawa takes this path to see Roxane at night and Carmen takes the route in reverse to meet Gen.

Surrounding the house is a garden with a ten-foot wall. There are two known ways to enter the garden. One is through the kitchen and onto the back porch [16] while the other is through the front door and beyond a stone walkway. [17] The garden was prepared for the party and contained many beautiful plants. However, while the crisis was going on, no one has been able to tend to the garden. By the time the hostages were allowed to enter the garden, the grass was high enough to brush against the people's calves. The garden contains many plants, including jasmine vines and evening lilies. [16] In the garden there is a curve in the wall that makes a pocket of grass and slender trees. It is impossible to see this spot from the house, and it is here that Gen and Carmen make love for the first time.

### Time

The book begins on the evening of Mr. Hosokawa's birthday, October 22.<sup>[18]</sup> The book in total spans four and a half months and the hostages are released sometime in late February or early March.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Themes

### Opera

Opera is often used in the story to draw the characters together. Roxane, one of the main characters, is a world famous opera singer. During the terrorists' time in the house, they are forced to think and reflect, and the thing they most reflect on is Roxane's music.<sup>[20]</sup> Her music brings the terrorists and hostages together as one people to admire her voice. Even the name of the novel suggests opera, as the name "Bel Canto" is an operatic term meaning "beautiful song."<sup>[21]</sup>

### Community

Before the characters entered the house, they were individuals that did not know much about each other. For example, Kato was an excellent piano player, but none of his co-workers knew that he played that instrument.<sup>[22]</sup> By the end of the novel, the hostages were friends and even lovers. For example, Roxane and Mr. Hosokawa first met in the house, but by the end of the novel, they were having sexual relations.

The hostages and terrorists also develop a sense of community among each other. At the beginning of the novel, the hostages lived in fear of the terrorists<sup>[23]</sup> while the hostages were only concerned with getting the President and leaving the house.<sup>[24]</sup> By the end of the novel, the hostages and terrorists are connected with each other. Gen and Carmen develop sexual relations, Cesar becomes Roxane's opera student and Ishmael pictures himself as the Vice-President's son.<sup>[25]</sup> The hostages and terrorists learn to create a community within the house and live together as a community

## Writing the Book

Patchett was inspired by the Lima Crisis when she watched the crisis on the news. The opera in the story was added when she thought how operatic the crisis was.<sup>[20]</sup> However, Patchett did not know anything about opera prior to writing the book.<sup>[12]</sup> To build a knowledge of opera, Patchett read books about opera, attended local theatre performances and listened to opera whenever she could.

Patchett has stated that writing her books has been a progression. She always wanted to write with a omniscient third person narrator, but stated that she always went back to a narrative structure she could handle.<sup>[26]</sup> She was pleased when she was able to write this book in the narrative she wanted.

The basis of this book was a prologue in Gen's perspective where he told us that this book is about how he met his wife. However, Patchett's mentor Elizabeth McCracken told her that the prologue was not needed, so Patchett took it out.<sup>[26]</sup> Also, Patchett's editor wanted her to take out three lines. One of the lines was about the plants growing a half-inch over the course of an hour. Patchett insisted on keeping the line and changed the length to a half-centimetre.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Footnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> ^ Best Books of 2001: Top 25 Editors' Favorites, *Amazon.com*. Retrieved on 2007-06-23.
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- 19. <sup>^</sup> Patchett, Ann (2001). *Bel Canto*. Toronto: HarperCollins, p.294.
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Preceded by  
**Kate Grenville - *The Idea of Perfection***  
Orange Prize for Fiction  
2002  
Succeeded by  
**Valerie Martin - *Property***

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Categories: 2001 novels | American novels | Thriller novels | Terrorism in fiction

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# Japanese embassy hostage crisis

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The **Japanese embassy hostage crisis** began on December 17, 1996 in Lima, Peru, when 14 members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) took hostage hundreds of high-level diplomats, government and military officials and business executives who were attending a party at the official residence of Japan's ambassador to Peru, Morihiro Aoki in celebration of Emperor Akihito's 63rd birthday.<sup>[1]</sup> After being held hostage for 126 days, the dignitaries were freed in a daring raid by Peruvian Armed Forces commandos, during which one hostage, two commandos, and all the MRTA militants died. The operation was seen as very successful by Peruvian society, and world-wide media. President Alberto Fujimori received most of the credit, and so strengthened his hard-line position by raiding the complex instead of permitting negotiations of any kind with the militants.

In recent years, reports emerged suggesting that a number of the *Emmeretistas* had been executed after surrendering during the ambush. These findings prompted civil suits against military commanders by relatives of the dead militants. As of 2005, the Attorney General's office in Peru allowed the charges and hearings have been ordered.

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## Staging

In the years following the capture in 1992 of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán and the rest of the group's leadership, insurgent activity declined in Peru; the country appeared to have finally put behind it the violence that had plagued it for some 15 years.

When news spread of the MRTA's daring assault on the ambassador's residence, the country emitted a collective groan. The Lima Stock Exchange was forced to close three hours early because domestic stocks plummeted. The feeling of the Peruvian population in general could be summarized in a major Peruvian newspaper editorial comment: "It is a setback of at least four years. We've returned to being a country subject to terror."

The news came during a period of low popularity for president Fujimori (down to 40% from a 1996 high of 75%), who had until then been given credit for restoring peace to the country after terrorist activity largely ceased through the country during his first presidential term.<sup>[2]</sup>

The surprise ambush and seizure of the Japanese ambassador's residency was the most high-profile ever operation of the MRTA in its 15-year history. The ambush propelled Peru in general, and the MRTA in particular, into the world spotlight for the duration of the crisis.

The militants had been able to infiltrate the complex unnoticed, both inside an ambulance, and another group acting as catering staff for the celebration. The complex was guarded by more than 300 heavily armed police officers and bodyguards surrounding the residence.

The militants were armed with AKM rifles, Uzi sub-machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, Browning automatic rifles, revolvers, hand grenades, explosives, anti-gas masks and other military gear.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Demands

In the days immediately following the takeover, the Red Cross acted as an intermediary between the government and the insurgents. Among the hostages were high officials of Peru's security forces, including Máximo Rivera, the chief of Peru's anti-terrorist police, DINCOTE, and former chief Carlos Domínguez.

Other hostages included Alejandro Toledo, current president of Peru, and Javier Diez Canseco, a Peruvian congressman. The 24 Japanese hostages included president Fujimori's younger brother. The leader of the MRTA insurgents was identified as 43-year-old Néstor Cerna.

The insurgents made a series of demands:

- The release of some 400 of their members from prisons around Peru (including recently convicted U.S. activist Lori Berenson).
- A revision of the government's neoliberal free-market reforms.
- They singled out Japan's foreign assistance program in Peru for criticism, arguing that this aid benefited only a narrow segment of society.<sup>[4]</sup>
- They also protested against what it claimed were cruel and inhuman conditions in Peru's jails.

Javier Diez Canseco was among the 38 men who were released shortly after the hostages were taken. He defended the MRTA and called for the government to negotiate a settlement. Diez Canseco said that the hostage-takers are "18 to 20 years old, maybe 21 ... They're a group of special forces, comandos. I think

## Negotiations

they're young men who want to live. They don't want to die".<sup>[2]</sup>

The Japanese ambassador's residence had been converted into a fortress by the Japanese government. A copy of *Tara, Scarlet O'Hara's* home in the film *Gone with the Wind*, it was surrounded by a 12-foot wall, and had grates on all windows, bullet-proof glass in many windows, and doors built to withstand the impact of a grenade. It was, therefore, an easy site to defend from the inside.

Upon being freed, Alejandro Toledo said that what the MRTA really wanted was an amnesty that would allow its members to participate in public life. He said that any attempt to rescue the hostages by force would be "insane", as they were "armed to the teeth". Rooms in the building, he said, were wired with explosives, as well as the roof. He added that the terrorists had anti-tank weapons and wore backpacks that were filled with explosives that could be detonated by pulling a cord on their chest.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Government Reaction

On 22 December Fujimori made his first public announcement on the hostage-taking. In a televised four-minute speech he condemned the assailants, calling the MRTA assault "repugnant" and rejecting the terrorists' demands on their totality. He did not rule out an armed rescue attempt, but said that he was willing to explore a peaceful solution to the situation.

President Fujimori also publicly indicated that he did not need help from foreign security advisors, following speculation circulated that Peru was turning to foreign governments for assistance.

Fujimori made his speech shortly after MRTA leader Néstor Cerpá announced that he would gradually release any hostages who were not connected to the Peruvian government.<sup>[2]</sup> During the months that followed, the rebels released all female hostages and all but 72 of the men.

## The Negotiations

In search for a peaceful solution, Fujimori appointed a team to hold talks with the MRTA, including the Canadian ambassador, who had briefly been a hostage, Archbishop Juan Luis Cipriani, and a Red Cross official. Fujimori even talked with Fidel Castro, raising media speculation that a deal was being worked out to let the MRTA militants go to Cuba as political exiles. However, it was reported on 17 January that negotiations with the MRTA had stalled.

In early February, a new squad of Peruvian troops with heavy equipment took over the embassy vigil. They played loud military music and made provocative gestures to the rebels, who unleashed a burst of gunfire. This prompted Japan's prime minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto, to publicly urge Peru to refrain from taking any unnecessary risks that could endanger the hostages' lives. Japanese leaders pressured Fujimori to reach some sort of negotiated settlement with the Tupac Amaru rebels in order to ensure the hostages' safe release.

Fujimori subsequently met Hashimoto in Canada. The two leaders announced that they were in agreement on how to handle the hostage situation but provided few details.<sup>[5]</sup>

On 10 February Fujimori travelled to London, where he announced that the purpose of his trip was to "find a country that would give asylum to the MRTA group". Observers noted that his request that the MRTA group be given political asylum contradicted his previously-stated position that the MRTA were

not guerrillas but terrorists.

On the eve of his arrival, an article on *The Times* referred to him as a "dictator" and berated "his barbaric and mediaeval dungeons".

On 11 February, Fujimori declared that "Peruvian prisons are built in accordance with international standards for terrorists." He also attended business meetings, which he described to his domestic audience as an "exercise in reassuring the international investors."<sup>[6]</sup>

## The Military Solution

In February, Peruvian newspaper *La República* reported the existence of a secret government "intervention plan", involving the direct participation of U.S. military forces. The plan was reportedly devised by Peru's Army Intelligence Agency and submitted to Fujimori.

On 17 February the *New York Times* wrote, "United States participation in the assault is crucial, according to the plan, which said that the commandos would come from the Peruvian Army's School of Commandos and the United States Southern Command, based in Panama."<sup>[7]</sup>

The MRTA called off the talks with the government in March when they reported hearing loud noises coming from beneath the floor of the residence. Peruvian newspapers confirmed the MRTA suspicions, reporting that the police were digging tunnels underneath the building.

The police tried to cover up noise from the digging by playing loud music over loudspeakers and carrying out noisy tank maneuvers through the nearby streets.<sup>[8]</sup>

According to the *New York Times*, the Canadian ambassador himself admitted that Fujimori's negotiating team "had served as little more than a cover to give [Fujimori] time to put in place the physical and political elements of a raid."<sup>[8]</sup> It appeared that it was Fujimori's plan for a military assault, not MRTA's "unwillingness to negotiate", that led to the breakdown of talks.

## Operation Chavín de Huantar

### Preparations

In preparation for the raid, one of the hostages, Admiral Luis Gianpetri of the Peruvian Navy, who was an expert in intelligence and command operations, was provided with a tiny radio set and given encrypted instructions ordering him to warn the hostages ten minutes before the military operation began, telling them to stay as far as possible away from the MRTA members.

Light-colored clothes were systematically ferried in to the hostages, so that they could be distinguished easily from the dark-clad insurgents. Cerpa himself unwittingly helped with this part of the project when, hearing sounds that made him suspect that a tunnel was being dug, he ordered all the hostages placed on the second floor.

In addition, sophisticated miniature microphones and video cameras had been smuggled into the residence, concealed in books, water bottles, and table games. Gianpetri and other military officers among the hostages were given the responsibility for placing these devices in secure locations around the house.

Eavesdropping on the MRTA commandos with the help of these high-tech devices, military planners observed that the insurgents had organized their security carefully, and were particularly alert during the

night hours.

Early every afternoon, eight of the MRTA members, including the four leaders, played indoor football for about one hour.

## Raid

On 22 April 1997 a team of 140 commandos, given the name *Chavín de Huántar* (in reference to a Peruvian archaeological site famous for its underground passageways), mounted a dramatic raid on the residence. At 15:23 that afternoon, operation Chavín de Huántar began.

Three charges exploded nearly simultaneously in three different rooms on the first floor. The first explosion hit in the middle of the room where the football game was being held, killing three insurgents immediately — two of the men involved in the game, and one of the women watching from the sidelines. Through the hole created by that blast and the other two explosions 30 commandos stormed into the building, chasing the surviving MRTA members in order to stop them before they reached the second floor.

Two other moves were made simultaneously with the explosion. In the first, 20 commandos launched a direct assault on the front door in order to join their comrades inside the waiting room, where the main staircase to the second floor was located. On their way in, they found the two other female MRTA insurgents guarding the front door. Behind the first wave of commandos storming the door came another group of soldiers carrying ladders, which they placed against the rear walls of the building.

In the final prong of the coordinated attack, another group of commandos emerged from two tunnels that had reached the back yard of the residence. These soldiers quickly scaled the ladders that had been placed for them. Their tasks were to blow out a grenade-proof door on the second floor, through which the hostages would be evacuated, and to make two holes in the roof so that they could kill the MRTA members upstairs before they had time to kill the hostages.

At the end, fourteen MRTA insurgents, one hostage—Dr. Carlos Giusti Acuña, member of the Supreme Court—and two soldiers—Lieutenant Colonel Juan Valer Sandoval and Lieutenant Raúl Jiménez Chávez—died in the assault.

## Fujimori's role on the raid

As the commandos tore the Tupac Amaru rebel flag from the roof of the embassy, Fujimori joined some of the former hostages in singing the national anthem.<sup>[9]</sup> Shortly thereafter President Fujimori was seen speeding through Lima in a bus packed with freed hostages.<sup>[10]</sup>

Peruvian TV also showed Fujimori striding among the dead insurgents. Some of the bodies were mutilated, with arms and legs chopped off.<sup>[11]</sup> The outcome was seen as a triumph and bolstered his hard-line stance against unpopular and leftist groups. His popularity ratings quickly doubled, to nearly 70%, and he was acclaimed a national hero.<sup>[12]</sup> "You had to live in the climate of the time. The operation was so successful that there was no opposition. Peruvians loved it", said historian Luis Jochamowitz, author of a biography of Fujimori.

Reflecting on the raid a few days afterward, Antonio Cisneros, a leading poet, said it had given Peruvians "a little bit of dignity. Nobody expected this efficiency, this speed. In military terms it was a First World job, not Third World." <sup>[12]</sup>



Fujimori also took personal credit for the operation. In an interview with the 17 December 1997 edition of *El Comercio*, Fujimori stated that shortly after the embassy residence was seized, he, the National Intelligence Service headed by Julio Salazar and Vladimiro Montesinos, and the Joint Command of the Armed Forces under Army Commander General Nicolás de Bari Hermoza Ríos had planned the rescue operation, which included the tunnels from adjacent houses used by commandos to enter the building.<sup>[14]</sup>

## International involvement

Reports emerged that the US and Israel had helped the Peruvian military in preparing for the raid. US State Department spokesperson Nicolas Burns maintained that the U.S. government had no direct participation in the assault.

But former FBI agent Bob Taubert told CNN News on 23 April that Peruvian troops had undergone training the previous December at an undisclosed location in the United States. Commenting that the Peruvian commandos performed precisely as he had trained them for such an action, Taubert said he was "very proud."<sup>[11]</sup>

The CIA made no comment when asked if it had given intelligence assistance to the Peruvian military in preparation for the raid, but observers pointed out that the CIA and other US intelligence agencies were deeply involved in the counterinsurgency operations of the Peruvian military and that the CIA had a direct hand in the massive search by the Peruvian secret police that led to the 1992 capture of Abimael Guzmán.<sup>[8]</sup>

## MRTA Corpses illegally detained

When the operation was over, the bodies of the Emmeretistas were removed by military prosecutors; representatives from the Attorney General's Office were not permitted entry.

The corpses were not taken to the Institute of Forensic Medicine for the autopsy required by law. Rather, the bodies were taken to the morgue at the Police Hospital. It was there that the autopsies were performed. The autopsy reports were kept secret until 2001. Next of kin of the deceased were not allowed to be present for the identification of the bodies and the autopsies.

The bodies were buried in secrecy in cemeteries throughout Lima.

Eligia Rodríguez Bustamante, the mother of one of the victims, and the Deputy Director of APRODEH asked the Attorney General's Office to take the necessary steps to identify those who died when the residence was retaken, but the Attorney General's Office conceded its jurisdiction over identification of the deceased members of the MRTA to the military justice system.<sup>[13]</sup>

## International reaction

In general, the military operation was viewed with positive eyes by the Peruvian society and other international governments. However, there were some exceptions:

- On 25 April there were protests at the Peruvian Embassy in Santiago, Chile. Riot police tear gassed demonstrators and pushed them to the ground outside the embassy. Some protesters told television reporters, "We absolutely reject these acts of such cruelty, which should never happen again."
- On the same date, the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared: "The Chilean Government has manifested its satisfaction with the outcome of this crisis. It is true that we must regret the death of several human lives, but is also important to acknowledge that there was no other possible outcome."<sup>[15]</sup>

- In Mexico City on 23 April, scores of people gathered at the Peruvian Embassy to protest. Demonstrators hurled red paint and tomatoes at the building, shouting "Fujimori murderer" and "Latin America is in mourning."

- In Chicago on 27 April, the Editor of the *ENN Daily Intelligence Report* stated: "To suggest, after the fact, that the use of extreme violence in the retaking of Ambassador Yukihiko Ikeda's residence is simply naive, wrongheaded, and misinformed. It would appear to be the product of a disgruntled left-wing attempt to try to gain some sort of belated propaganda victory and establish the dead

- MRTA as "martyrs in a larger revolutionary struggle."<sup>[16]</sup>
- On 28 April, an article in *The New York Times* commented on the regime's dependency on the military, describing Fujimori, Montesinos and armed forces head Gen. Nicolás Hermoza Ríos as "Peru's ruling troika."<sup>[17]</sup>

- Several Andean Presidents (Andrés Bastara of Colombia, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada of Bolivia and Rafael Caldera of Venezuela) supported Alberto Fujimori's decisions.<sup>[18]</sup> This was made a public declaration of the IX Andean Presidential Council.

## Interviews in support of the MRTA

In an interview in the 24 April edition of the German newspaper *Junge Welt*, MRTA spokesperson Norma Velasco assessed the developments leading up to the raid, saying that "The goal of the MRTA unit was not to murder the embassy prisoners" but, rather, to achieve their demand to free the 450 MRTA prisoners held in Peru's prisons. Saying that "we had no illusions" that Fujimori wanted a peaceful solution, Velasco added, "we did have some bit of hope that international public opinion in many countries would increase pressure on the Peruvian government and force them to give in." Alluding to the underlying economic conditions of the country, she observed "A vast segment of the population still suffers from poverty, hunger and a lack of proper medical care, and these problems are increasing. The end of the crisis at the ambassador's residence showed that Fujimori exclusively relies on military means."

Despite the secrecy, people discovered where MRTA leader Néstor Cerpas's body was buried, and his grave in a hillside cemetery in the impoverished *pueblo joven* of Villa María del Triunfo subsequently became a rallying point. A woman by Cerpas's grave told a *New York Times* reporter "He fought for us, for the poor. Look at how we live. Look at how we die." Another said: "He was not a terrorist. He was a revolutionary"<sup>[19]</sup>

## Aftermath

Doubts about the official version of events soon began to arise, however. Some aspects of what happened during the rescue operation remained secret until the fall of the Fujimori regime. Rumors began to circulate not long after the rescue operation that surrendered MRTA members had been executed extrajudicially:

- One Japanese hostage, Hidetaka Ogura, former first secretary of the Japanese Embassy, who published a book in 2000 on the ordeal, stated that he saw one rebel, Eduardo Cruz (aka "Tito"), tied up in the garden shortly after the commandos stormed the building. Cruz was handed over alive to Colonel Jesús Zamudio Aliaga, but along with the others he was later reported as having

- died during the assault.
    - Former agriculture minister Rodolfo Muñante, declared in an interview eight hours after being freed that he heard one rebel shout "I surrender" prior to taking off his grenade-laden vest and turning himself over. Later, however, Muñante denied having said this.<sup>[20]</sup>
    - Another hostage, Máximo Rivera, then head of Peru's anti-terrorism police, said recently he had heard similar accounts from other hostages after the raid.<sup>[12]</sup>
  - On 18 December 2000 *El Comercio* published a story in which the hostage Hidetaka Ogura again stated that he and other hostages saw three of the MRTA rebels captured alive, one of which whom was "Tito".

Media reports also discussed a possible breach of international practices on taking of prisoners, committed on what was, under rules of diplomatic extraterritoriality, sovereign Japanese soil, and speculated that if charged, Fujimori could face prosecution in Japan.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Legal proceedings

On 2 January 2001 the Peruvian human-rights organization APRODEH filed a criminal complaint on behalf of MRTA family members against Alberto Fujimori, Vladimiro Montesinos, Nicolás De Bari Hermoza Ríos, Julio Salazar Monroe and anyone found to be guilty of the crime of the qualified homicide of Eduardo Nicolás Cruz Sánchez and two other MRTA members.

Special Provincial Prosecutor Richard Saavedra was put in charge of the preliminary inquiry into the complaint. Non-commissioned National Police officers Raúl Robles Reynoso and Marcial Teodorico Torres Arteaga corroborated Hidetaka Ogura's testimony, telling investigators that they took Eduardo Cruz Sánchez alive as he was attempting to get away by mingling with the hostages when they were at the house in back of the residence.

In an interview in March, assistant state attorney Ronald Gamarrá told CPN radio that Fujimori should face murder charges over the alleged executions: "(We have) information regarding how post-mortems were conducted on the dead MRTA rebels, which in opinion could corroborate accusations of extrajudicial killings." He said unofficial post-mortems plus reports by the United Nations, the US State Department and rights groups, suggested rebels had been executed with a shot in the head. The state prosecutors ordered the exhumation of the insurgents' bodies.<sup>[21]</sup>

Others, however, have stated that the investigation is just another attempt by Fujimori's political enemies to destroy his legacy. "Not giving in to terrorist blackmail is the only good thing remaining from the previous government" said Carlos Blanco, an independent congressman and one of the hostages. "And now they want to destroy that like everything else."<sup>[12]</sup>

### Investigation

The bodies of the deceased MRTAs were exhumed and examined by forensic physicians and forensic anthropologists, experts from the Institute of Forensic Medicine, the Criminology Division of the National Police, and the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team, some of whom have served as experts for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Statements were taken from various officers who took part in the rescue operation and from some of the rescued hostages.

The examination done by the forensic anthropologists and forensic physicians revealed that Cruz Sánchez had been shot once in the back of the neck while in a defenseless posture vis-à-vis his assailant.<sup>[13]</sup>

Other forensic examinations established that it appears that eight of the insurgents were shot in the back

of the neck after capture or while defenseless because of injuries.

## Prosecution against the Commandos

On 13 May 2002 judge Cecilia Polack Boluarte issued warrants for the arrest of 11 senior army officers who participated in the raid. The warrants allowed the accused to be held for 15 days before formal charges were filed.

The judge's decision provoked an outcry; the ministers of defense, justice and the interior all criticized the arrest orders. However, Attorney General Nelly Calderón supported the measure. In a statement made on 20 May 2002 to Radio Programas del Perú (RPP) she said: "We prosecutors are supporting the action taken by prosecutor Saavedra, because he has done a careful investigation (and) unfortunately the evidence suggests culpability. That evidence has to be collated to determine what degree of responsibility each arrested officer bears."

## Amnesty

On 16 May, two amnesty proposals were announced in congressional committees, one submitted by the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance party (APRA) of former president Alan García, the other by the National Unity party (UN).

The UN bill "granted amnesty" to army General José Williams Zapata, who headed up the operation, and to the "official personnel who participated in the freeing and rescue of the hostages."

Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch strongly protested the move. "The successful rescue of the hostages turned these commandos into national heroes, but the evidence of illegal killings is compelling. National gratitude is no reason for shielding them from justice" the organization argued in a press release.

HRW argued that the amnesty proposals clearly conflicted with the principles enunciated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in its March 2001 ruling against the Peruvian government in the case of the 1991 Barrios Altos massacre.

In that case, which involved the amnesty law passed in 1995 by the Fujimori government, the Court declared the amnesty null and void because it conflicted with Peru's human rights treaty obligations. It later interpreted that ruling as applicable to all similar cases.<sup>[22]</sup>

## The Military and the Judicial System

On 7 June, at a ceremony organized by the army to commemorate loyalty to the National Flag, the commandos were honored and decorated, including those whom the judicial branch had under investigation for alleged involvement in the extrajudicial executions.

On 29 July 2002 the Chavín de Huántar commando squad was selected to lead the independence day military parade. This appeared to have been done to exert more pressure on the Supreme Court justices who had to decide the jurisdiction question raised by the military court, in order to make certain that it would be the military court that investigated the extrajudicial executions.<sup>[23]</sup>

On 16 August 2002 the Supreme Court convened to hear the oral arguments of the parties to the jurisdictional challenge brought by the military tribunal. The military prosecutor heading up the parallel inquiry being conducted in the military court, who had to bring the charges and prove them, was the

person arguing the military's challenge. However, in his arguments he made a defense for the comandos, stating that "heroes must not be treated like villains."

The Supreme Court subsequently ruled that the military court system had jurisdiction over the 19 comandos, thus declining jurisdiction in favor of the military tribunal. It held that the events had occurred in a district that at the time was under a state of emergency, and were part of a military operation conducted on orders from above.

It further held that any crimes that the 19 comandos may have committed were the jurisdiction of the military courts. It also ruled that the civilian criminal courts should retain jurisdiction over anyone other than the comandos who may have violated civilian laws.

### The Inter-American Commission

On 3 February 2003 APRODEH, on behalf of MRTA family members, filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights against the Peruvian state, alleging that Peru violated certain rights recognized in the American Convention on Human Rights to the detriment of MRTA member Eduardo Nicolás Cruz Sánchez, David Peceros Pedraza and Herma Luz Meléndez Cueva, by detaining them and then summarily executing them.

The Commission determined the petition was admissible.

## Chronology

December 17 1996: MRTA members take the Japanese ambassador's residence in Peru with more than 600 hostages. They shortly release about half of the hostages.

December 20 (day 3): Another 38 hostages are released.

December 21 (day 4): Fujimori declares that there will be no talks.

December 22 (day 5): 255 hostages are released.

December 26 (day 9): An explosion is heard in the residence. Police say that an animal detonated a mine.

December 28 (day 11): 20 hostages released

December 31 (day 14): A group of reporters are allowed into the mansion.

January 21 (day 35): Police and MRTA members exchange shots.

March 2 (day 75): MRTA members refuse asylum to Cuba and Dominican Republic

April 22 (day 126): Peruvian Special Forces storm the residence. One hostage, two comandos and all 14 MRTA members die.

## Notes

- ↑ The crisis took place at the ambassador's residence and not the embassy, but the media and others customarily referred to as the "Japanese embassy" hostage crisis.
- ↑ *abc d* Steve Macko, Day 3 of the Peru Hostage Crisis

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12. ↑ ^ ^ ^ ^ Peru Ex - Leader's Popularity Falls (http://www.latinaamericanstudies.org/peru/popularity.htm), The Associated Press April 2, 2001. Accessed 23 Feb 2006.
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## See also

- List of hostage crises

## External links

- Petition for admissibility: *Eduardo Nicolas Cruz Sanchez et al.* (<http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2004eng/Peru.136.03.eng.htm>) (IACHR, 27 February 2004; retrieved 9 March 2005.)
- Troops storm embassy in Peru* ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisd/hi/dates/stories/april/22/newsid\\_4297000/4297347.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisd/hi/dates/stories/april/22/newsid_4297000/4297347.stm)) (BBC, 22 April 1997; retrieved 9 March 2005.)
- "Peru's Fujimori: A Latin American Pinochet with an Asian Face (<http://www.pacificnews.org/jinn/stories/3.03/970130-fujimori.html>) (Pacifica News, 30 January 1997; retrieved 9 March 2005.)
- The Spiritual Dimension of the Hostage Drama* (<http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Igpress/CWR/CWR0697/peru.html>) (Catholic.net; retrieved 9 March 2005.)
- "Fuerzas especiales liberan a los rehenes de Lima" (<http://www.h2.dion.ne.jp/~yyt/ADELANT/23041997.html>) (in Spanish)
- "Rescate el Lima" (<http://www.copesa.cl/Casos/Peru/Especial0.html>) (in Spanish)

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## Peru Troops Free Hostages, Kill Rebels, at Ambassador's Residence

By David Scanlan and Carol Salguero  
© 1997 Bloomberg News

Lima, April 22 -- In a dramatic raid on the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peruvian soldiers and marines rescued the Peruvian and Japanese hostages who have been held by guerrillas since December, ending a four-month siege.

According to Peruvian radio reports, all the rebels, at least four soldiers and one hostage were killed in the surprise raid, that began with a powerful explosion at about 3:30 p.m. as heavily armed soldiers stormed the house to free the hostages. The number of dead couldn't be confirmed.

Peruvian radio identified the dead hostage as Carlos Giusti, a judge. It's not clear how he died.

## Peru Raid Went by the Book, But with a Few Extra Pages

By PHILIP SHENON  
© 1997 New York Times News Service

WASHINGTON, April 23 -- Counterterrorism specialists in the United States said on Wednesday that the Peruvian military managed to pull off their daring rescue of 71 hostages in Lima by applying lessons learned from recent hostage situations elsewhere in the world but with notable innovations that included the use of a network of tunnels beneath the compound.

William Corbett, a retired army colonel who oversaw anti-terrorism programs for the U.S. military in Europe, said that the Peruvian government had been presented with "an unbelievable break" when the guerrillas decided to relax and play soccer in the compound, away from the hostages.

"The hostage-takers showed a terrible lack of appreciation of the danger they were facing," he said.

## Doomed Young Rebel's Change of Heart Saved Lives of Hostages

By JULIA PRESTON  
© 1997 New York Times News Service

LIMA, Peru, April 23 -- Moments after a thundering explosion signaled the beginning of the military raid to rescue the 72 hostages in the residence of the Japanese ambassador, a young guerrilla burst into the second-floor bedroom where several high-level government officials were held.

Trembling, the rebel trained his rifle on Rodolfo Munante Sanguinetti, Peru's minister of agriculture, who was lying on the floor trying to protect himself from the falling plaster and flying shrapnel generated by the bomb blast.

The guerrilla appeared ready to carry out a plan he had rehearsed perhaps two dozen times during the 126 days he and 13 others from the leftist Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement had occupied the Japanese compound. The rebels had told their captives repeatedly that if government troops attacked, their orders were to kill the hostages and then, if necessary, themselves.

The young man, a fierce-looking figure in his combat uniform, wrapped his finger around the trigger, Munante recounted Wednesday. Then, with a look of agony, he lowered his gun, turned around and walked out the door. Soon after, he and all the other guerrillas were dead.

"He was going to shoot me," Munante said. "He could have done it. But he didn't."

Hostages have, at times, come to identify with their captors -- the so-called Stockholm syndrome. In this case, according to the hostages, the tables were turned and the captors began to soften toward their prisoners.

Other young guerrillas wanted to learn how to play the guitar, several hostages noted. Paradoxically, it was a guitar that was requested by the Red Cross, that apparently hastened the rebels' undoing.

Government officials told a Peruvian newspaper that a pin-sized microphone that had been placed inside the guitar helped military and police intelligence officials to monitor the guerrillas' movements inside the vast mansion.

## A Signal, And Peru Hostages Opened Door to Raid

By CALVIN SIMS  
© 1997 New York Times News Service

LIMA, Peru, April 23 -- The spectacular rescue of 71 hostages from the Japanese ambassador's residence on Tuesday was a meticulously executed plan in which military commandos blasted into the compound through underground tunnels and hostages who had received advance warning of the raid furtively opened a sealed door for the soldiers to enter.

President Alberto Fujimori and former hostages Wednesday provided new details of the military raid, which resulted in the deaths of one hostage, two military commandos and all 14 of the Marxist guerrillas who had seized the residence on Dec. 17.

These accounts disclosed that the raid had been planned virtually from the outset of the hostage crisis, with commandos staging practice raids in a mock ambassador's residence constructed on the outskirts of Lima. The attack began when commandos who had been waiting in the tunnels underneath the residence since Sunday were given the signal to detonate a bomb beneath the first-floor living room where nine of the 14 guerrillas were playing a game of soccer.

At the same time, commandos entered through the open door on the second floor and blasted through the front door, spraying the rebels with gunfire.

"Ten minutes before the attack, the police gave us a sign, and one person among each group of hostages gave the order to get down on the floor and don't move," said Jorge Gammucio, the Bolivian ambassador. "Since the fourth day of captivity, we had permanent contact with the army forces. I cannot say who was the contact, but we knew that it was a good contact and this kept us calm."

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## 1997: Shots heard at besieged embassy in Peru

Gunshots have been heard inside the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru, where left-wing guerrillas have been holding 72 hostages for the last four weeks.

At 1120 local time, police surrounding the embassy compound dived for cover as members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) opened fire.

Television cameras showed two armed rebels with grenades strapped to their bodies, wearing bulletproof vests, firing around the compound.

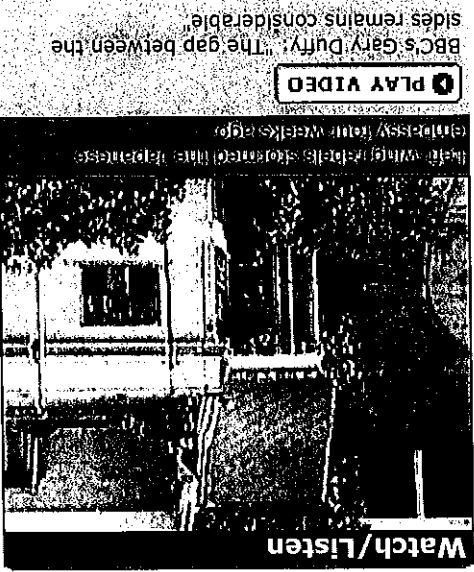
Minutes earlier an International Red Cross mediator, Michel Minnig, had left the building after delivering food and water for those inside.

Mr Minnig returned to the embassy after the shooting to confirm that no-one was harmed.

### Japanese ambassador held

On policeman told reporters: "We heard at least 12 gunshots coming in our direction but they appeared to be a provocation rather than an attempt to hit specific targets."

Later tonight the guerrilla leader Nestor Cerpa Cartolini said his followers had fired the "warning shots" because the police had broken an agreement by coming



The siege of the Japanese embassy finally ended on 22 April - four months after it began - when government troops stormed the building. Within minutes all 14 Tupac Amaru guerrillas were killed including their leader Nestor Cerpa. Most died in an explosion set off by the troops.

One Japanese citizen also died but the remaining 71 hostages were rescued. The Japanese Prime Minister, Ryutaru Hashimoto, thanked President Fujimori, himself the son of Japanese immigrants, for freeing the hostages. The Peruvian president remained popular for taking a hard line on terrorism but human rights

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The government has however talked of setting up a "commission of guarantors" to talk through a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Tension is now extremely high as the stand-off continues between the two sides, with the Peruvian Government, headed by President Alberto Fujimori, ignoring the demands of the MRTA which has been fighting to overthrow the government since 1984.

Among those held are the Peruvian foreign minister, the Japanese ambassador, and 23 other Japanese nationals.

The rebels first stormed the building on 17 December demanding the release of 440 of their comrades in return for the release of the hostages.

"fewer than 100 meters" from the compound.