

**Interview with Ann Patchett, September 2018**

**Kara McLeland: This book was published back in 2001, but for our listeners who maybe haven't had the chance to read it yet, I was wondering if you could give us your elevator pitch summary of what it's all about.**

Ann Patchett: You know, the nice thing about talking about a book that was published that long ago is you get your elevator pitch down pretty cold. So, this is book that takes place in the Japanese Embassy in Lima, Peru, and it's a party that's being put on for a very wealthy and important and powerful Japanese businessman. And they bring in a world-famous soprano named Roxanne Coss—the businessman's name is Katsumi Hosokawa— and while the party is going on, they are taken over by terrorists, who are trying to protest the treatment of prisoners in the prison system in Peru, and they are completely isolated for months. And what happens over the course of that time is the people who are the hostages and the people who are the hostage-takers move closer and closer together, and a lot of this is facilitated through music and the singing of Roxane Coss, because there is not common language- there are people from all over the world at this party.

**KM: Right, and I know that's something that will really interest music lovers, is the fact that music, and opera in particular, are really at the heart of this book. How did you decide that your heroine should be a world-famous opera singer?**

AP: Well, it is very, very loosely based on a real event, and in the real event, all the women were set free right away. And in my book many of the guests are set free. But I thought, ok, they're gonna keep one woman, so why would they chose this one person? And I decided that because she was the most important woman at the party, she had been brought in at great expense, and then I was thinking, is she a pianist? Is she a cellist? You know, what would she do? And I finally decided that she would be an opera singer because it would have a sense of the universal language. This book is largely about the suspension of language and communication, so there's one genius translator, Gen Watanabe, who's at the party, but he is completely overworked. So at first, everyone is trying to communicate through him, and then they try and communicate really through their love of art.

**KM: You included an essay at the end of—at least my copy of—the book, where you talked about when you first started writing, you thought of opera as music that needed to be turned off. And you had to put in some good work to really get opera and to love opera, which I loved reading, because I think a lot of people share that experience. I was wondering what advice you have for someone who might think something can't be *that* good if you have to work to love it.**

AP: Oh my gosh, “welcome to being a grownup” I would say, because I think that’s true about just about everything. I mean, quite literally, you get out what you put in. And so while it can be great to go see a silly comedy or read a pulp fiction novel because you want to kick back and relax, if you want to have a deeper experience, it usually takes a little bit of effort, and that’s true for everything.

I always think about baseball, which I don’t understand baseball, and probably the longest afternoon of my life was spent at the single baseball game I ever went to when I was in college. But it was because I didn’t understand it, and if you don’t know who the players are, and if you don’t know how to score, and you don’t know the little subtle things that are going on, you’re not going to enjoy it. People put in a lot of work because they are interested, and they learn the rules, and opera is definitely like that.

The thing that I found that made such a wonderful difference was a book by a guy named Fred Plotkin called *Opera 101*, which is easy to remember, and it really was like taking a class, it really explained how to listen to opera, and to sit down and read the libretto first, and then to listen to the whole opera while you’re reading the libretto again. I had never had that experience, where I would just sit down with a piece of music in my own home and listen to it. Music for me was always just something that was on in the background while I was doing something else, and it’s an amazing experience to just focus on a piece of music and really listen.

And also, I started going to the opera, and getting to see it was a lot of the joy for me, and it’s so wonderful because now we have these HD broadcasts in the theater, and we also have the wonderful Nashville Opera, which wasn’t around when I was working on this. And so if you can have a chance to actually see an opera, that’s great, but I would urge people not to just go in cold for the first time. I mean, set yourself up for success rather than failure. Do a little work in advance and it will really pay off.

**KM: There’s a film version of *Bel Canto* coming out in just a few weeks, and Julianne Moore plays Roxanne, but her singing voice is Renée Fleming. Did you hear Fleming’s voice, or a particular opera voice, as you were writing *Roxanne*?**

AP: Well, it’s funny, Renée is a very close friend of mine, and when I was writing the book, I didn’t know anything about opera, and I listened to a lot of Maria Callas, because that was sort of the name that I knew. And I listened to Renée, but without really understanding who she was. I listened to a bunch of different sopranos, but I made some choices unwittingly in the character of Roxanne Coss, that were similar to Renée Fleming; the most important one being that her signature aria was Dvořák’s “Song to the Moon.” I had a friend who was a real opera buff in London, and I said to him, “give me an aria that will make me look super smart,” and he said “oh, Dvořák’s ‘Song to the Moon.’” Well the only person who sang that was Renée, and I didn’t even know that, I mean, that’s what a neophyte I was at the time. So when the book came out, a lot of people thought that it was about Renée, we were introduced, we wound up becoming very close friends, and now it’s funny because if I go to see Renée in an opera it will

say in the playbill: and the character of Roxane Coss in Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* was based on her. It's sort of this great joke, because at this point in our friendship I think oh, it probably was. I probably just subconsciously channeled her in some way.

**KM: You create this really vivid impression of Roxanne's voice, but the way that you do it, I found was really interesting because it's largely through how the other characters respond to her performing. And I think that created this magic, and her voice becomes this—I felt like it was larger than life, and kind of her superpower. Did you think about how all that would translate when the story was adapted into an opera, and now into a movie, when Roxanne suddenly had a very real human voice, even if it is performed by Renée Fleming?**

AP: Um, no, I mean I didn't really think about any of that in advance. But what's been very moving to me in the years that I've known Renée, and there've been times we've been out for breakfast at 8:00 in the morning or we've gone to a restaurant after an opera at midnight, and everywhere we go people come up to the table, and they'll stop her on the street and they say "I was listening to you sing when my daughter was born," "I was listening to you sing on my wedding day," "I was listening to you sing when my father was dying," "You were there at all the great moments in my life." Again and again and again. I mean, she must hear this every single time she leaves her house, and she's so gracious and beautiful and always really moved. I mean, she has an ability to genuinely connect with people, every time they stop her and tell her these stories, she's so touched by them. But *that's* what you want to get across— that this is the voice that represents the deepest, truest moments, most private, most in-your-own-soul moments of your life. Perfect example, a few days ago she sang "Danny Boy" at John McCain's funeral, and it becomes literally the voice, the sound of how we are feeling at this moment of loss and pride and honor and love. And that's what I was trying to get on paper. So Renée getting that by opening her mouth is much easier than me getting some proximity to it on paper.

**KM: This next question has a huge spoiler alert attached to it, so if you have yet to finish the book, pause this, finish it, and come back. There is this sort-of tradition in 19<sup>th</sup> century opera of heroines dying on stage. You know, they commit suicide, or they go mad and they're murdered, or they die of consumption, and you reference quite a few of these operas in the book. So as I was reading the first time, I was completely convinced that Roxane was gonna die, that she was going to jump in front of a bullet to save her lover or something because that's what tradition demanded—**

AP: Isn't that interesting? I never once considered that, and no one has ever said that to me before.

KM: Oh my gosh.

AP: I mean, good on you, because that is a really smart point. I never thought of killing Roxane, because Roxane is just such a bulletproof character. You know, she is so tough, and so the leader. There's nothing in my brain that can conceive of her dying. And just the fact that

actually she is hurt, emotionally, but she grows enough and opens herself up enough to love and to experience pain- that to me seemed like the trajectory of her growth, not that she had to die for love.

**KM: Now, when books are turned into movies, a lot of times you see authors as screenwriters, or producers, and I read that you were pretty hands-off when the book was adapted into an opera. Has this been the case as the film has been produced?**

AP: Yes. And in fact, I haven't seen it. I didn't read the script, I didn't go to the set, and I didn't see the movie. And a lot of that is that I wrote the book a really long time ago and I have a huge amount of work that I'm doing, and it doesn't make any sense to me to stop work that I'm doing now to go back to revisit work that I did a long time ago, and I wouldn't have been adding anything to the process, either with the opera or with the film. This was something— I sold it, and they own it, and it's going to happen without me, as it should be. So the idea of just going for fun to watch... not my idea of fun. I wish them well, I hope it does well, but it doesn't really have anything to do with me at all.

**KM: So you won't be at the premiere, I'm taking it?**

AP: I won't be at the premiere, no. I'll be at home typing.

**KM: That's good. Well, we're glad for that, so we can get the next book. Ann, thank you so much for revisiting this beautiful book with us, and I hope that some our listeners who haven't read it yet will read it, or go back and read it again. And maybe some people who are not so into opera will learn to fall in love with it.**

AP: I hope so. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this, and it was a great pleasure.