

# BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE  
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES ANN PATCHETT'S NOVEL

# BEL CANTO

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# **BOOK CLUB IN A BOX**

## **Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Ann Patchett's novel Bel Canto**

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Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the hardcover edition of *Bel Canto*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for *Bel Canto* has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

### **Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for Bel Canto**

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto*

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

### You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

## How to Begin

**Relax and look forward to enjoying your bookclub.**

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

## What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

**INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.**

## **Do We Need to Agree?**

**THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.**

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

## **Discussion Starters**

There are as many ways to begin a bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

## **Above All, Enjoy Yourself**

# **INTRODUCTION**

**Suggested Beginnings**

**Novel Quickline**

**Keys to the Novel**

**Author Information**

# INTRODUCTION

## Suggested Beginnings

1. *Bel Canto* is an opera in novel form. The author plays with the format and includes many opera characteristics, such as the presentation of the characters' inner thoughts expressed in aria-style.

**Consider the effectiveness of this technique. Can non-opera lovers appreciate the form of this book? Does Patchett's novel encourage more knowledge about this musical form?**

2. Given the fact that Patchett had no previous knowledge of opera, it is curious that she would have chosen this form to tell her story.

**What other forms could she have used? Play? TV drama? Biography? Historical fiction?**

3. Review the quotes illustrating the common perceptions of opera found on page 18 of this guide.

**Defend or argue the merit and/or accuracy of these perceptions according to your own perspective.**

4. Patchett does not change the facts of the real story but uses them to play out her drama.

**Did the historical accuracy make this a better story?**

5. Patchett has included very little information about the personal histories of the young hostage-takers.

**Discuss how Patchett has presented them. Would added information about them have made a more intriguing story? Why or why not?**

6. Regrets are common and universal. Hosokawa discovered that his failures in life included not learning other languages or to play the piano.

**If you were presented with extraordinary circumstances, what would you regret?**

7. An opera does not normally include an epilogue to tie up loose story ends. Patchett, however, includes one.

**Discuss the purpose and effectiveness of Bel Canto's epilogue.**

## More Questions

8. Music is a universally understood and appreciated mode of communication, while all spoken languages are in need of accurate interpretation.

**Consider Gen's role as translator and Patchett's use of this metaphor.**

9. Terror and siege are horrific by-products of the modern world, yet Patchett presents this siege with humor and irony.

**Does this style add to or detract from the subject matter?**



**10.** Victims of hostage-taking incidents can suffer from a condition whereby they sympathize with their captors. Patchett also shows much sympathy for these hostage-takers. (see *Stockholm Syndrome*, p.33)

**Discuss this from the point of view of the victims, the author, and the reader (the public). Consider the modern issue of hostage-taking in light of real events: the American Embassy takeover in Iran in 1980; the Moscow Theater takeover by Chechen rebels in 2002; or the Beslan school tragedy in 2004.**

**11.** The popular soap opera involving Maria rivets the attention of the missing president, the hostage-takers, and the hostages.

**Why are soap operas so endearing and enduring as stories? What is their fascination?**

**12.** Among other things, *Bel Canto* explores the nature of love and considers whether love as a memory is as valuable as love in the present moment.

**Discuss the well-known line from one of Tennyson's poems, "*'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all*", in relation to the quotation from Mozart in the epigraph. (see Epigraph, p.19)**

**13.** Fyodorov's declaration of love to Roxane is surprising, because he is not talking about romantic love.

**Discuss your initial reaction to Fyodorov's pronouncement to Roxane. What kind of love is he proclaiming? Connect your thoughts to the story Fyodorov tells of his grandmother's art book.**

**14.** Making new choices when confronted by a suddenly changed reality is an important theme in *Bel Canto*, but the truth is that not everyone is capable of making timely or effective choices and decisions.

**What qualities do people need to have in order to make decisive and life-changing choices? How does one's attitude affect one's survival when making such choices? Discuss this in relation to the novel's characters and/or to yourself.**

## Novel Quickline

An opera singer, a Japanese businessman, his translator, a vice president of a small South American country, other important foreign dignitaries and compatriots, and a couple of dozen terrorists: everyone is in the same house at the same time. This is a dramatic hostage-taking incident based on a real event.

Ann Patchett sets the stage: a group of rebels storm the residence of an ambassador, capture more hostages than they can handle, but fail to get the prize they are after. Instead of the president, they get an opera singer: *“It’s a rotten exchange, if you ask me.”* (p.73) They spend the next four months singing, playing chess, and eating – in the end, they are killed.

The story sounds like basic opera. In fact, **Bel Canto** is an opera written in novel form by an author who has admitted that she had absolutely no background or interest in opera prior to the writing of this novel. What could have been a tensely told and action-filled tragedy turns out to be a human story narrated with gentle humor and warmth.

Although **Bel Canto** is based on a real situation, Patchett does not explore the reasons why it happened. Rather, she investigates the outcomes of the incident by looking at how new relationships and alliances, once inconceivable, are formed under adverse conditions.

**Why does Patchett use this style for her novel? What is her theme or purpose? Did she accomplish what she set out to do?**



**Thanks for previewing this  
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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