

Bel Canto by Ann Patchett (4th Estate)

14 July 2002

There is something patronising about literary prizes for select groups, as if they couldn't make it in open competition. In particular, the Orange Prize for women writers has become a kind of Girlie-Booker, promoted with all the promotional skills of which its sponsor is capable, and yet fated to remain a shadow of her big brother.

Bel Canto, the surprise winner of this year's Orange Prize, unfortunately does nothing to dispel one's misgivings about the existence of such a prize. It is exactly the kind of book one would have imagined to be selected as worthy of such a prize, which is to say it is women's writing in the most limiting sense.

The story is in effect a hostage drama with music: a group of people gathered together in an unnamed under-developed country to hear a celebrated American soprano, Roxane Coss, sing in honour of a visiting Japanese businessman, is taken hostage by a ragged band of terrorists who thought they would be scoring the President himself. The President, though, has elected to stay home to watch his favorite soap opera, and the desperadoes don't altogether know what to do with their illustrious but not very negotiable captives.

Patchett writes extremely well, and is always in control of her tone. The potentially melodramatic given is defused by a cool irony, the participants humanized by their vulnerabilities. Her characterisations are crisp, her eye for detail sharp. The problem is with the plot, which is frankly silly, and its basic premise, about which more later.

We are told at the outset that the only people who will be killed are the terrorists, so there is no tension in the conventional sense, and Patchett can afford to represent the terrorists as a ragged band of mainly very young men, poor, idealistic, ultimately pathetic.

The book's most glamorous creation is the soprano, brought to this god-forsaken country to sing as a birthday present for a Japanese businessman. The American soprano Renee Fleming has apparently assumed a kind of property in this creation, ("It's about me" she claimed in an interview), and putting out a CD called, of course, Bel Canto; but it is difficult to see why she would want to be taken for this vapid creation. To be sure, Patchett loads her creation with all the mystique of the glamour goddess that Fleming has typecast herself as, and she exploits skillfully the apparently superhuman charisma of a beautiful voice, but she is also realist enough to portray Roxane Coss as a somewhat limited human being, at heart an American tourist inconvenienced by bad travel arrangements.

But really, the whole cast is a kind of United Nations dream presided over by Mom. The French consul kisses the cheek of the Japanese translator, Gen, the Vice-President scrubs the floors of what used to be his official residence, the Japanese translator falls in love with a girl terrorist, a German pharmaceuticals manufacturer starts a jogging team, and captors and captives all get together for a cook-in under the direction of the French consul, using their weapons to chop onions and peel eggplants. One expects someone to bake an apple pie or a birthday cake.

This doesn't altogether happen, but one of the boy terrorists does manage to ingest by osmosis Roxane Cox's repertoire and sing a perfect "Vissi d'Arte" without benefit of music lessons, Italian, or castration.

The book's main thesis seems to be that music hath charms to soothe the terrorist breast, not to mention the less susceptible breasts of a group of super-industrialists. At one difficult moment Roxane launches into "O mio babbino caro" and all resistance withers under the spell of her voice. Tycoon and terrorist alike succumb to the power of music ("the people around her stood in stunned and shivering silence"). By this logic, Renee Fleming should be reporting for duty in the Middle East about now.

North American sentiments on terrorism being what they are, it was brave of Patchett, who lives in Nashville, Tennessee, to suggest that terrorists are anything other than the spawn of the devil, but then everybody in her novel is really just a child looking for a cuddle. The Vice-President gets his wounded cheek sewn up by a governess with a sewing kit; the young priest invites a boy terrorist to lie down and rest. Unfortunately the governess is released quite early on in the proceedings; one feels that between her sewing skills and the young priest's boyish faith the whole situation could have been sorted out in no time.

As it is, it takes a slow 300 pages plus for the book to sit out ("move" is too active a word for the plot's means of progress) its predictable end and trite conclusion: "'When I hear Roxane sing I am still able to think well of the world,' Gen said." The belief that sopranos can save the world is a dangerous fallacy, as witness, say, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf's membership of the National Socialist Party.

Dame Gillian Beer, the chair of the Orange Prize judges, opined in her prize-giving speech that women's fiction has at last proved itself capable of handling Big Topics. It's a debatable point at best (what on earth have women been writing about all these years?), and this novel, if anything, suggests the contrary. Its strength, such as it is, lies exactly in reducing Big Events to a matter of cooking and sewing and housekeeping, and in suggesting that in the breast of every terrorist with a bad haircut and business tycoon with a tight schedule beats the heart of a little boy (or of course girl) hungry for love and opera.

It's a nice idea and makes for a cosy read, but in the end it bears about the same relation to reality as *Rigoletto* -- which may, of course, be the point: this is the novel-as-opera. If so, one misses the music, with nothing to listen to but the creaking of the plot. But then, of course, there is the Renee Fleming CD . . .