Bel Canto — Discussion Questions

by Ann Patchett

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." Messner 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 rather stay captive in this house than return to the "real" 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?