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Ann Patchett, *Bel Canto* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001. \$16.00 paperback). Pp. 318 ISBN 0-06-093441-7 and *Bel Canto* (Priority Pictures/ Depth of Field/ A-Line Pictures 2018), directed by Paul Weitz. Screenplay by Paul Weitz and Anthony Weintraub, based on the novel by Ann Patchett. 1h 40min. Starring Julianne Moore, Ken Watanabe, Sebastian Koch, Ryo Kase, Christopher Lambert.

When Ann Patchett's fourth novel, *Bel Canto*, was published in 2001, it was met with almost universal praise from critics, also winning the prestigious PEN/ Faulkner Award for Fiction, and rightfully so: it is a modern classic infused, from the first to the last page, with the author's scintillating prose that unfolds gradually, to the beat of an inner rhythm reminding one of the architecture of classical opera. Unfortunately, as it is often the case in classical opera, whatever rare happy end exists is decidedly more bitter than sweet.

The novel is inspired by a real-life hostage crisis taking place in the Peruvian capital Lima in 1996, when members of the Tupac Amaru revolutionary guerrillas stormed the Japanese Embassy in the middle of an official reception to celebrate the Emperor's birthday and took almost six hundred high profile guests as hostages; the crisis dragged on for months before Peruvian security forces stormed the compound and killed all the rebels, releasing the remaining prisoners. By and large, Patchett preserved all the features of this dramatic incident in her novel, but added one more ingredient that she felt such a crisis required: a world-famous lyric soprano named Roxane Coss.

The novel is set in an unnamed Latin American country, always designated as "the host country", where the vice-president hosts a lavish birthday celebration for a wealthy Japanese businessman, Mr. Hosokawa, hoping to persuade him to build a factory that would greatly benefit the impoverished host nation. Hosokawa, as the reader later finds out, has no intention to invest in the country often plagued by violence and instability; the only reason he agrees to come is to hear an opera recital given by his

favourite soprano, Roxane Coss, whose voice and unique talent he had discovered years before. For Hosokawa, opera was where true, authentic life resided, it was a reward he enjoyed after each day's hard work, it was what taught him how to feel and love above all else. Seeing and especially hearing Roxane Coss perform in such a close, intimate setting, after having followed her to many opera theatres around the world without ever speaking to her, was a temptation too great to deny himself.

The novel's plot is set in motion when, right at the end of Roxane's recital, after she had fittingly finished singing Dvorak's Rusalka (the famous aria telling the love story between a mermaid and mortal), dozens of rebels hiding in the air vents storm the residence, taking all the guests hostage. From that point onwards, the author's gift for rich, detailed descriptions brings before the reader a story that very much resembles a chamber drama without, however, the feeling of stuffiness or confinement one often gets by reading such pieces. All the action, save for a few episodes towards the end, takes place inside the vice-presidential residence and the omniscient third-person narrator smoothly navigates between highly dramatic episodes, such as the death of Roxane's accompanist because of a diabetic coma, or mundane daily occurrences, such as the characters staring out the windows at the prolonged *garua*, a mist that envelopes their outer surroundings for weeks on end.

All the characters, rebels and hostages alike, soon settle into a not uncomfortable routine that steadily builds towards the denouement: the reader, somehow, is given to feel that the story would not end well; in fact, the rebels' action was doomed from the start, since their only goal in storming the mansion was to take the country's president prisoner and use him as leverage in exchange for the liberation of many political prisoners. Ann Patchett adds here an absurdly comical note, as the president declined to attend the reception, as he did not want to miss an episode of his favourite telenovela, the same soap opera with which some of the rebels would later become obsessed themselves. Interestingly enough, as she confessed in an interview, she drew inspiration for this event from Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori's well-known love for South American telenovelas.

Having missed their main target, the rebels have to settle for detaining other, less high profile dignitaries (including the vice-president and the French ambassador) and businessmen (Mr. Hosokawa and several of his associates), as well as Roxane, the only woman whom they refuse to release, as they consider her a prisoner of great value. The hostage situation reaches a stalemate, when the Red Cross impromptu negotiator, Messner, who happened to be vacationing in the host country at the time and gets caught up in the events, is unable to persuade any of the parties to compromise. The one who brings together, in a sense, this very diverse group and enables communication to flow among people who do not speak one another's language is Mr. Hosokawa's polyglot translator, Gen Watanabe, who becomes the book's central figure as the novel progresses.

As the book title's shows, opera plays a central role in the plot: as Roxane starts practicing again, after finding a new accompanist (one of Mr. Hosokawa's vice-presidents, who turns out to be a truly gifted and passionate pianist), the rhythms of the house and the daily life of hostages and rebels start revolving around her performances. Music helps transform the relationships between captors and captive and serves as the background against which Roxane and Hosokawa fall in love. Theirs is not the only love story in the book: Gen and Carmen, one of the rebels (who asked Gen to teach her how to read and write in Spanish and English), also experience their own passionate romance, while the French ambassador uses this time to think about his wife and, by rediscovering her in his thoughts, falls in love with her again. Other relationships blossom and transform into a very unlikely friendship: the one between Hosokawa and one of the rebel commanders, Benjamin, who are brought together by their love of chess, despite not speaking each other's language; the one between Ruben, the vice-president, and the young rebel Ishmael, whom he considers adopting after the crisis is over, and the one between Roxane and Cesar, a young rebel who turns out to have a tremendous gift for music and becomes her devoted pupil.

All the characters in the house seem to settle into a comfortable routine that makes the residence resemble an island, completely cut off from the outside world, existing in a dimension of its own, in a sense of suspended animation in which all characters become very adept at

forgetting whatever has to do with the world at large: the reader gets very few glimpses of what goes on beyond the tall walls of the vice-presidential residence, as the security forces surrounding the mansion are sometimes heard only as disembodied voices on a megaphone. While one might be tempted to criticize the author for making the political and ideological background of her novel irrelevant in this manner, one should keep in mind that adding a political dimension was never her intention to begin with. Instead, the reader is treated to long, rich descriptions detailing the characters' thoughts, actions and backstories, which reveal the measure of Patchett's talent, and make them come alive to the point where the reader may be forgiven for forgetting that this is, in fact, the story of a hostage crisis in which one group are held captive by another. This story is all the more unusual in that the captors have nowhere to go and the captives show no true desire for being released: most characters achieve their own liberation through love, music, or pursuing their newly-discovered or rediscovered passions.

The reader is also given small clues pointing to the fact that the situation could not endure for ever: Messner tries to warn the rebel commanders that the government will not grant their demands and will make an example out of them. As the *garua* lifts and the sun's warmth makes the vegetation in the mansion's neglected garden come alive and thrive (in a description reminiscent of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, when nature overcomes civilization), the state of suspended animation inside the mansion comes to a sudden, brutal and bloody end. In my view, the book should have ended there, to stay true to the operatic tradition that inspired its title, where happy endings are few and far between. However, Patchett chose to add an epilogue recounting the marriage of Roxane and Gen in Italy, a few years after the events. While the epilogue does add a note of optimism and an uplifting message, it leaves the reader feeling slightly bewildered: how did two characters who never, throughout ten chapters, ever manifest any signs of affection or attraction for each other, fall in love and marry in the end? Were they brought together by the loss of their loved ones, Carmen and Mr. Hosokawa, who died when the government's forces stormed the house? Ann Patchett deliberately provides no answer to this question and, after

painstakingly building all her characters in exquisite brushes for ten chapters, to have two unlikely central ones live out their presumably happily ever after together feels somewhat incomplete.

Bel Canto's central plot has all the ingredients that should have made it into a successful film adaptation: compelling characters, dramatic build-up, forbidden love and tragedy, political revolution. Yet, somehow, the 2018 film whose script follows the book quite closely, is a pale copy: despite having an international all-star cast, including Julianne Moore and Ken Watanabe, and featuring Renee Fleming's celebrated vocals in the opera scenes, Paul Weitz's directorial effort feels flat, rushed and superficial.

While the film can be forgiven for changing a few plot details for an increased dramatic effect (such as having the accompanist, instead of dying in a protracted state of agony, be accidentally shot by a jittery rebel), in my view, the recent cinematic adaptation should be taken to trial for the way in which it almost completely manages to hit all the wrong notes when it comes to translating its multitude of characters from page to screen. They appear as mere sketches, given that their motivations, thoughts and fears are insufficiently explored in a film whose duration is much too short to do justice to the richness of the material it is based on – a fact all the more surprising since the author, Ann Patchett, was one of the film's executive producers.

Admittedly, for anyone who has not read the book, the film might appear as a decent effort to portray the real-life Lima hostage crisis, but for those who were enthralled by the world Ann Patchett created in her novel, watching the 100-minute drama on the big screen only serves to remind them that some stories are better left in book form. Seeing the rebels killed by government forces, rather than imagining it, may well have a stronger impact on the viewer, despite the fact that the film does very little to develop them to the point where the viewer might feel empathy towards them.

But in the end, the book is a story about love, friendship and the possibility of communication despite great odds, a story about forming a community by bringing together people who, under normal circumstances, would have never, ever even met one another – and from this perspective,

Paul Weitz's film suffers from many shortcomings, probably none greater than the ambiguous final scene, when Roxane, accompanied by Gen (who may, or may not, have become her husband in the film – as the audience is given too few clues on this subject to draw a definitive conclusion), and the ghosts of their dead lovers seated in the ornate theatre, takes centre stage at the Metropolitan Opera to perform *Rusalka*, presumably as a tribute for Hosokawa. Despite Renee Fleming's soaring vocals and Julianne Moore's commendable effort to mimic the mannerisms of a soprano, what should have been a moving denouement fails to save a film whose reach sadly exceeded its grasp.

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