Notes on Ann Patchett, *Bel Canto*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

**When Novels Are Too Comforting**

This book has a strong and consistent tendency that is both unusual and, for me, strange: the author has the desire to comfort everyone, both the reader and the characters. This isn't just because the narrative is a hostage situation. The desire permeates the implied author's choices and descriptions. It matters that the hostages are as comfortable as possible: one has a tiny pillow, another loosens her hair, a third rests on her husband's shoulder. They all get bathroom breaks. This interest in comforting, consoling, and assuaging extends to inanimate objects. One character worries about pipes in his house, even though he doesn't own it. The narrator (who is near-omniscient, but "focalized," as Genette says, on a number of characters) even tells us that the wonderful carpet is safely cushioned by a pad, so it won't be unduly worn by all the gunmen and hostages.

There's an equally consistent and heartfelt need to tell readers how mesmerizing, how sheerly beautiful, women can be. An opera singer hypnotizes one character after another. A servant's beauty makes a man forget his pain. Intimacy and quiet are important; people whisper to one another nearly inaudibly in Spanish, French, and Japanese. The opera singer's voice is heavenly, to everyone with ears, which means almost everyone worth describing.

At first -- around page 20 -- I thought that this authorial nursing would make it impossible for anyone in the novel to suffer or die, but then -- 10 or so pages later, and so very early in the book -- I realized that one of the author's principal purposes in writing is to provide a glow of reassurance over everything and everyone, to illuminate life with an aura of maternal love. What a strange purpose for a novelist. It isn't exactly sentiment, although it is often very sentimental: it's more a kind of unassuaged need to show that things and places as well as people can be nurturing and nourishing, good for you to contemplate.

This desire feels like it was once an anxiety, before the author began to write, and that she healed herself by writing. It's as if the calm and warmth of the prose need to be continuously renewed by narrative. If I read through the narrative, as it were, to the anxious state of mind that I imagine might have impelled it, then I'm interested; but I am not convinced by an author who wants to console me at every minute: it's like being in the company of an overly solicitous, determinedly optimistic nurse.

(This is not a complete review. I only made it to page 89. So much reassurance: by p. 81 there is a death, but we're told in many ways it was for love, and then we're told how that love was reciprocated, not only by one person, but by an entire crowd of people, who somehow understood what was happening even though they spoke a variety of languages; and we, the readers, are reassured that everyone appreciated and was inspired by the love they witnessed.)

All this made me wonder what the opposites of "Bel Canto" might be. "Bel Canto" consoles and cares about every doubt or anxiety a reader might have; what books disregard their readers' doubts? One of Patchett's opposites would be Beckett, who can sometimes want to tell us over and over that things are hopeless. Or writers like Houellebecq, Capote, or Ellis, who often want to remove consolation.

Those names come to mind because they are authors who set out, in a way, to do the opposite of
what Patchett does. The norm would be narrative that sometimes consoles but typically doesn’t, that sometimes shows how people care and are cared for, but generally doesn’t. If, as a reader, you don't feel any special pleasure in being continuously reassured, or if you find, as I do, that continuous solicitous care raises questions about the person who needs to administer that care, then this book may seem less comforting than disturbing.