

Venero Armanno: *The Dirty Beat*. University of Queensland Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-7022-3614-3, pb., 274 pages, AUD 32.95. **Reviewed by Veronika Starnes**, University of Silesia

When a copy of this book ventured into my hands I did not know what to expect. With the words *Dirty Beat* seemingly spray-painted on the cover in the middle of a semi-circle of red giving it an urban *grandeur*, I did not at first notice the splintered drum stick nor the decaying part of a drum kit that plays a significant role within the plot. Yet here it lay withering on the back of the cover; much like the narrator in the story. However, the words highlighted in red – rock, jazz, sex, love, life – struck a chord with this reviewer.

They come up in that precise order but seem to be unrelated to the story until one takes a closer look. The words and their connotations are indeed splashed out as raw as the blood-like ink used to accentuate them on the cover. Instantly they grab your attention, like a horrible car accident with fatalities; yet you cannot turn away.

The originator of this novel's simple prose is called Max, later on referred to as "the smashed-up drummer who's the audio man" (250). He weaves in and out throughout the two sections of the book named "I Feel So Strong" and "Soul Cakes", creating a feeling as though one were attending a *séance*, with the ghost performing all the parts and all the characters needed, that, like himself, weave in and out of his life. Unlike the plot, the prose flows easily, and if you listen closely you can perhaps hear music playing in the background. Maybe it is just wishful thinking or maybe one actually can adjust the volume of what Max presents in a chaotic yet understandable fashion. The events, like a beat, like a heart pounding, like adrenaline rushing through one's veins when the pressure gets too much, constantly has the reader at its mercy, the harshness or simplicity of a scene, a memory, a voice, never allows you to rest. This again, like a *Grateful Dead* album, creates a whole that is fashioned out of disparate parts to suit any reader with a love

of music, introspection, and a love of life that fuels the desire to create music: "you've lived and died and that's what every good musician wants to do if they're going to make memorable music" (203). Armanno's Max is just as candid, and real as Marilyn Manson could ever hope to present himself within his own autobiography *The Long Hard Road Out Of Hell*. That is exactly the feeling one has when confronted by Max's stories, anecdotes, or recollections of what at times is the equivalent of "dying by degrees" (190). Yet, to every tale of failure, of heartbreak, of another lesson learned, Armanno allows the reader a second of positive thinking: "maybe the upside is that I can put myself back together any way I want" (194).

And this is what lies at the core of this ridiculously simple scenario, the fact that it can be prescribed to so many aspiring, established or even day-dreaming musicians who live among us and supply us daily with doses of fantasy to enlighten our often dreary lives. All those who entertain us, who break the monotony, our "cookie cutter" (245) existence, only to perish in the very world that was meant to save both them and us: "You never get the chance to get ready for change; you simply hurtle in, blind, lonesome and always ill-prepared" (221).

Yet, there is no feeling of regret when all has been said and done, and Max's coffin is eased into the ground which concludes the story. It is, maybe, an anti-climactic ending. By this gesture however Armanno professes a philosophy that summarizes every tale the novel extols, namely "Plenty of passion but passion burns and leaves ashes" (253). Put another way: when life burns out it leaves a corpse, it ends the passion. The reader, if managing to compose her own thoughts after having a *tete-a-tete* with this stranger who says he provides "the dirty feel of old" (245) and could have been encountered anywhere, whether at a bar, bus-stop, library, whether drunk or sober (but more likely the former); that reader has unraveled a gripping story and has lived vicariously through various woes, loves, excesses. It is what modern society thrives on. As Lacan has remarked "nowhere does it appear more clearly that man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so

much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (*Ecritis: A Selection* 1985:58). Impossible to leave Max's side without a smile, and unlike some novels which feel "as exciting as getting pounded by a side of beef" (245), Venero Armano's *The Dirty Beat* manifests that "distance is nothing, time is immaterial, a sigh travels across decades and hits you in the same places." (p.251)