

**Venero Armanno: *Candle Life*.** Milsons Point, N.S.W.:  
Vintage, 2006. 351 pages, AUD 32.95. Isbn 174166120X.  
**Reviewed by Catherine Schwerin,** University of Hamburg.

**A**rmanno's dreamlike novel opens with a man being roused from sleep after an illness, a nameless man cut adrift in a foreign city, roused from a dream of his beloved.

When a man can't sleep any more, any sleep is a good sleep, and this one turned out to be something like a coma, and filled with you, Yukiko, only you.

This is the tale of a journey which weaves in and out of darkness and light. In large stretches of the narrative the man, an Australian writer, is speaking to his absent beloved, Yukiko, his Japanese-Australian girlfriend. He tells her of his encounters in Paris, the city the two of them had planned to travel to for a year, a city he is now experiencing alone. Interspersed are memories of his life in Australia that gradually reveal Yukiko's fate (her sudden accidental death before their planned trip), the extent of the protagonist's grief, and consequently the reason for his dislocation in both the literal and figurative sense.

The protagonist decides to go ahead alone with their plans to live in an arts commune in Paris, where his daily excursions and night wanderings bring him into contact with the lost, lonely, invisible people on the streets of the romanticised metropolis. These include the beggar Harry, who is burdened by the horror and shame of his experiences at the outbreak of World War II, Zoya, a mute Russian girl working as a prostitute who has deep powers of empathy, and the Cuban-American writer Jackson "Sonny" Lee, who is just as lost as the Australian writer but driven in his quest for retribution. It is the meeting with the latter that sets the protagonist on a path leading him to explore the depths of his grief, which is ultimately symbolically reflected in his myth-like journey down to the catacombs beneath the city of Paris.

In a parallel strand, the forlorn Australian writer is visited by a French friend whom he and Kiko knew from Australia. Carefree, erratic André Domain lobs into the writer's life as an interlude and intrudes into his solitude. André's subsequent unexpected death brings the man into contact with Emilie, André's niece. Her sensual and vivacious presence offers the man an unexpected pathway back to life. Despite this, the protagonist is irresistibly drawn to seek Kiko, drawn to the darkness and the desire to relive his hours with her. And to achieve this he sets his sights on the establishment *Les Belles Endormies (The Sleeping Beauties)*, where sleepers, after imbibing a mysterious beverage, fall into a deep slumber in which they may relive the most significant moments and memories of their lives.

This notion of sleep runs through the narrative as a theme. It frames the story in the opening, as the man wakes from his post-illness sleep, and in the close with his drug-induced comatose sleep that seems to prevent him from re-emerging to the world of the living. Conversely it is his sleeplessness that drives him out into the streets at night where his chance encounters with people propel the story in its path. Sleep is connected with his friend André who seems to be blessed with a capacity for deep slumber. André speaks of sleep as death, "No, no. I'm dead... Bed, bed" (54), and of waking as returning from the dead, "Well, after all, I have to come back from my land of the dead" (62). Ironically, André's sound sleep is the symptom of an illness, and it is while he is staying with the Australian writer that he fails to return to the land of the living.

There are sequences in the story where the sleep is drug-induced, and these take on an almost supernatural quality, where, despite the physical torment of the sleeper, the soul is raised to commune with the stars and attain a level of blissful enlightenment. This occurs in the protagonist after André's funeral, and in Sonny Lee after the brutal attack on him in Turkey where he almost loses his life. The Australian writer has a similar elevating experience when he descends to the catacombs to drink the beverage stolen from *Les Belles Endormies* in the hope of finding a pathway in the underworld that will reunite him with Kiko. He manages to emerge from the

symbolic underworld of the catacombs, but it remains uncertain whether he truly returns to the surface. In the final scene where he almost reaches out to the women who could bring him home to Emilie, he collapses into bitter-sweet oblivion instead, united with the stars. Ultimately sleep and death in the story are facets of the same phenomenon.

The narrative is also imbued with a sense of isolation and disorientation. It focuses most keenly on his loss, the loss of his loved one, Yukiko (the cause which is only gradually revealed – her death). This is what leads to his aimlessness. His decision to continue with their shared plan to go to Paris, although Kiko is no longer there, is more due to an inability to choose another direction and a desire to maintain her presence in his life as long as possible than to a focused desire to be in Paris. He is emotionally lamed.

This isolation and disorientation is also reflected in hindered communication. The writer loses his ability to write, becoming frozen in time like “a bug trapped in amber” (p.104). In addition, he faces a language barrier – he is unable to express himself freely in the foreign language of his environment. The Russian girl, Zoya, is hindered in her communication in a different way. She has lost her power of speech and in fact is working as a prostitute to finance her treatment to restore her ability to speak. Her loss of speech, however, seems to enhance her qualities as a vessel for the sleepers’ dreams at *Les Belles Endormies*.

Loneliness and desperation are encountered everywhere in the story - the policeman at the door at the beginning who engages in conversation; the beggar Harry; Sonny Lee in his apparently futile search for the murderers of the woman he loved, who savagely beat him and left him to die. Despite this the story remains in a mode of the magical, never taking on a laboured or burdensome manner. The narrative itself is light, propelling the reader forward. What is more, the story is embedded in a framework of celebration, commencing with the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the armistice at the beginning and concluding with a street protest-cum-party at the end, so that the darkness of the inner events is played out against the confusion of

light and colour and noise that forms the backdrop. This further highlights the contrast between the internal and external, the light and the dark.

The narrative style conveys a sense of the episodic, yet each episode pours fluently into the next. Armanno picks us up in the gentle tide of events, slowly carrying us out to the sea of one man's loss and emotional isolation. This man journeys to the depths of his emotional Hades in an attempt to retrieve his beloved (symbolically in the catacombs) and manages to return to surface. Despite the somehow ambiguous ending, which seems to contradict the logic of the preceding narrative, Armanno's *Candle Life* is haunting, magical and strangely uplifting.