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Last rites of wild life on the beat and the road

The Dirty Beat

By Venero Armanno
University of Queensland Press,
\$32.95

NOW NEAR THE FOREFRONT OF contemporary Australian novelists, Venero Armanno continues to make every book of his a fresh and challenging departure. After the grand scale of *The Volcano* came the phantasmagoric tale of artists in a beguiling, shadowy Paris, *Candle Life*.

His latest novel, *The Dirty Beat*, relates — by flashbacks — the life of Max, a jazz drummer and lately manager of a soon-to-be-a-hit band. There is a peculiar recent fashion for posthumous narration in Australian fiction. Trevor Shearston's *Dead Birds* was brought to us by a severed head; Armanno's by Max's "glorious undead mind". The rest of him has perished flamboyantly, by stroke on a dance floor, where he was accompanied by a beautiful young woman called Ash.

From the jaunty first sentence, where Max watches his skull being sawn open, to the unexpected pathos of its ending, Armanno shifts the tone of the novel with assurance and flair. Buried on what would have been his 50th birthday (the service is described in a long, virtuoso series of scenes), Max takes us back first to steamy Brisbane in 1973.

There Maree Kilmister taught him about three things that would be of utmost importance: "women, lovemaking and rock music." There is a fourth matter, perhaps paramount: "the value of veracity."

Self-pity never seeps into Max's accounting of his life. Neither was he self-deluded, having refused to be

one of the many who "tried to hold on to the past, to keep their glory days going, or to reinvent failures as successes, miseries as triumphs".

Maree is one of the mentor figures who — along with lost loves — are the key kinds of people in Max's life. His own background could have been brutalising. His natural father shot through when his mother, a "backroom brothel-worker" who will die of an overdose, became pregnant.

Taken in by his alcoholic aunt, Max will be taught most by the firm but gentle man who marries her, the Italian migrant Concetto San Filippo. From him Max receives moral precepts ("shoot straight, or don't shoot at all") besides his first and enduring lessons as a drummer. More saviour than mentor is Patti, nearly 30 years older than Max, who saves him from despair and a career as a nocturnal supermarket shelf-stacker. Truly an innocent abroad, Max is succoured by the kindness of others, but his own free and generous nature franks his integrity.

His great love is the violinist and renegade, Debbie Canova, whom he encounters first on an outback band trip when her playing fills the countryside "with the sort of magic you get in European art-house movies but not real life". Fleeing to the city, a resilient but forever damaged victim of sexual abuse, she turns up on Max's doorstep, where graphically she resembles "a road rat, a truckie's wet dream, a biker's moll or a rock band groupie thrown out of some travelling van to make her own way home".

Able to give us a keen sense of the musicianship of Max, Debbie and others (a hard task of artistic cross-over), Armanno is also alert to

the sullied world in which artists work, the milieu of producers, managers, roadies, night club owners, the predators for whom performers are at once highly valued and despised.

Last of Max's grand emotional entanglements is the prostitute who calls herself Laetitia Sparks. He meets her only once, on the last night of the Club Marrakesh. She is also one of his instructors, at first into the folk origins of Halloween (for this is October 31) and the tradition of "soul cakes" given to beggars who "promised to pray long and hard for the souls of the dear-departed".

Prophetically she speaks to Max as well of that state of limbo (as if he were still a believer) in which he will find himself: "I've always felt an attraction for what comes after you die. I like the idea of a door opening and there being a way to get between this world and the next."

That is the strange, in-between-place to which Armanno's novel has taken us.

His full-scale fictional dare in the way the story is told is complemented by a succession of smaller ones: the interpolated fairy tale that Debbie tells Max concerning the burden of guilt and the need for confession, however destructive, the surprising yet benign revelations of human connections and consequences that come to Max after his death.

The Dirty Beat is a bold, original and moving reckoning of a life in those final post-mortem moments with which Max — at least — has been blessed.

Peter Pierce is a former professor of Australian literature at James Cook University.

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