

Venero Armanno, *Black Mountain* (Queensland University Press, 2012)

Like a continuum of ever-widening circles *Black Mountain*, by award winning author Venero Armanno, is a story within a story. The underlying themes are the search for belonging and a sense of self that is basic to humanity.

It is primarily Cesare Montenero's story, but it is also Mark Alter's, even though his is a cameo appearance in the Prologue and Epilogue. Initially, I wondered whether the Prologue was even necessary, but both sections work to set up the initial situation that leads to Cesare's revelations in the chapters between and to complete the circular style of the novel.

Mark Alter has a recurring dream and the creature of his dream haunts him as if etched into his psyche. In the prologue Mark is a dropout from university law, who at 22 years of age is bored with merely drifting through life and settles on a project he hopes will help him 'find himself' (12).

More than one-third of this novel is set in the sulphur mines of Sicily at the turn of the twentieth century when Sicily's mining and export of sulphur (brimstone), an essential contribution to the munitions industry, was reaching its peak. It is a period when families of the large country estates are beginning to feel the pinch of increasing taxes imposed on their properties. These elite families are selling out and moving to the cities.

It is also the time when impoverished families with too many children sold sons into slavery in the sulphur mines. The writing in this section of the novel is very good, quite vibrant as it creates a sense of the isolated mining life and the suffering of the children. I could almost smell sulphur fumes and feel the skin-searing heat of the mines. It shows the unrelenting pace of the miner's work to extract huge loads of crude brimstone that the child slaves are required to deliver to the surface. Miners, paid by weight of the load that the smelter's cart collects, wanted to clean out the mine and go home to wife and family. I could hear the groaning and painful breathing of the puny boys as they tote load after load, as much as 40 pounds per load. I could see the trembling of their tired frail legs; feel their relief to heave a load into the waiting smelter's cart; their pleasure breathing in the fresh air as they view the surrounding landscape. Although it is a bleak scarred one due to the mines, at least there is daylight and fresher air to be enjoyed on the surface. There's also Luisa, the smelter's tired overworked carthorse, always ready to nuzzle the boys' gently as they pat her. Luisa brings warmth to their otherwise loveless existence.

On top of this misery, which was surely harsh enough for the boys to endure, the miners isolated from female companionship frequently consigned a *carusi* to provide them with sexual gratification.

This is the life of Sette, initially in service to Giozzi, a pottery, ceramics and tile-maker who sold him to Giovanni, who in turn sold him to Salvatore. Salvatore is the worst of all masters. He truly makes the life of his slave boys a living hell.

Sette, which means 'Seven'. So at the start, there were at least six others like me. There must have been many more who came later, children nicely labelled Otto, Nove, Dieci. They got rid of me young, sold me, I believe, at maybe four or five years of age. There's no town or village that I was born into, and I don't remember the faces of any people who surrounded ... me. (11)

Sette is aware he is not like the other boys. Not only does he have absolutely no memory of village or family life before the mines, but also his amazing recuperative powers, even after the toughest day, make him unusual. He's no better fed, equally puny to look at, but somehow manages to keep going. Even injuries, from beatings or accidents in the mine, heal quickly. When he attempts escape from the mines and the brutal Salvatore, he is hunted and tracked down, and receives several bullet wounds, but remarkably he survives.

This is a turning point in Sette's life due to the intervention by Don Domenico Amati. It is where Sette is recreated to become Cesare Montenero (140). There is a pulling back from the almost brutal energy of the writer's style towards a gentler historical style in keeping with Sette/Cesare's new life. Gone is the despair and cruelty of the mines and the more immediate threat of life and death that period of Sette's story covers.

Don Domenico is an odd, remote character preferring to eschew society and from time to time beset by moments of mental instability. However, he is a kind mentor to Cesare, perhaps becoming close to a father figure for the youth, though emotionally distant. Domenico ensures Cesare learns manners, is educated and properly prepared for life as a young gentleman. He encourages Cesare to explore life and to 'become who you are' (138).

This is very much a story about men, although not gender specific in its writing. Because of the nature of the content there are few women. For Sette/Cesare the most important women are Rosa Bortolotti who becomes the mother he never knew, Veronica who aids him to explore life, and Celeste whom he loves.

Be who you are, or become who you are, is a phrase often used in this novel. In the Prologue, Mark Alter reflects that 'One day I will find myself' (12). The aging Cesare Montenero in a phone call with Mark tells him, 'Once you're here you'll know where you are' (25). Later, 'So you've found me' is the enigmatic note Mark finds, instead of the mysteriously absent Cesare, when he discovers hidden documents at old writer's isolated property in the Australian countryside.

Genealogy is another important theme. Domenico tells the younger Cesare that 'One hand passes on to the next ... Isn't that the way we renew ourselves?' (184). That's certainly a thriving interest today with the popularity of the television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* as well as the growing use of Ancestry.com for people undertaking family research. We all want to know our roots to make sense of ourselves.

So what does it mean to be human? Is it our ability to love, laugh, cry, and feel empathy? Is it to be found in science as it researches the means to remain youthful, stave off the afflictions of old age, and seek the possibility of escaping our mortality. This book will keep you thinking for quite a while after you've read it.

Kay Hart