



Sicilian alterations

FICTION

BLACK MOUNTAIN. By Venero Armanno. University of Queensland Press. 282pp. \$29.95.

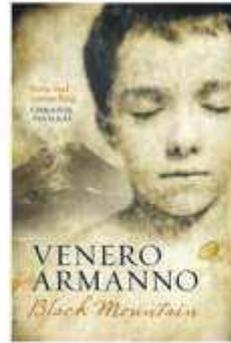
Reviewer: NATASHA MOLT

Venero Armanno's latest novel, *Black Mountain*, imagines a world where scientists create a new breed of resilient people. The narrative leads through several generations of eugenically altered humans, beginning with modern-day Australian Mark Alter. The young man seeks to find himself in the solitude of a coastal town, writing a screenplay about his haunting dreams. After submitting his screenplay to a production company he is told he has plagiarised a story by Italian novelist Cesare Montenero. To discover why his dreams resemble Montenero's descriptions, Mark travels to Sicily to locate the writer. But Montenero has abandoned his home, leaving only a series of notebooks detailing his life, and strangely, Mark's past.

The narrative clearly echoes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in form and idea. Walton's letters in *Frankenstein* framed the protagonist's main saga, just as Mark's account at the beginning and end of *Black Mountain* contextualises Montenero's primary story. In Shelley's novel, there are other parallels between Walton's and *Frankenstein's* narratives, and this is also the case with Mark and Montenero. Nonetheless, Armanno reworks the theme of modifying the human species into an original and eventful tale.

Montenero, as a young boy called Sette, was sold into the Sicilian sulphur mines near Italy's largest volcano, Mt Etna, early in the 20th century. Described by anti-slavery campaigner, Booker T. Washington, as the closest thing to hell on earth, life in these mines meant an early death for most. But not for Sette, a boy of remarkable, unnatural endurance.

Eventually Sette escapes the mines, rescued by a mysterious stranger, Don Domenico, who renames the



boy Cesare Montenero. Cesare learns that it is not by chance that Domenico saved him, and that the two share a deeper bond that explains the boy's exceptional strength. Domenico, a farmer who has written down his experiences, continues to raise Cesare into manhood. As the story progresses, Cesare begins a promising writing career and a journey of sexual discovery.

Part speculative, historical and literary fiction, the novel choreographs the paradox of a fortunate yet lonely and afflicted form of human. Armanno demonstrates how the genetic altering of people can lead to potentially unknown health defects and unhappy, melancholic-prone identities, but not necessarily any diminishment in humanity or human dignity.

Armanno knows his background material well, and the story forms part of his fascination with Sicily. Having grown up in an area of Brisbane with a large Italian population, Armanno recounts that he was raised speaking Sicilian, and visited Sicily as a boy. As an Australian-Italian, though, he never felt that he fully belonged to either country.

These themes of not fitting in and identity have made their way into Armanno's other novels and short stories. The Sicilian community has provided the setting for a number of his works and Armanno's writing is most vivid when he explores the Sicilian landscape. In *Black Mountain*, with the depictions of life in the mines, his prose displays a thrilling intensity. Less convincing is the idea of three genetically improved male characters taking up writing themselves, a trait inconsistent with the purpose for which these superhumans were created. Despite this, the novel is rich, compelling and accessible, and relationships between the characters are well composed.

The topics of eugenics and genetic engineering are becoming increasingly relevant in today's age of scientific advances, and Armanno's *Black Mountain* offers an enthralling, dynamic contribution on the possible psychosocial implications of such experimentation.

• Natasha Molt is a Canberra writer and PhD student at the University of Adelaide.



Brisbane writer Venero Armanno: thrilling intensity.

Photo: Eddie jim