



Dead Max brings novel to life

FICTION

THE DIRTY BEAT. By Venero Armanno. UQP
274pp. \$32.95.

Reviewer: **IAN MCFARLANE**

Venero Armanno is arguably one of Australia's leading literary novelists, and doesn't waste time: I reviewed his previous novel *Candle Life*, a consummately crafted tale of a writer's self-doubt under the corrosive stress of grief, only last year. And here, with the accomplished talent of a real writer, he tacks away on a daringly different course, exploring the tempestuous era of rock-and-roll; tempered by the cool jazz legends of John Coltrane and Miles Davis.

Rock and jazz drummer Max is remembering the rapidly vanishing era of Dirtybeat, his almost accidentally successful rock group: "With the start of the Eighties most punk and new wave was already gone, moody synth-pop bands were all the rage, and if you made rock music at all you had to have big hair. We didn't. We still had our straggly Seventies look, but that was our badge of honour. No synthesizers for us, nothing but raw rock-and-roll the way God made it, and certainly no pre-fab image."

The trouble is, Max is dead, the victim of a middle-aged heart attack while dancing with a pretty young girl, and is lying in his coffin, watching his old mates, lovers and critics gather round to say goodbye. What an attention-grabbing premise for a novel! Providing, of course, it carries the narrative skills to out-run any lingering suspensions of disbelief, and this one certainly does. In fact, the ploy becomes a virtuoso performance, as Max – or perhaps a ghostly trace of his spiritual *je ne sais quoi* – floats among the mourners, selecting random thoughts or emotions, and using them to kick-start a series of seamless flashbacks.

The creation of memorable characters is a vital element of good fiction, and this novel's cup runneth over with them. Even Aunt Emma, the kind of grey, suburban woman, homespun by loneliness into virtual invisibility, who takes Max in when his drug-addicted and abandoned mother

dies, leaves a lasting impression. Emma is backlit by the looming hulk of Connor, the man who arrives on her doorstep as a future husband, with two battered suitcases and a drum kit; a man whose awkwardly caring persistence ("shoot straight, or you do not shoot at all") gives momentum to Max's interest (and natural ability) for drumming.

But the stand-out characters are women; like the doomed, but talented, Debbie Canova, who drifts into contact with Dirtybeat at a failed outback gig, with her cheesecloth shirt, gypsy skirt, frayed round the edges, broken toenails with remnants of pink polish on them, and a violin, which she has taught herself to play, divinely. Her presence transforms the band; its music, lyrics and style, nudging Max towards the exotic world of recording contracts and fame.

Or Patti, who Max first meets packing supermarket shelves, when he is raw and 19, and she a well-worn woman of 46: "Her teeth were stained and crooked in a way that wasn't really all that bad, and she was stocky and strong-looking without being dumpy or frumpy. I could easily imagine her as the one-time lead singer of some all-girl rock band, now fifteen to twenty years post her career. Her voice was low and gravelly enough that it could have been true." Their eyes meet over a mountain of baked bean cartons, and Max, who is a bit of a philosopher when it comes to women, recalls, "For the most part [women like Patti] are still the girls they were at eighteen, it's just that no bastard will take the time to find that kid any more." Max does, and Patti responds by providing a sexually well-primed youth with a useful distinction between lust and love.

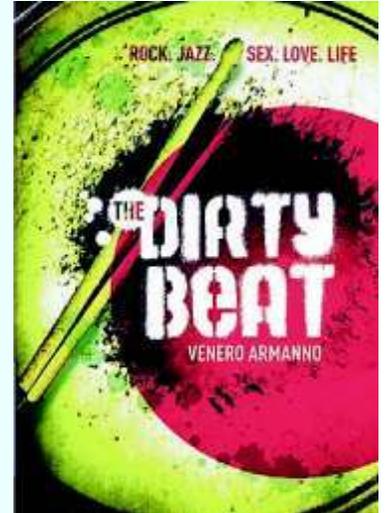
This novel has the unmistakable beat of a passionate humanity. The author says he wanted it to be "full of hope, humour and life". And it is. If you like your fiction straight off the bone; lean and sweet and true, find yourself a copy real soon.

Ian McFarlane is a South Coast writer and reviewer, for whom good books are the staff of life.



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Novelist Venero Armano succeeds in creating memorable characters in his rock and roll tale *The Dirty Beat*.
Picture: Letchford Photography

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