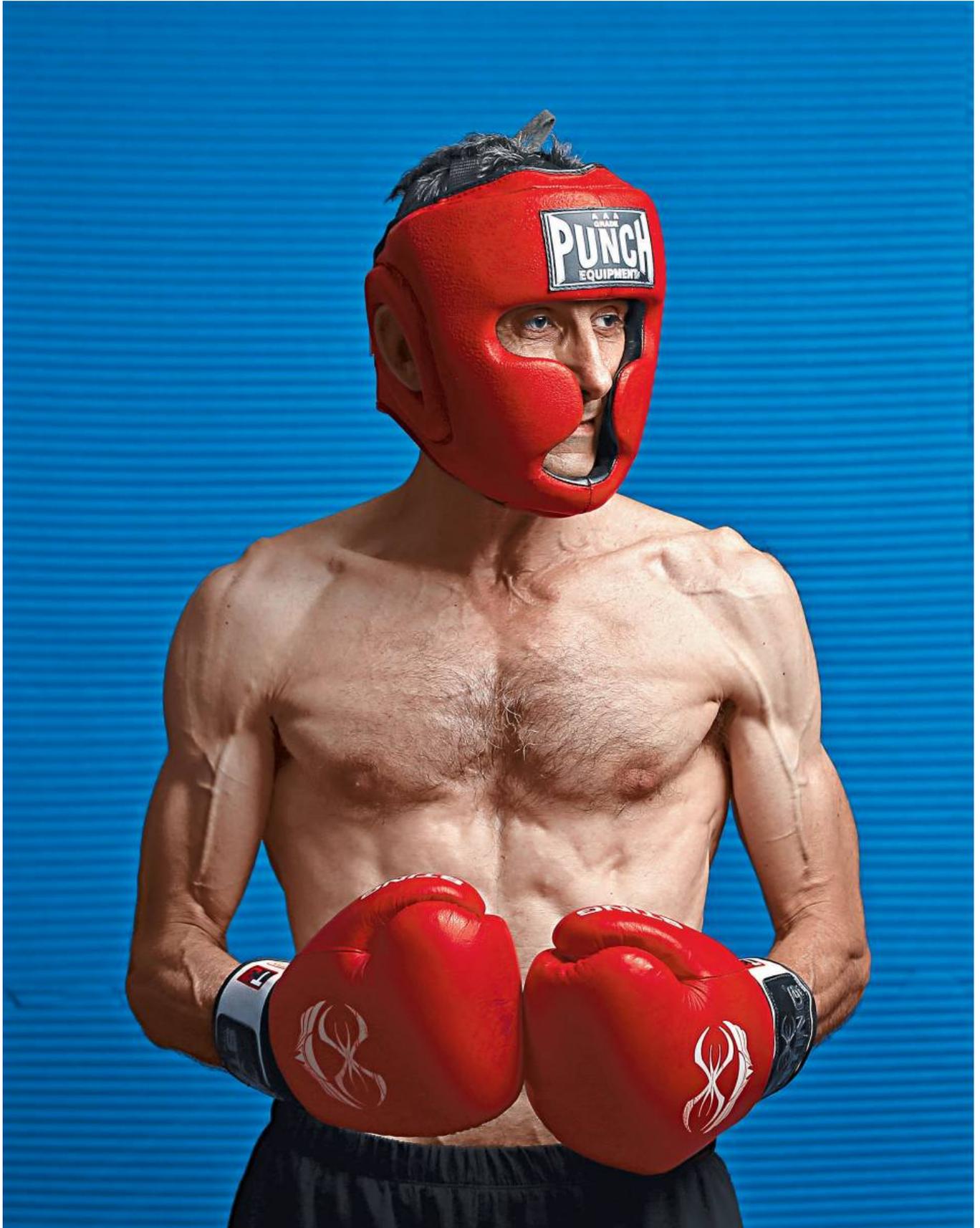
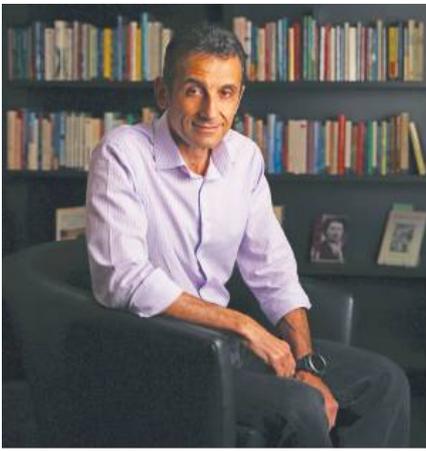


MAKING A GOOD FIST OF WRITING

SUSAN JOHNSON



Every writer has his bone, the subject he gnaws at his whole life long. Venero Armano's is composed of family, migration, the island of Sicily with its dramatic stories of volcanoes, beauty and death, and the flourishing green of the camphor laurel trees lining Abbott St, New Farm, in Brisbane's inner north, where he grew up.



Author, academic and (opposite page) shadow boxer Venero Armanno. Pictures: David Kelly



Armanno as a young man (he'd been bullied at school about his weight and his ethnicity); (right) Bareknuckle Books' Adam Pettet (left) and Brentley Frazer. Picture: Adam Head

It's a tasty bone for a writer to chew on. Its marrow has fed Armanno over a career spanning 15 published books and countless unpublished ones, literary prizes, European translations and a university job in creative writing, which he loves. Armanno – known to his friends, family and students as Veny – is now 57, and as hungry as ever.

He's fit, too. Not since the heady days of Hemingway and Mailer, talking up the link between masculinity in the boxing ring and virility on the page, has an Australian author looked this good in boxing gloves. Artist and writer Norman Lindsay (of *The Magic Pudding* fame), who died in 1969, was possibly the last Australian writer who was also an accomplished amateur boxer.

Armanno is keen to point out that he is not a real boxer. What he does is boxing training, which is a very different thing. His thing is health and fitness; never again being the fat kid who was bullied at St James College in

Brisbane's inner-city Spring Hill. His mother, Angelina, who died in 2008, came from Piedimonte Etneo, the same town in Sicily as his father, Carmelo, 92, and both knew starvation during World War II and in the hard years following. They didn't meet in Italy – despite the small size of the town nestling at the foot of Mt Etna – but in Spring Hill, after both had emigrated to Australia after the war. They married and had their first child, a girl they named Connie, when Angelina was only 19. Four years later, in 1959, Veny arrived



and Angelina quit her job as a seamstress at Freemans in Fortitude Valley, relying on Carmelo's income as a bricklayer. She set about feeding her kids, making sure their stomachs were always full and their flesh abundant, because plump children showed you were prosperous and that you looked after your children properly.

Being Italian was bad enough in 1960s Brisbane, but being a fat Italian kid was even worse. "(School) was a really unhappy environment, very violent and very racist. Every day at that school was just hell. Absolute hell. I hated every second of it," says Armanno. "At least 10 or 20 times a day someone would say, 'You dumb f--king wog'. If you stood up to them, if you spoke back, you'd just get belted. And the guys were all bigger than me, they were big footballers and I was small and fat." He says the racism didn't stop at the school gates. "I remember being spat on at a bus stop in the city," he says. "Some guy just walked past me and said 'You wog', and spat at me. I was 13."

Armanno hastens to add that this casual racism was nothing compared to what migrants face now, when "the migrant issue can polarise a nation in such a way that elections can be won or lost on them. It wasn't like that then. Anything I experienced is nothing – zero – compared to what migrants are experiencing today".

"My family were welcomed to this country. It's just that it was very difficult assimilating from both sides, OK? But we were welcomed, there was still room for us, it's nothing like the vilification and hatred that happens today."

Besides, experiencing bullying – and surviving it – made Armanno the boxing-fit writer he is now. "The good thing is, it transformed me. It turned me into this, you know? This is why I'm doing training," he says. "But I'll never get over those years. I was always the outsider – not too much worries me now."

In a lovely piece of serendipity, his new publisher is a small press run out of the inner suburb of West End on a shoestring budget, which calls itself Bareknuckle Books. Its logo is a tiny male boxer, putting up his dukes, in honour of the Romantic poet Lord Byron, who was enamoured of bare-knuckle boxing and took regular instruction in the sport from Jackson's Academy for Gentlemen at No. 13 Bond St, London. Publisher and poet Brentley Frazer, who runs Bareknuckle Books with his co-founder Adam Pettet, a former assistant director of the Queensland Poetry Festival, chose the name because he was charmed by the story of Byron, down on his luck, resorting to bare-knuckle fighting matches to pay for his dinner. Armano's new collection of novellas and short stories is the press's first fiction title – it has previously published poetry, non-fiction and scholarly essays – and it seems unlikely this celebrated author will need to put up his dukes in order to pay for his lunch.

ARMANNO DIDN'T START OUT SO GARLANDED. HE MIGHT

now be a Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Industries (Queensland University of Technology) but he was once the class dunce. "They looked at me, very early on, and said, 'this kid is dumb' and that became the label that was attached to me, and it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. I was treated as dumb and I acted dumb. I acted like a complete moron, you know? I was down the bottom of the class for everything and that's where I thought I should be."

Armano believes now he did so badly because he was so desperately unhappy at St James and got "no support whatsoever". When he failed Year 11, he begged his father to let him leave school and start work but, to aspirational migrants, education was everything. "My father said, 'no way, you're going to finish your schooling', which turned out to be the best thing he ever did."

Armano moved to Kelvin Grove State High School (now Kelvin Grove State College) in the city's inner northwest, and suddenly everything was different. "Nobody there knew me – no kid, no teacher – so they just accepted this new kid at face value," he says. He remembers the exact moment his world changed: his English teacher called him in after he'd handed in an assignment on Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a book he adored. "She said, 'this is a very good assignment, one of the best, but I'm going to fail you'. I said, 'OK, why?' and she said, 'because you didn't write it'. I said, 'but I did!' " The teacher proceeded to test him. "OK, tell me what this word that you used means then: 'iconoclastic'." Armano told her the correct meaning. Then she asked him to explain the meaning of the word 'indictment'. He told her. "And she said, 'I'm so sorry'. And, after that, I got sevens (out of seven) every semester. Thank God that teacher took me in and asked me those questions. Those two words – 'iconoclastic' and 'indictment' – changed my life."

Armano's final year academic results were so good, he qualified for entrance to a law degree at the University of Queensland. But by then he had gone from being a voracious reader of books to wanting to write one. "I got into law but I only lasted a year," he says. "It was kind of a conscious failure, because I wasn't studying, I was writing my first novel." He laughs. Armano has the happy knack of not taking himself too seriously while at the same time taking his writing very seriously indeed. "It was a vampire novel, called *Darker Than Night*. I was 18. It's possibly the only vampire novel that has a Sicilian migrant vampire who gets bored and at the end commits suicide. I thought it was great – I don't know why nobody wanted to publish it!"

He says he'd sit in the library every day, writing his book instead of assignments. "That failed law for me, yeah, so then I changed to psychology because I had friends doing psych. I got my undergraduate degree in psychology." Then – in another stroke of serendipity – the brother-in-law of someone he knew worked for a Japanese IT company, Facom (now an arm of Fujitsu), which was running a trainee program. It was 1980 and the computer boom was just starting.

Armano says it seems hard to believe now, but he had never used a computer and neither had anyone he knew. "No one used a computer on campus, everything was handwritten or typed. There were some computers in the computing department, I think, but we didn't use them."

He got the job, on the sales team, and ended up working there for a couple of years before moving to UK-based International Computers Limited (ICL). Computers were still a novelty item. Armano says they used to joke about PCs because "we had no confidence whatsoever that these things would actually exist. It was like some silly rumour".

He loved the job at ICL. "From the moment I sat down for the interview, it was love at first sight," he says. "I loved the work – selling to government, semi-government and private businesses – and when you achieved your quota for the year, and our quotas were five or six million, they sent you on all these programs to all these wonderful destinations." He laughs again. "Those were the days!"

But despite his enchantment with his newfound career, his love of writing would not go away. "I realised I didn't know anything about writing – yes, you've read a gazillion books, but you need to learn how to be a writer. And – only a young person could think this – I said to myself I'm going to write a book a year, until I get published. And that's what I did." Armano calculates he probably wrote a million words before he got published: "Ten novels and God knows how many short stories." He smiles again. "I'm not saying they're any good. They read like 10 books written in 10 years!" He had some good luck, though. In 1984, his book *Strange Rain* was shortlisted for the Vogel Award for a first novel written by an author under 30 (it was eventually published, in a much altered version, by Picador in 1996).

Then, a couple of things happened: a friend suggested that instead of wasting time writing novels no one published, why didn't he concentrate instead on writing short stories? At the same time, Armano began to send off applications to the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) because "I always wanted to be a novelist, but I also wanted to be a scriptwriter. I wanted to work in films".

He set about writing a collection of short stories – a couple were published in small literary journals – and then he got a call from an editor at University of Queensland Press (UQP). He'd sent off a big pile to them. "The editor called me in. She had two piles in

front of her – a small pile and a big, thick pile. She said, 'OK, Veny, I want you to look at these. The small pile? Really good. The big pile? Really bad. Go home and figure out the difference between the two.'

As with his high-school English teacher, it was a lightbulb moment for Armanno. He reread the stories closely, went back to the editor and had a good, long conversation with her. His first short-story collection, *Jumping at the Moon*, was published by UQP in 1992. In the same week UQP offered Armanno a contract for publication, he received an offer from the AFTRS to join its prestigious screenwriting program. "So it was really a confluence of events, where I thought to myself, OK, you either do it now, or you'll never do it. It was the difference between a wonderful IT-based career, or the unknown of writing." He chose writing.

SINCE THEN, ARMANNO'S WORK HAS GONE FROM STRENGTH

to strength. His books have been shortlisted for or won numerous literary awards (*Jumping at the Moon* was joint runner-up for the Steele Rudd Award in 1993 and *The Volcano* won the 2002 Queensland Premier's Literary Award). He's been published in the US, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Holland, Israel and South Korea.

So why is he publishing his new anthology – a collection of novellas and short stories under the title *Travel Under Any Star* – with a small, independent Brisbane press rather than the large multinational publishers he usually deals with? "Firstly, it gives you the freedom to deal with people directly," he says. "Bareknuckle Books is just a couple of guys who are passionate about what they're doing, and there's nothing inspires me more than people who are passionate and trying hard." He says Bareknuckle's Frazer and Pettet, both in their early 40s and authors themselves, are literary heroes, revisiting a tradition of innovative publishing championed by luminary independent presses such as San Francisco's *City Lights* and London's *Hogarth Press*. "They showed me a contract and we haven't even signed it," he says. "It's a handshake agreement, and there's nothing I love more than where you say, 'On my honour, I will do this, and you'll do that'. It's fantastic," Armanno says.

As for Bareknuckle, co-publisher Pettet says it's an honour to publish him, despite an initial hesitation as to whether such an established writer would fit their model. "We debated whether Veny's work fitted the Bareknuckle aesthetic – the cutting-edge and challenging work that we wanted," says Pettet. "(But) after reading the manuscript, a new aspect of his work emerged – that of the urban loner, the sense of dislocation and the frailties of human interaction that personify current society. These were subjects we connected with, and we felt (his book) would also ring true for others."

Started as an online journal in 2013, Bareknuckle began producing books as a publishing house last year. "One of our major philosophies is 'be who you needed'," explains Pettet. "The idea was that we would try to be the kind of person or entity that we needed, when we were struggling writers (ourselves), especially in Queensland with no established local literary journal (Australia's oldest, *Meanjin*, relocated from Brisbane to Melbourne in 1945 and another successful contemporary publication, *The Lifted Brow*, also relocated to Melbourne in 2009)." Brisbane had nothing to call its own. Pettet adds that he and Frazer were also aware that publishing an established author such as Armanno bestowed a sense of legitimacy Bareknuckle might otherwise lack, thus helping it support emerging future voices. "It's what we can do for new writers that matters, and having an established back-catalogue increases our chances of funding and distribution of unknown writers."

Despite his foray into the world of small publishers, Armanno's next novel, *Burning Down*, will be published by UQP in 2017. Set in Brisbane in the mid-'70s, it's about an ex-boxer who committed a long-ago crime that cost him everything, and features some of the old illegal casinos of Fortitude Valley. Armanno likes to spread the love.

The truth is he's as hungry as ever. He's been teaching the creative writing program at UQ for more than 15 years now – during which he married events manager Nicole and became a devoted father to Rocco, 14, establishing a family home on acreage at Pullenvale in Brisbane's outer west – but through it all, he has been writing, writing, writing. "I'm still a struggling writer, a beginning writer," he says. "I've not even started to climb the mountain – I'm on the road towards the mountain. I might be a bit closer, but I'm definitely not yet the writer I want to be." >

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