
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide, first broadcast on 19 June 2006

The narrator of Venero Armanno’s latest novel is a young Australian novelist in Paris. Haunted by his dead girlfriend Yukiko, who would have been with him sharing his studio in the artists’ commune if she hadn’t been electrocuted, just like Assumpta in Ballykissangel, he stumbles through Parisian life trying to write but distracted by beggars with lurid histories, and beautiful girls. Normality does its best to intrude but a psychological drama has to be enacted before it can assert itself, taking the young man back in time to the appalling events of Kristallnacht and down in space to the catacombs deep underneath Paris.

Candle Life is written in the first person and the present tense, the narrative tumbling along and occasionally becoming compulsive. The novel loops in on itself: the act of writing surfaces from time to time and the narrator’s intermittent writers’ block is part of the story. The psychological premise is simple enough: he must exorcise the past before he can begin life anew as a writer and a lover. But it is not only his own past he has to relive, with the help of a mind-altering memory drug from South America provided by the mysterious painter and brothel-owner Roman Zielinski. The narrator has an alter ego, Sonny or Jackson Lee, otherwise known as Carlos Juan-Luis Cemi, and there is the beggar Harry, who has also taken on another identity. Who is who, whose stories are true and whose are imagined or embellished, is never firmly established. Sudden death is everywhere, but there are survivors, although they are often maimed in some way.
Candle Life is a gripping read but the symbols sometimes become tired and obvious. The characters mostly lose the struggle to become more than their role in the narrator’s psychology. Perhaps it is inevitable that this kind of novel, which is a subjective, impressionistic account of a few dramatic months in the narrator’s life, should shade into solipsism. Is he really making meaningful connections with autonomous other people, or is the whole drama taking place in his head? I’m not sure we can be sure, despite the vividness of Armanno’s descriptions of physical sensations and places, and the inclusion of other characters’ own stories in their own words. Dreams and reality, past and present, truth and lies, even self and others, all mingle in a postmodern realm where boundaries disappear. Nevertheless, Candle Life is not pretentious or overwritten, and although a bit heavy on the symbolism, it is never less than interesting.