



BLACK MOUNTAIN

by Venero Armanno

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'Black Mountain is an eerie and compelling read. The storytelling is confident, the writing fluid and assured. Like the best fiction, this unsettling novel remains with you long after you have finished.'

Christos Tsiolkas

Just after the turn of the twentieth century, sold into slavery by a family he can't even remember, the life of a small boy known only as 'Sette' ('Seven') promises to be short and brutal.

Working in Sicily's notorious underground sulphur mines to service the armament demands of World War I, watching other children weaken and perish around him, *Sette* somehow manages to survive, demonstrating a strength that is as surprising as it is mysterious.

One night, when he is forced into an audacious escape, *Sette* discovers what the world outside the sulphur mines can really be like; for the first time he sees the natural beauty of unspoilt fields and meadows, and the way rivers and streams run clear and true. *Sette* travels toward the volcano Mt Etna, a beacon for his attempt at freedom, yet pursuers are closing in on him. He knows that if he is caught his punishment will be swift and final.

When he is finally cornered, and the hunters' bullets tear through his small body, *Sette* is saved by the enigmatic landowner Don Domenico, who metes out his own swift retribution upon the hunters.

Don Domenico nurses *Sette* back to health and takes him under his wing, giving him a new home and a new name: Cesare Montenero, after the volcano, Sicily's 'black mountain'.

As the years pass *Sette* – now Cesare – learns about life and about being a man, yet his greatest discoveries are that his rescue was no accident, his physical strength isn't quite natural, and the strange bond between he and Don Domenico is something shared by other outcasts of society almost exactly like themselves.

DISCUSSION NOTES

1. *Black Mountain's* prologue is set in the present day. It centres on a young screenwriter named Mark Alter who discovers the diaries and incredible personal journey of a man named Cesare Montenero. Did you find this an interesting way to lead into an exploration of the past, and of the life of a man who seems to have gone missing?



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2. What did you think of the message to the finder of the diaries: *'So you've found me. And that means you've found yourself. Please don't look away?'* (p 30)

Does this mean these diaries will have some bearing on the life of Mark Alter? Were you interested to find out what the message might mean?

3. The story of the small boy who only goes by the name 'Sette' (meaning 'Seven') starts in the early twentieth century in the old Sicilian world of manufacturing tiles and ceramics. There the boys are treated as menial workers and virtual slaves. Did you find this an interesting world to connect with, or was it too far beyond your experience?

4. As with much in *Black Mountain*, Venero Armanno researched factual accounts of similar lives to portray what it would have been like for small boys to work for Aldo Gozzi and his company.

Have you read other books where child slavery has been similarly explored?

Do you know of any other places or countries where such things occurred?

5. As bad as things were working for Gozzi, of course nothing compares to the miseries of working in the Sicilian sulphur mines. When *Sette* and the other small boy Natale are sold to the miner named Giovanni, we know their lives will not be easy.

What emotional threads in the story made you want to keep reading (or otherwise)?

How did you find the relationship between *Sette* and Natale, and their master?

How did you react to the depiction of 'life' in the sulphur fields and underground mines?

6. Somewhere in the story it starts to become clear that there is something quite different about *Sette*. He can't remember a past or a family; he can handle the work underground; then when he becomes the slave of a new and even more awful miner, Salvatore, he breaks his leg horribly yet heals in what seems like record time.

What did you think was going on with this character?

At what point did you start to think that things were not quite as they seemed?

At what point does *Sette* start to believe he's not the same as everyone else? Should he have known earlier?



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7. *Sette's* escape in the snow really starts his life's adventure. From this point it's as if he has a chance to be reborn, to create a new life. There is even the reference to being in a womb when he hides in Giovanni's old mine.

When you were reading, did you feel this sense of a boy on the precipice of making himself into something he really wanted to be, but risking losing everything?

8. The escape introduces several new narrative threads, all developing in the shadow of the great volcano, Mt Etna. There is the story of *Sette's* survival during the hunt, then there is the start of new storylines involving the mysterious Don Domenico, Dr Vliegman, and Signora Rosa. Through them *Sette*, and the reader, experiences a kinder, gentler side to Sicilian life that hasn't been seen before. Yet Domenico is the owner of a vast property upon which scores of people live. He has, in effect, a fiefdom.

In reality, how free can people be when they have to work the land of a great property baron?

9. The relationship between *Sette* – who now takes the name 'Cesare Montenero' – and Don Domenico is key to the novel. What did you think of this master and protégé relationship, and what sorts of things does Cesare start to learn from this man?

As a mentor, is there more Domenico could have done?

10. Domenico is keen for the young Cesare to have a life that is his own. We learn later in the book why this is so important to him. We also learn the true meaning of Domenico's exhortation '*Be who you are*'.

Domenico is true to himself and understands his limitations in the world. He can never be happy in society, in company, even with a woman. Yet he believes Cesare might have a chance, and sends him to study at the University of Bologna.

Can you understand the reasons Domenico couldn't 'connect' with the outside world, and why troubles and problems would lead to his fits and turns?

Did you think that Cesare would suffer the same sort of fate? Does he, in the end?



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11. Cesare makes a pivotal discovery while working as a wardsman at the local Bologna hospital. It reveals everything about Dr Vliegman and also about himself. His act of mercy to the ‘creature’ is a turning point in his life.

Should he have taken this step? Should he have given the creature what it begged for?

If there was an alternative, what might it have been?

12. Cesare’s journey to freedom, to making his own life, is also a sexual journey. After Domenico is killed, Cesare sees that he’s a young man who perhaps shouldn’t, or can’t, have sexual urges – yet through love discovers that he can. First there is the Englishwoman Veronica; then, of course, there is the enigmatic Celeste, who works in the Parisian *maison closes*.

Celeste isn’t so much a sexual adventurer as someone who offers herself easily for sex. What do you think about this life of a courtesan that Celeste leads? Are there any issues of morality (or otherwise) that these sorts of sexual adventures raise?

13. The publisher Bruno Pasqua is half peasant, half man of letters, and is definitely a sexual adventurer. He loves his wife and family and seems genuinely happy with them, yet he craves and seeks out adventures at every turn.

As he says: ‘*God allows us one life, and whenever you limit yourself you limit the experiences you have before your time’s up. Who knows when that will come?*’ (p 229)

Is he correct? What do you think of his reasoning?

Does this seem a particularly European approach to life, or perhaps part of a generation that no longer exists?

Are there modern examples of this thinking?

14. Cesare has no interest in the sorts of adventures Bruno Pasqua lives for, but he is immediately and deeply drawn to Celeste.

Why is this? What makes them connect so powerfully when they barely speak any words to one another?



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15. Why do you think Cesare seems to have no memory or knowledge of what happened to Celeste's former employer, the powerfully connected Jean-Claude Batiste?

16. Bruno's anger ensures that Cesare's promising writing career will be destroyed and his books forgotten. Yet the diaries and other boxes that Mark Alter finds reveal that Cesare never stopped writing.

Why do you think none of this was ever published? Why did Cesare leave it all to accumulate and never see the light of day?

17. Cesare, now living alone, has a final conversation that illuminates many of the ongoing themes in *Black Mountain*: the search for health, beauty, longevity and 'the holy grail' – something that looks a lot like eternal life on earth.

The new version of Dr Vliegman – who understands that he himself is vulnerable to the illnesses that killed his previous versions – seems to believe that Cesare has something that none of the other so-called 'new people' had. Though disappointment shrouded his young life when he was expelled from the original project, it may well be that Cesare contains the key to everything the project sought.

What is it that scientific research into health and well-being promises us? How far should we go?

And what does Mark Alter's epilogue reveal about what happens to Cesare?