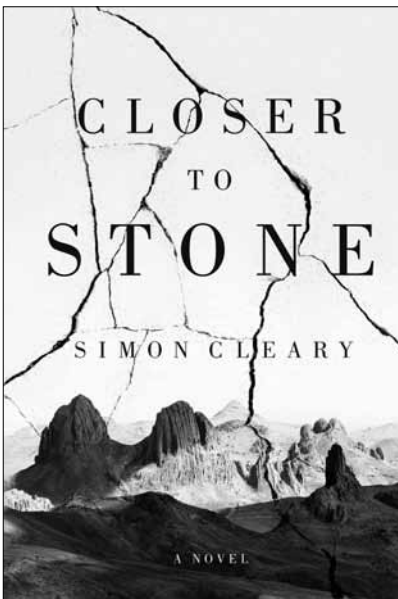


Closer to Stone

By Simon Cleary | University of Queensland Press | 2012



Simon Cleary is a barrister at the Queensland Bar. He is also the author of two novels. His first, the *Comfort of Figs*, which was published in 2008, tells the story of a group of people whose lives intersected with, or were affected by, the building of the Story Bridge in Brisbane.

His second, *Closer to Stone*, was recently published by University of Queensland Press. It is very different. It is set in North Africa, in the 1990s. When the story starts, Sebastian Adams, known as Bas, has just landed in Casablanca. He is 20 years old and from a small town in Queensland; he has never travelled outside Australia before.

We learn that Bas has come to Africa to look for his brother Jack, who is a soldier with a United Nations peace keeping force. Jack has gone missing.

Bas sets out by bus for the Western Sahara in search of his missing brother. The reader is caught up in the story immediately and

irrevocably: what has happened to Jack? Is he a deserter, run off from the army, gone AWOL (a possibility their father back in Australia angrily discounts)? Is he injured somewhere, or killed even? Is he ill? And why is no one looking for him?

Cleary spent time travelling in the Western Sahara during the early 1990s, and the local knowledge shows. Bas watches from his bus window as the broken down landscape turns slowly into desert:

The slums stretched for miles. Along unglutted roads and unpaved paths women trudged with water containers hanging from each arm. In places I saw burning sewage: thin towers of smoke linking city and sky. Dogs raking piles of rubbish with their front paws. Bare footed children balancing on the tops of overflowing industrial bins, their splayed toes holding fast to the steel edges while they pause in their rummaging to watch the bus pass.

Bas is a sculptor, by profession and by instinct. We see him at work, taking pieces of stone and chipping away at them, trying to uncover, or shape, something that he senses could emerge from the rock, a dragon, for example, or a crescent moon. He is pensive, an observer, an artist who feels most comfortable with a chisel in his hand, very different from his confident and outgoing older brother Jack – it is only later in the book that a different, less sympathetic, side of Bas emerges.

Bas encounters many people along the way; some help him in his search for his brother, some don't. He meets Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew

Grose, Jack's commanding officer, an enigmatic and menacing figure:

Grose looked at me.

'You will not find him,' he said. 'You don't have it in you. You don't have what it takes.'

Then he leant forward, his giant head and shoulders looming, the breath from his nostrils on my face.

'You are not your brother,' he whispered.

He meets Sophia Maddison, an American woman who has been working as a teacher in the Sahara. It turns out that she knew Jack, and she joins Bas on his search.

I will not say too much about the dramatic and terrible events that unfold – readers of this book will want to do that for themselves. In the end the story is about much more than the search for a missing soldier. At that time Islamic fundamentalism was on the rise, it was becoming a social and political force in a way that was only fully realised by the events of September 2001. As the years pass Bas slowly, and at time painfully, has to come to terms with what he has seen in northern Africa.

In this fine and engrossing book, Simon Cleary has managed to create both a page turner and a serious look at the clash between fundamentalism and the west – from one person's perspective at least. But at its heart the book, as its title suggests, is about a sculptor, Bas Adams, a young Australian dropped into a terrifying situation, and an artist slowly chipping away the outer layers to uncover himself.

Reviewed by Jeremy Stoljar