



The War Artist by Simon Cleary

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There are many difficult and often divisive questions that arise out of having Armed Forces. For instance, is it a form of service to their country or is it just a job? Does it make a difference if the service is in a foreign conflict that gives rise to no immediate threat to this country? Should we pay members better than other public servants?

Perhaps the most difficult issue is how to deal with those returning from conflicts. On one view, servicemen and women have risked their lives, and often suffered, for their country and are deserving of greater gratitude. Thus, in the United States people stand up and applaud their very presence in public.

An approach based upon gratitude, however, invites a value judgment on their service and thus on the conflict in which they have served. It is well-recognised that those who served in controversial conflicts such as Vietnam and Korea were not unambiguously welcomed home and celebrated. Similar issues arose even with those returning from the First and Second World Wars.

Whether approached from a principled perspective to service or as a matter of pragmatism, the fact is that there are many servicemen and women who suffer terrible physical and psychological injuries, which impact not only upon them but also their families.

Cleary's interest in the impact of war was inspired by his grandfather having returned 'both enhanced and traumatised' from the First World War, a man he describes as 'a confident, successful man by day, [but] his sleep was haunted by nightmares'.

There are many charities operating in the space of providing support and assistance to ex-servicemen and their families in times of injury, illness and crisis, but much of the focus of commemoration and fundraising continues to be by reference to long-past conflicts.

James Brown, the current head of the

Returned and Services League NSW, has written powerfully in his excellent book, *Anzac's Long Shadow: The Cost of Our National Obsession* (Redback, 2014), how Australia expends too much time, money and emotion on the Anzac legend at the expense of the needs of current servicemen and women returning from conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Simon Cleary's new book *The War Artist* (University of Queensland Press, 2019) is an important contribution to the debate that we ought to be having about returning service personnel. He highlights, albeit in a fictional account, the devastating psychological effect that conflict can have upon servicemen and their families.

James Phelan is a Brigadier returning from Afghanistan with the body of a young soldier. He blames himself for the soldier's death as it may have been his very presence on the patrol that led to the ambush that killed him.

Phelan's guilt and reliving of the ambush, which he cannot shake, lead to a rapid mental disintegration. This commences with a decision to get a tattoo, which in turn leads to an encounter with a tattoo artist, Kira, who becomes a recurring, and indeed central, character in the book.

The third person in this emotional triangle is Phelan's wife. It is striking how much she has been living a life wholly separate from her husband during his absence and there is a tension upon his return such that the marriage could collapse at any moment. Instead of the marriage, it is Phelan who unravels. His disintegration and then partial recovery in his search for redemption is captivating and moving.

At times, the peripheral figures in the novel can feel somewhat one-dimensional. For instance, there is Kira's drug-dealing and abusive partner, the army colleagues of the dead soldier who blame Phelan for his death and embark on a campaign to destroy him and the senior officers whose only concern seems to be avoiding negative publicity. No doubt such people exist, but, together with the odd clunky metaphor in the early pages, their presence does distract on occasion from the tension of the central narrative.

It is the emotional triangle of Phelan, his wife and Kira that drives this novel on and in which Cleary excels. The initial pages of a novel are often taken up with watching from the outside new characters being introduced, but it was not long before I was completely engrossed in the story, but more importantly in the characters themselves.

Cleary is a talented writer and a successful one, his previous two novels having been recognised in literary awards in Queensland. He is also a practising barrister in Brisbane and so comes within that frustrating and impressive group of barristers who have extraordinary talents outside of the law.