



THE WAR ARTIST

by Simon Cleary

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THE STORY

This is a captivating novel about the trauma caused by participation in war and the impact this has on a veteran's family and friends.

Brigadier James Phelan returns from Afghanistan, a shell of the man he once was. After escorting home the body of a young soldier killed under his command, Sapper Samuel Robert Beckett, the trauma Phelan witnesses when the young man dies begins to haunt him. On an impulse, he visits a Sydney tattoo parlour where he asks the tattooist, Kira, to imprint the soldier's name on his shoulder to honour Beckett's bravery in life. A junkie interrupts this session and Phelan saves Kira from almost certain assault and robbery. They spend the night together and Phelan then returns to his Brisbane home and discovers the wife he loves, Penny, has had cancer and a mastectomy while he was away. After former colleagues accuse him of inappropriately dealing with the injured soldier before he died, and for being responsible for Beckett's death, Phelan cannot return to duty and his condition steadily worsens until one night he accidentally burns down the family home.

Six years later, Phelan has endured countless rehab sessions and, with his long-suffering and supportive wife, they have repaired what they can of their lives, and have just bought James' childhood home in a rural area near Toowoomba where they plan to run cattle and become self-sufficient. James takes up creative writing and one of his war poems leads to a televised interview, which Kira in Sydney happens to see, reminding her of the soldier she once knew. Her life has deteriorated as her partner Flores has sunk into drug dealing at the behest of his criminal brother Prince. Their once creative tattoo practice is now just a shabby front for their dealings, and Kira is at the mercy of Flores' temper and his brother's life of crime. To complicate matters, she now has a six-year-old son named Blake. Tensions between Kira and Flores escalate, and she heads north in the hope of finding Phelan. When Kira unexpectedly arrives at the farm, Penny agrees to let her and Blake live in the abandoned cottage. Kira embarks on a series of tattoo sessions for Phelan, inking poppies and the names of soldiers killed in Afghanistan, and as Phelan slowly starts to come to terms with events of his past he takes Blake under his wing. When Phelan attends an army get-together organised by his nemesis, Gruen, he is forced to confess his culpability for the death of Beckett in front of his ex-army mates. But when they see his tattoos they understand the power of the art and they, too, beat a path to Kira's door. The action culminates in Flores arriving to claim his son back, and a violent encounter leads to a denouement, which represents a spiritual turning point for those who survive.

This is a poetically inventive novel in which art becomes a panacea for trauma, and love – as always – a salve for pain.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Cleary is the author of three novels, including *The Comfort of Figs* (UQP, 2008), which was published after the manuscript was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards. His second novel, *Closer to Stone* (UQP, 2012), was inspired by his experiences in North Africa at the commencement of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. It went on to win the Queensland Literary Awards People's Choice Award in 2012. *The War Artist* was published in 2019. Simon lives in Brisbane. www.simoncleary.com

QUESTIONS

1. The back cover blurb of this novel describes it as 'a timely and compelling novel about the legacy of war, the power of art and the possibility of atonement'. Discuss this statement in relation to the novel.
2. Service people who fought in World War I and World War II are routinely commemorated in Australia on days such as ANZAC Day but those who fought in more recent conflicts tend not to be as prominent in these celebrations. Why is that? Does this novel offer any possible reason?
3. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a topic which deserves far more media coverage than it receives. Phelan and his colleagues are all damaged men. Coming home from war is only the beginning of their struggles. Were you surprised by the apparent inadequacy of the counselling Phelan received? Did his superiors protect him or 'hang him out to dry'?
4. The tragic military patrol that Phelan is involved in seems to achieve little in terms of diplomacy with the Afghans, and results in Beckett's death. What picture does this novel present of the efficacy of western military efforts in Afghanistan?
5. Kira's estrangement from her mother as a rebellious teenager and her partnership with Flores has seemingly destroyed her early promise as a fine artist. She is a victim of domestic violence and a dedicated, if endangered, mother. This novel implies that being a talented tattoo artist is her saving grace, in frequent references to her tattoo art being very spiritual: 'She could be a priestess drawing some sacred energy to herself.' (p. 45) The tattoos she creates largely relate to symbolic motifs, such as flowers or creatures from myth. Is her work a form of fine art, or a spiritual craft, in your opinion? (Read more about tattooing to

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inform your discussion.)

6. Penny's patience in dealing with James' breakdown after the trauma of her own illness and surgery is extraordinary. What gives her this strength? How is she able to put aside her own suffering in order to focus on James'? Does her dedication stem from love, a sense of duty, her nursing training, or a combination of these things?

7. Phelan gives Kira a delicate blue crane made of lapis lazuli to match the azure blue of her tattooed sleeve (p. 60); Blake makes origami cranes and presents some to Penny as a gift. The crane is traditionally a symbol of peace and love. What other symbols were prominent in this novel?

8. The novel is told in alternate scenes depicting Phelan's arrival home and subsequent life, and the events in Afghanistan, which led to Phelan's return. Each section, though, is told in the present tense, which lends immediacy to the narrative. What other aspects of Simon Cleary's writing style did you particularly note?

9. Description in this novel is richly suggestive, often employing similes and metaphors relating to nature. For example, the home in which Beckett's parents live 'Melaleuca in the air, sweeter than perfume (p. 117) ... the white letterbox on its single white post, standing like an egret.' (p. 118) What other aspects of the writer's style did you particularly notice and enjoy?

10. Atonement is one of the novel's major themes. Phelan's tattoos are a form of apology to those who have died. His death is a classic soldier's act of bravery and also echoes the desperate attempt he made to save Beckett's life. By the end of the novel has Phelan atoned for Beckett's death?

FURTHER READING

Afghanistan War:

'War in Afghanistan (2001 – present)' *Wikipedia*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan_\(2001%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan_(2001%E2%80%93present))

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Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

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<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/types-of-anxiety/ptsd>

'PTSD' *Black Dog Institute*

<https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/clinical-resources/post-traumatic-stress-disorder>

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<https://www.dva.gov.au/health-and-wellbeing/mental-health/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>

Tattooing:

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<https://www.highbrowmagazine.com/2337-how-tattoos-became-favored-art-form>

Katherine Schwab, 'Highbrow Ink', *The Atlantic*, 3 September 2015

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/tattoos-high-art/416769/>

'More than a fashion choice: the everyday aesthetics of tattooing', *The Conversation*, 2 June 2015

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