



## The War Artist

Enza Gandolfo



James Phelan returns to Sydney from Afghanistan escorting a coffin with an Australian flag draped across it and the body of a mischievous young soldier, Samuel Robert Beckett, resting inside.

Phelan, aged 50, has risen to a senior rank in the army but sees himself as an 'armchair officer' – he's never experienced active combat. To rectify this, he deploys himself to a remote base in the Uruzgan badlands to accompany a simple mission on the front line. But what should have been an in-and-out job turns deadly when Taliban forces find out a senior brigadier is with the soldiers. They attack. Phelan watches Beckett bleed out. Upon his return to Sydney, Phelan visits a tattoo parlour

to etch a tribute to Beckett onto his skin. He makes a fast and intense connection with his tattoo artist, Kira, who has a Celtic warrior woman tattooed on her arm. This connection threatens his already unsteady marriage.

**The War Artist** follows Phelan over years as he deals with the death of Beckett and the blame directed at him. The book explores PTSD, nationalism, and how the Afghanistan War – the longest running war Australia has ever been involved in – affects those embroiled in it. Simon Cleary's writing is excellent and clear, and short chapters drive the novel forward. This is a thrilling and thought-provoking book, and in Simon Cleary I feel as if I have discovered a brilliant and under-appreciated Aussie author.

★★★★ UQP \$29.95

*Reviewed by Angus Dalton*

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