



The War Artist

Simon Cleary
UQP, \$29.95

Brigadier James Phelan is a career soldier who has survived into his 50s without any major trauma, but then he finds himself racked with guilt after the death in Afghanistan of a young private whose life might not have been wasted if Phelan had not insisted on joining a particular patrol and been present when it was ambushed. Accompanying the body home to Australia is not enough to assuage his guilt, and neither is his desperate act of memorialisation, a tattoo on his arm of the dead soldier's name and date of death. This is an earnest, sometimes moving novel about the effects of PTSD and war, not only on the immediate participants but also on those close to them. The sexual encounter that precipitates a big chunk of the plot will be unconvincing to many, but the dramatic ending seems all too possible and perhaps even inevitable.