

A war that never ends

Simon Cleary's latest novel explores the scars, visible and invisible, left on soldiers after serving on the front line

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What happens on the battlefield doesn't necessarily stay on the battlefield. The past century has taught us that wars abroad eventually become wars at home, and the toughest battles are sometimes those involving the war within.

Brisbane author Simon Cleary's latest novel explores that notion and deals with the aftermath of a particularly gruelling tour of duty in Afghanistan. *The War Artist* is the story of Brigadier James Phelan, who returns home to Brisbane traumatised by the death of a young soldier under his command. An encounter with a Sydney tattoo artist leaves him with a permanent tribute to this soldier and is a meeting that will change his life.

At home he endures a campaign of retribution from soldiers who blame him for a deadly ambush. His relationship with his wife is strained and life will clearly never be the same.

Cleary, 50, a Brisbane barrister, the author of two previous books (*The Comfort of Figs* and *Closer to Stone*), has written one of the first novels to look at the legacy of our involvement with the war in Afghanistan. As Cleary says, "It's been our longest war". The experience of representing veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and other illnesses related to their service heavily influenced Cleary and convinced him he wanted to tackle the subject. Having acted for soldiers, he realised the intensity of their experiences and the resulting scars, inner and outer.

Cleary carefully researched his subject, interviewing soldiers and experts. Visiting



the Keith Payne Unit at the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation at southside Brisbane's Greenslopes, which specialises in PTSD, helped the author understand what returned soldiers go through. "Writing about this subject, I did feel a sense of responsibility to them," Cleary says. "I wanted to get the experience right. I didn't want to write about anyone in particular, though."

Studying military procedure was also important and Cleary chronicles the landscape of Afghanistan with a certain veracity, even though he has never been there. He channelled his younger self and his own travels in the Middle East and

Africa to get a feel for that sort of arid country.

Back at home he sets the book in Wilston, in Brisbane's inner north, where Cleary lives with his wife Alisa and two teenage sons, and he wanted the local settings to resonate. "I like setting my novels in particular places, real, tangible places," Cleary says. "That always helps to bring a novel to life." The author grew up in Toowoomba and *The War Artist* is also partly set there, at a property on the edge of the Great Dividing Range.

His portrayal of the wounding and death of the young soldier in Afghanistan is harrowing stuff, but Cleary obviously feels the need to tell it like it is and he does so without pulling any punches. Despite the death and trauma, he hopes his book is a "novel about healing". "The sadness and suffering are softened by love and art and poetry and such things," he says. Along the way Cleary also researched the art of tattooing to make his tattooist, Kira, a character that resonates for numerous reasons.

And while it's not about him, Cleary is, like Brigadier James Phelan in the book, a lover of the work of Ancient Roman philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius, and there are many mentions of his *Meditations*. It's a nice touch.

***The War Artist* by Simon Cleary (UQP, \$29.95). The book will be launched on March 12 at 6pm at the Greek Club, South Brisbane. Admission is free, but RSVPs are essential: avidreader.com.au On March 28 at 6.30pm, An Evening with Simon Cleary will be held at Riverbend Books, Bulimba; tickets \$8 at riverbendbooks.com.au**

