



A tale from the home fronts

FICTION John Charalambous' second novel is a brilliant rendering of a tentative relationship in France during World War I, says **Peter Pierce**.

FICTION T.C. Boyle's new novel talks the talk, writes **John Freeman**.

Silent Parts

By John Charalambous
University of Queensland Press,
\$32.95

AS HIS GREAT-NIECE Julie plans a family reunion coincident with the 50th anniversary of the end of the Great War, Harry Lambert is the centre of gossip and attention. For the story of his war service is troublingly ambiguous. Did he get shot and drown in the mud at Gallipoli or perhaps Flanders, so that he was "the only one of our lot not to come back"? Did he desert? Was there a French bride? Is the funerary urn that supposedly contained his ashes only a family joke?

John Charalambous' novel *Silent Parts* is concerned with the strange and compelling answers to these questions. Yet the puzzles are ultimately incidental to a tale of unexpected love and how it can assuage loneliness.

This book is one of the most poignant and unusual of reflections on war and remembrance. It bypasses so many well-trodden Australian fictional paths in making its own muted, moving way.

This is not a tale of battle but of two home fronts, and of how French and Australians coped with rumour and loss. It does describe, plangently and complexly, the brief separate piece that Harry Lambert made with the Frenchwoman Colombe Jactatot.

Charalambous interweaves the events of 1968 (as Julie marshals the scattered Lamberts for reunion), including older relatives' memories of two world wars, with Harry's travails in April 1918. Timorous, too old — in his early 40s — to have enlisted, as he did after the death of his mother, he is posted to Field Bakeries South, outside Rouen, and far from the front. On a chilly Sunday, he seeks out the nearby Cordier property from which his father's imported rose seeds came, there encountering the woman whom he takes to be the proprietor. This is the first of the narrative surprises that Charalambous elegantly engineers. Here, it is Harry's mistaken assumptions that will soon enough take him on to the right track.

None of this is to do with conventional heroism. Harry fears battle. He "attracts lonely and uncertain men" but "he can't imagine a more fraudulent father-figure". The rhetoric of war repels him and he undoes it in his thoughts: "He is not a nation. What or who he might be is a debilitating mystery."

In flight from the prospect of being called to the Somme to confront the last great German push of the war, Harry finds solace and protection with Colombe. With her, he begins to make, in exceptional and perilous conditions, the ordinary life that he could never manage in

Australia. Colombe also has a vexed history — of marital tyranny and the loss of a son. She is trenchant about the war: "This is a catastrophe and we got to it in our sleep."

Between them develops a love that neither anticipated nor imagined, one that is enabled by the war but bound to be riven by it as well.

Charalambous is never sentimental nor impatient in his unfolding of the story. It will have none of the decisive or dismissive endings that Harry's Australian relations conceive for him and his unknown "French wife". Indeed, its primary business will be to do with waiting, as Colombe and Harry live apart until their own reunion.

What Harry wants for them, in Normandy, where he has settled after the war, is "contented insignificance". He has seemingly forever uprooted himself from an Australia where he suspects that "the whole country (is) tyrannised by patriotic committees".

The last scene of *Silent Parts* transports us from the fervid world back home at which Harry guesses, to end in beatitude, though not in a sure promise of happiness. Charalambous has triumphantly cleared the hurdle of the second novel in this, one of the books of the year.

Peter Pierce is professor of Australian literature at James Cook University.

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