



## Myths, memories and a new path of a reluctant fighter

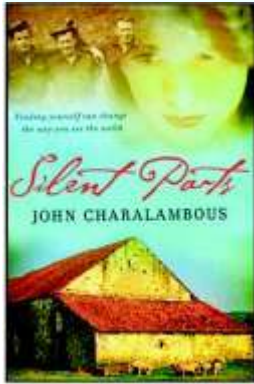
### FICTION

**SILENT PARTS.** *By John Charalambous.*  
*University of Queensland Press. 309pp. \$24.95.*  
*Reviewer: DIANE STUBBINGS*

**A** SELF-DESCRIBED “slow-moving lump”, Harry Lambert — almost 40 years old and a bachelor — spends the early years of World War I running the family bakery and caring for his ailing mother. He is labelled a “shirker”, yet refuses to take the insult personally, preferring “to blame the war: the ugly contagion of grief”. When, in early 1917, his mother dies, Harry belatedly enlists.

Sent to serve in France, Harry works in Field Bakeries South, a unit churning out 300 loaves of bread every shift. The routine of baking defines his days, allowing him to shut out of his consciousness the “crush of broken and dying men, just a few hundred yards away”.

Sixty years later, Harry’s great-niece, Julie, is organising a family reunion to honour his memory. Her letters to those who might recall Harry evoke a variety of



responses and, intriguingly, a diversity of recollections: that he was killed in action at Gallipoli; that he married a French woman, possibly a 16-year-old girl; that he died in an agricultural accident; and that he was a deserter.

In *Silent Parts*, Victorian writer John Charalambous juxtaposes Julie’s attempts to untangle the family myths regarding Harry’s fate — her desire “to hear his voice” — with the actual story of Harry’s service and his subsequent decision not to return to Australia. In doing so, it seeks to underline not only the way individuals clutch at certain memories, often unconsciously recasting them to better serve their own experiences, but how far such memories unknowingly drift from truth.

Harry Lambert is no hero: “His will is inclined to flicker, to go out altogether for a split second or longer. So far, it has always reignited, and that’s what people see, the resurrected Harry Lambert, and generally without any inkling he has repeatedly collapsed.” So, when he is told he is to be moved from the reliable and rather comforting monotony of the field bakeries to the “forward areas”, his immediate response is “an abrupt refusal . . . He won’t die for them.” He absconds, finding his way to a farmhouse run by a woman he believes to be the daughter of the esteemed rose-breeder Monsieur Cordier.

Assailed by his own memories, Harry is forced to re-examine his past and question the nature of the man he believed himself to be: “The best he can say is he existed in comfort. He had a defined place, a hidey-hole, the nest of a solitary animal. A part of him longed to emerge from the unwholesome air as a man.” And it is his unlikely relationship with Colombe Jacotot, the unprepossessing woman in the farmhouse, that, inevitably, allows him to do so.

In this, his second novel, Charalambous gives us an intimate and subtle portrait of two disparate individuals moving inexorably towards each other. While Charalambous is particularly successful in capturing the voice of the more reticent Colombe, both she and Harry are well drawn, believable characters. And, despite there being a remoteness about both of them in the early chapters that make them difficult people to connect with — a factor, as much as anything, of Charalambous’s over-flat tone — by the novel’s close you find yourself very much absorbed by their journeys.

Where *Silent Parts* markedly falls down is in the rather intrusive reunion sub-plot. This reads more as a hastily sketched afterthought than a fully imagined narrative. Charalambous fails to tease out its themes of myth and memory sufficiently, and it becomes, in the end, little more than a distraction. With its parallel story lines never really coming together, *Silent Parts* is an uneven and, at times, sluggish novel. Yet, in Harry Lambert and Colombe Jacotot, Charalambous has written two uncommon, yet beguiling characters. Real and imperfect, their uneasy renascence as they each break from the shell of their old lives is quite something to savour.

**Diane Stubbings has worked as a writer, researcher and academic.**