



# War novel with a twist

Martin Crotty

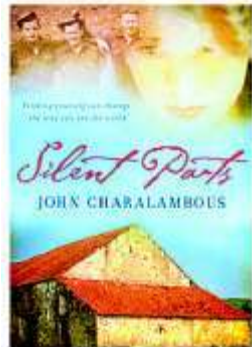
HISTORIANS, literary critics and others have often lamented a tendency towards "big-noting" in Australian war memories, particularly World War I.

The idea of the mighty, bronzed, egalitarian, brave and all-but-invincible Anzac who wins martial glory on foreign fields is a staple of Anzac Day rhetoric, fiction, memoirs and popular history.

The problem with such an image is partly its arrogant boastfulness, but more substantially its tendency to obscure the range of Australian war experiences, some of which are hardly the stuff of legend.

In his second novel, John Charalambous eschews such simplicities. He successfully evokes the discordant, subsumed and forgotten side of the Anzac experience, and does it so well that *Silent Parts* deserves to be considered a "must-read" in any serious consideration of Australian war writing.

The principal character, Harry Lambert, stands in notable contrast to the usual idealised Anzac soldier. A reluctant warrior, he joins up in 1917 only when his ill mother has finally died, thus depriving her son of his last convincing excuse for not volunteering.



Older than most of his fellows at 42, overweight and squeamish, he's the unnatural soldier, the human material thrown into the conflict only when the most willing and capable were exhausted.

After months of working in a bakery in the rear areas, thus avoiding frontline duty, Lambert's unit is told to go forward. His fellows do, but Lambert cannot bring himself to "face the music", and thus deserts.

Most of the subsequent story and the narrative tension centre on his efforts to remain hidden with a French woman, Colombe, who has taken him in.

Colombe's son was killed in the war, so she and Harry form an alliance, trying to protect an illicit miniature refuge. The odds are much against them.

Left at that, this would be a fine novel, an Australian version of recent classics such as Sebastien Japrisot's *A Very Long Engagement*, or Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*.

But Charalambous delves further into the meanings of Lambert's war experiences.

We hear, in several brief chapters, from Colombe, Harry's protector. She is silent through most of the narrative as she and Lambert are unable to converse across the language barrier, so the chapters where she takes over the narration enrich the imaginative experience by placing the reader in different shoes.

Charalambous also uses the parallel narrative of Julie, one of a later generation of the family, who is trying to rediscover Harry from fragments of family legend and official records 50 years later.

Julie discovers that official record is partial and possibly tampered with, and that there are different and incompatible family legends about Harry, some seeing him as a hero, others as a filthy deserter.

Through this device Charalambous raises challenging questions about private and public memory as they intersect with the Anzac legend and family history, about how we access the past, and about how historical reality isn't always what we'd like it to be.

A fine achievement, and a major contribution to Australian war literature.

***Silent Parts* by John Charalambous (University of Queensland Press, \$32.95)  
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