

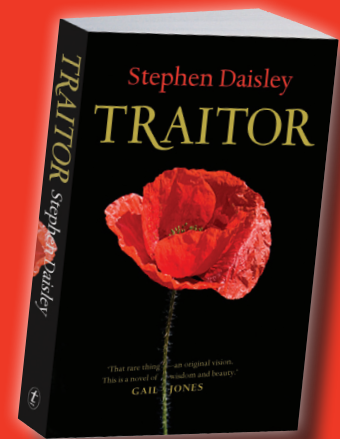
Traitor

Stephen Daisley

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



Praise for *Traitor*

'That rare thing—an original vision. This is a novel of wisdom and beauty.' **Gail Jones**

About Stephen Daisley

Stephen Daisley was born in 1955, and grew up in remote parts of the North Island of New Zealand. He served for five years in an infantry battalion of the NZ Army, and has worked on sheep and cattle stations, on oil and gas construction sites and as a truck driver and bartender, among many other jobs.

He has university degrees in writing and literature, and lives in Western Australia with his wife and five children. *Traitor* is his first novel.

A reader's introduction to *Traitor*

'When we encounter someone, something, that moves us to weep spontaneously we have somehow encountered the very core of our existence.' (p.15–16)

David Monroe's entire gruesome experience of war is turned upside down when he finds himself assisting a Turkish doctor, Mahmoud, to save the life of an Australian during the battle of Gallipoli. Both men are then seriously injured in the shell blast and find themselves recuperating in the same military hospital. When David is assigned as Mahmoud's guard neither can know the impact each will have on the other's life.

Mahmoud is a Sufi and his approach to life, the world and religion is unlike anything David has experienced before. He is consumed by Mahmoud's innate goodness, his ability to forgive, to uplift and to close himself off to the pain surrounding them. Mahmoud gives a voice to the poetry in David's soul. Fifty years after his time at war he still hears his friend's voice in his head and conducts a dialogue with him. Every thought, every action is effected and directed by the lingering influence of the Sufi doctor.

To all around them the bond and the relationship that develops between these two men is strange, confronting, confusing and unacceptable. When David then chooses to betray his country in an attempt to save his friend, the reaction is condemnation. David becomes a conscientious objector and a pacifist who refuses to take up arms against the enemy. He is sentenced to death for desertion and aiding the enemy to escape.

This then affects all that follows, his remaining experience of war, after his fellow soldiers refuse to execute him, and the life he lives upon returning home, a disgraced soldier. He resumes his life as a shepherd, living alone in a hut in the hill country of New Zealand. He seems to seek or need little but his encounter with a grieving mother leads to a life-changing love affair that reinforces the novel's themes of love and war and the power of each to irrevocably transform all it touches.

Questions for discussion

1. David instantly felt peace in the presence of Mahmoud. He felt forgiven and capable of more than ever before. Why did David Monroe so deeply need to feel all these things?
2. At the sentencing, several openings are created for David to absolve himself. He is asked if he suffers from headaches. Is he thinking clearly? Does he wish to speak in his own defence? Why do you think David makes no attempt to save himself?
3. When David introduces himself to Mahmoud he explains 'I don't own land, I work for other men' (p.16) as though this is something he should be ashamed of. Even at this point in the novel we sense that David feels apart from others, somehow lower. Mahmoud too was an outcast 'a fool and a dog' (p.17) by his own description. A Muslim who believed in Jesus, acknowledged Mary and that Jesus was a secret Sufi. Is this sense of difference or of being shunned the basis of the bond between the men?

4. Defectors as stretcher bearers—sound punishment or torture for men already tormented by the horrors of war?
5. David describes the idealism of young soldiers meeting war head-on for the first time as they launched themselves out over the top of the trenches under heavy fire. He speaks of the 'gulf between what they had imagined at school, the books they had read and what was occurring now'. (p.224) Are men more prepared for the wars they fight now? Is there any true preparation for the psychological impact of war?
6. As David waits in the trenches with the soldiers preparing to run into battle many of them lightly rib him with the moniker 'deserter boy'. Despite this we see in these scenes, and during the end of war BBQ where a comrade assures him 'It will all be forgotten Davo' (p.239), that the soldiers accept him as equal and afford him due respect for his courageous role as a stretcher bearer. In strong contrast to this is the description of Helen McKenzie spitting in his face after her husband tells her he has employed him despite his deserter status. Why was her response so different to that of the men who were there in the war with him?
7. The novel has a cyclical nature. We begin the novel where we finish, at David's end. In between we spin through the different time frames of this man's life as he remembers and relives his experiences and moves past the pain of each. Is this actually the case? Is David able to spin away the pain of his war experiences, like the meditative technique Mahmoud taught him on the beach in Lemnos, or is he just as tortured as the many comrades around him who succumbed to drink, or worse, to survive?
8. Does the author's technique of moving back and forth through David's life work as a storytelling tool or does it confuse a reader's understanding of events?
9. As the book finishes and the soldiers celebrate the end of the war, there is a shocking scene where the soldier called Albert suddenly and brutally bashes a French woman. Why do you think the author includes this scene? What purpose does it serve? Is it a message about the toll of war or simply a view of a dangerous man?
10. Is this a story about religion, about war or about love?