Review by Tracy Warrington of *Naively Bold: Adventure, Autism and Me*

I cannot recommend this book highly enough to anyone connected to the autistic world, whether they are autistic themselves, a family member, teacher, doctor, or neighbour. This is a book that doesn't just inform, it empowers. That empowerment feels especially significant for women, who even now, are so often overlooked due to outdated concepts of autism and diagnostic criteria that fail to reflect female experiences.

Woven through Dr Ava Ruth's rich memoir are the very real struggles that autism can bring. When she writes, "I felt lost, invisible, an alien stuck in a culture I didn't understand," it struck me deeply. Those words capture the experience of so many who feel they "come from the same planet." Her reflections on schooling mirror the isolation, academic pressure, and quiet confusion that I watched my own daughters navigate, being both autistic and gifted. The drive to succeed, the challenge of decoding or missing social cues, and the disillusionment that comes with social struggles, are all described with honesty and clarity. Throughout it all, Ava Ruth's stoic spirit of breaking new ground remains constant.

Like many parents of autistic children, through the process of their diagnosis, Dr Ava Ruth found her own autistic recognition. Society at the time had preconceived notions of her capabilities or limitations due to her autism and sought to impose these on her. Her courage, particularly in advocating within the autism space, is inspiring, especially given the prejudice and discrimination she repeatedly faced from those in positions of authority.

With a title like *Naively Bold: Adventure, Autism and Me*, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. What I didn't anticipate was a book so rich, so distinctly Kiwi, and so grounded in New Zealand's culture and voice. Dr Baker writes with refreshing honesty, and the inclusion of personal journal entries adds a depth and authenticity that made me feel truly invested in her story. The opening chapter, which unpacks the Christchurch earthquakes, was especially powerful. It brought the human reality of that tragic period into sharp focus. I felt compelled to read it aloud to my family, and we were deeply moved by the experiences of those who lived through it.

Her memoir also offers rare insight into small-town New Zealand in the 1960s, before carrying the reader out into the wider world. Through vivid snapshots of different countries and cultures, Ava Ruth takes us on a journey marked by curiosity, courage, and openness. I found myself humbled by the way she stayed true to her path, raising her children in the setting she loved while working and building her home.

The book also documents the birth and growth of autism awareness and understanding in New Zealand from the 1990s to today, and the roles both autistic self-advocates like Ava Ruth, and organisations like Autism NZ, have played in that. As we prepare to celebrate international Autism Acceptance Month in April.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book. No matter your age or background, this is a story that deserves to be read. It is brave, honest, and important, and it is one that will stay with you long after you turn the final page.