A review of Dr Ava Ruth Baker's memoir

Written by Dr Eve Pleydell, 14 July 2025

I so thoroughly enjoyed immersing myself in this captivating and reflective memoir that I read it twice.

Emerging from the chaos of the 2011 earthquake that ripped Christchurch apart, Dr Ava Ruth Baker takes us back through her extraordinary life as she looks for clues that may help her build "a less shaky life ahead". Throughout her account of this very personal journey flows the essence of New Zealand's landscapes and peoples. It's there in the incredible tale of her parents starting their married life in the company of 36 refugee children in the Falkland Islands, and in her descriptions of her own early childhood on the east coast of North Island, New Zealand. Her pioneering spirit is fully evident as she adventures through Samoa, the Andes, the Galapagos Islands, and Wales. Then, having returned to New Zealand, a tangible warmth radiates as she describes the sanctuary she built for herself and her children on remote land she shared with extended family.

However, this memoir is more than an engaging tale about the remarkable and venturesome life of an intelligent, courageous, capable and kind woman. The author also presents readers with an honest and genuine account of the challenges of being an autistic woman in a society that is largely engineered by non-autistic people. Being myself a professional woman who has recently been diagnosed as autistic, I know from firsthand experience that many of the difficulties autistic people face are internal experiences not necessarily apparent to an external observer and certainly not recognised by modern medicine. To this end, I found Ava Ruth's open honesty about these difficulties affirming and the wisdom she shares about coming to terms with them reassuring and inspiring.

However, many of the challenges the author has faced have not been internal. It was sobering to read about some of the adverse and deeply damaging reactions she has been exposed to from members of the educational and medical professions. I was genuinely shocked to read that, following her open disclosure of her late-in-life diagnosis in the 1990s, members of her own medical profession expressed severe reservations about her suitability to do a job she had been performing successfully for many years. I question the ethical legitimacy of any medical practitioner making such pronouncements about a person they have never met, and I sincerely hope that such damaging professional ignorance is now being confined to history. Nonetheless, it is inspirational to read how the author was not only able to overcome all such adversity but went on to use it to fuel her vocational work of supporting autistic people to be better understood and dispelling harmful myths. What better way to counter the unfounded accusations of inability than with a powerful display of super-ability?

While I highly recommend this unique memoir to all readers of creative non-fiction, I suggest it is a must-read for any reader who has received their own late-in-life diagnosis of autism.