



Lauren Roche: "Having multiple projects on the go keeps my brain active."

# The plot thickens

She's been a teen stowaway, a prostitute, and a GP. So it's not entirely surprising that Lauren Roche has now turned to fiction writing, in the latest chapter of her extraordinary life. **by SHARON STEPHENSON**

**T**here's a Japanese word, *ikigai*, which means having a direction or purpose in life. Although there's no literal English translation, it's a philosophy that embodies the art of living a balanced, slower life – one that brings joy.

Mention to Dr Lauren Roche that she may have achieved *ikigai* and, eye roll aside, the GP-turned-author will agree. "These days, I have a nice quiet life," she says from her home in Northland's Tutukaka, a hefty stone's throw from the water. "I actually live a hermit life, which I love."

I'm calling to chat about the 60-year-old's debut novel, *Mila and the Bone Man*. Set in the Far North, close to where Roche has lived for seven years, it centres around Mila, a young woman of Croatian heritage, and her Māori neighbour Tommy, whose passion for the bush and bones changes her life in ways she couldn't imagine. "It's a story of deep friendship and complex grief and the way that affects people. And how these characters, who are of the forest, seek healing and solace from that forest."

Before we get to that, and chat about why Roche gave up medicine to write, we first have to dip into how she got here, to a writing hut in dense native bush, her five-month-old puppy at her feet.

It's an astonishing story that has everything: prostitution, fire-eating, prison, sexual abuse, bankruptcy, medical school, drugs and suicide. There's even a shipwreck, an Ironman competition and three marriages.

It's the kind of story, if Hollywood ever got its hands on it, in which you just know Kate Winslet would play the role of Roche.

It was the subject of Roche's 1999 memoir, *Bent not Broken*, in which she wrote, "My life is one of dreams lost and found again, of abandonment and

rediscovery. There is pain, but there is also a lot of laughter and light."

It's a journalistic cliché to go hunting for the tragedy in someone's life, but you don't have to search far with Roche. She was born in Wellington, the oldest of three daughters, to parents she says "didn't really know what they were doing".

"Mum was 18 when she had me and Dad was 21. They were bright but under-educated and my childhood was pretty chaotic."

She's not airbrushing it: there were various moves across the Tāsmān and never enough money, food or love to go around. When Roche was eight, she was sexually

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abused by the father and brother of her mother's boyfriend.

"Blood was running down my leg, so I told Mum I fell on a stick," she recalls. "I think she suspected what had happened because she sent me to live with my grandparents."

Her mother, who struggled with drug and alcohol abuse and mental-health issues, fatally overdosed when she was 32 and Roche was 14. "I was living in Auckland with an aunt at the time, so for years I felt as though I'd let Mum down because she died alone. It took me a long time to unpick that grief."

Roche was bright but left school at 15. There followed a cycle of soul-sapping

jobs, from working at McDonald's to cleaning the corridors of Wellington Hospital, ironically the same corridors she later walked as a doctor.

Seeking adventure, at 16 she stowed away on an American naval ship, spending 21 days in complete darkness, unable to sit up in the tiny cupboard she was secreted in. "One of the sailors brought me food and I would pee in a can. But I refused to poo in the can, so I held on for 21 days!"

It's probably not surprising that this story doesn't end well: two months after arriving, Roche was arrested for being an illegal immigrant. She spent three weeks in a Texas jail before being deported.

Back in Wellington, she was working as a fire-eating stripper and prostitute when she discovered she was pregnant with son Paul (now 42). It wasn't her finest hour: "We did some terrible things back then, things like rolling Korean sailors for their wallets."

## TURNING POINT

Like her mother, Roche was stalked by post-natal depression and tried to commit suicide. Unlike her mother, it proved Roche's turning point. "When I was in hospital, one of the doctors said to me, 'Do you have any dreams for your life?' I told him I'd always wanted to be a doctor, and he smirked. But while I was in the psych unit, I realised my life was turning into my mother's and that education was the only way to stop it. I picked medicine because it was the biggest, most challenging thing I could find – to try and nullify the bad things I'd done and absolve myself."

Roche returned to high school to complete her last three years, repeating seventh form because she became pregnant with her second son, Christopher (now 37).



1. Roche as a toddler. 2. At a 1981 Springbok tour protest in Wellington. 3. Graduating with a Master of Creative Writing from AUT in 2021. 4. Competing in the Taupō Ironman in 2007. 5. With Winnie the poodle at Hibiscus Hospice, Whangaparāoia, in 2012.

Put it down to her rugged Viking roots, or the determination she wears like a shield, but there was never any question Roche wouldn't finish what she'd started. "My grandmother looked after my eldest while Christopher came to Otago University with me. He had epilepsy and was autistic, so it was a challenge raising him on my own and studying medicine."

She'd rise at 4am to revise, and often felt like a fish out of water. "I had this recurring dream of getting kicked out because I wasn't good enough. But I remember Professor Eru Pōmare saying to me, 'We need more doctors like you, so don't let them get you down.'"

Roche had her heart set on obstetrics and gynaecology, but juggling 48-hour shifts with young children wasn't a good fit, so she became a GP, first in Wellington, then Paraparaumu, Palmerston North and Napier. "I've been gradually moving towards the sun," she laughs.

Being a respected GP didn't automatically cancel out her demons: a gruelling work schedule ended her second marriage (her first, to a Canadian national for a visa, lasted a day) and then her old nemesis, depression, returned. "I started prescribing myself sleeping tablets and became addicted."

There was another failed suicide attempt, which ended with Roche being "treated in hospital by doctors who were my juniors. It was mortifying."

Because she wasn't working or paying her bills, the debts piled up and Roche declared bankruptcy in 1995. "I was too messed up and depressed to figure a way out, but too embarrassed to go on a benefit."

A friend offered her a lifeline – work at a Kāpiti Lotto shop – which she did for a year. It gave her the mental space to start writing. "I wrote a medical column

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in a magazine and started thinking about what I wanted to write. Even though my parents had issues, they were both great readers and passed that love of books on to me. As kids, we'd have boxes of second-hand books from the Salvation Army."

#### EXTREME EXERCISE

Once Roche started writing, she couldn't stop. She followed *Bent not Broken* with a second memoir, *Life on the Line*. "I finished the first book on a positive note, but I didn't want people to think that, if you get an education and change your

life, all will be fine. My life has been a mess, then it hasn't been, then it has been a mess again. In the second book, I was trying to figure out why I've had so many ups and downs in my life."

There was a third marriage, and eventual divorce, to a plumber in Napier. And the realisation that although Roche had managed to put some of her psychological demons back in their box, she'd neglected the physical ones.

"My weight had climbed to 103kg and I was tired all the time. I wanted to do something positive for my health."

True to form, she picked the hardest thing she could find – the Ironman competition, a gruelling 3.9km swim, 180km bike ride and 42.2km run.

"I could only swim three strokes, hadn't ridden a bike since I was 20, and couldn't run. I remember my first swimming lesson at the local pool where five- and six-year-olds were beating me. Their parents, many of whom were my patients, were watching, which was hugely embarrassing."

But Roche persevered, and despite an injury that meant she had to walk the race instead of run, 18 months later she completed it in 16 hours, 36 minutes.

While training for her second Ironman, Roche injured her back. Two surgeries followed, leaving her with spinal cord damage. It put an end to exercise and left her in daily pain. "All I can

do these days is a gentle walk in the bush. I can't drive far or sit for long."

It also signalled an end to Roche's medical career, because one side effect of the injury was incontinence. "Having to go to the toilet every 15 minutes doesn't really work when you're in a public-facing role."

It was the break she needed to become a full-time writer, but this time of fiction.

"I had outright hatred from some in my family when my memoirs were published, so Dad begged me to pick on someone else's family story. I remember the local community paper running a story about my first book with the headline: 'From Stripper and Prostitute to Doctor'. Dad was so worried about his parents seeing it that he ran up and down the street grabbing newspapers out of letter boxes."

#### JUST GETTING STARTED

It's the nature of memoir that other people can get caught in the crossfire. Roche says since many in her family are no longer alive to defend their stories, she decided to switch to fiction.

The idea for *Mila and the Bone Man* came in 2018 when she was running through the bush. "There had been all this publicity about kauri dieback," she explains. "So, they'd set up sanitisation stations around the bush, but I watched runner after runner swerve around

them because they didn't want to spend 10 seconds doing something to help nature. I wondered how that kind of selfishness would feel for someone of the forest."

The first draft of the manuscript, completed in 2019, was from the perspective of a young Māori woman. But that eventually proved problematic.

"I consulted with Māori and one

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person whose opinion I deeply respect said having me write from the Māori perspective was culturally really confronting. I realised that Mila didn't have to be Māori to be part of the natural world, so I rewrote it, giving her European heritage and making Tommy, the autistic boy next door, Māori.

"Writer Pip Adam, who was my mentor for this novel, agreed it was good to change the ethnicity of my protagonist and I'm thrilled with how it turned out."

Roche laughs for a really long time when I ask if she's scratched her literary itch. "I'm just getting started," she says in a tone that suggests this is only the tip of the writing iceberg.

Her writing hut, tucked into the 4ha property she shares with her partner, coffee roaster Graham Allen, has seen a lot of action lately. There's the manuscript Roche completed as part of her master's degree in creative writing at Auckland University of Technology, *Songs to Sing to the Dying*, a book she describes as "a metafictional postmodern pastiche that personifies death and demystifies some aspects of dying".

Her second completed manuscript, set in the 1850s, tells the story of two artists competing to illustrate the medical textbook *Gray's Anatomy*.

There are other books in the pipeline – "having multiple projects on the go keeps my brain active" – and the rest of the day is filled in with reading, playing with her bichon puppy, Lucy Jordan, and trying to answer all the questions on the TV show *The Chase*.

It is, she concedes, her own take on *ikigai*. "My injury really opened up my life and allowed me to do something else I love. Once again, I've totally changed my life." ■

*Mila and the Bone Man* (Quentin Wilson Publishing, \$37.99) is available on August 18.