

# Tragedy and trauma are core of debut novel

## MILA AND THE BONE MAN

by Lauren Roche  
(Quentin Wilson Publishing, \$38)

**B**roken families, grief, trauma, abuse, meth etc — these are not some of my favourite things to read about, so I approached *Mila and the Bone Man* with some trepidation. Fortunately, while Lauren Roche's debut novel is indeed all of these things, it's also so much more.

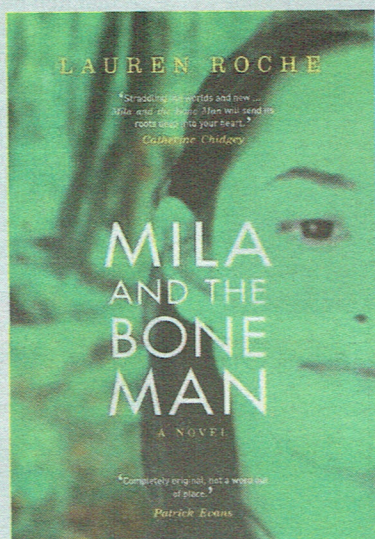
Brief synopsis: Esther, a Croatian descendent of those who came to Northland because of the kauri, has formed a happy family with her three kids with Lyin' Brian (who's long since buggered off), Tama her Māori husband, and the two kids they have together. They all live in rural Northland on the edge of the Puketi Forest.

They have a lovely neighbour, Jane, and her neuro-diverse grandson Tommy (the eponymous Bone Man) and Esther's sister Cath and mother Baka live down the road. They're a close-knit lot and although they don't have much money, they are rich in other ways. Then one afternoon a terrible accident happens and from that point onwards everything changes.

"We were like a jigsaw that didn't fit together," says Esther's daughter Mila, who does most of the narrative heavy lifting, "some pieces swollen, others shrunk — so we couldn't make a picture of a happy family any more."

Roche's settings, particularly the Northland ones, are evocative and utterly recognisable. There's a real aroha for the place here and it's obvious that Roche has spent countless hours in the native forests of Northland and driving its back roads.

But for me, the really triumphant aspect of *Mila and the Bone Man* is the main characters. And what good characters they are, especially Tama. What a joy and a rare treat it is to read a gentle and kind male Māori character. Tama loves Lyin' Brian's kids every bit as much as his own, even if sometimes they think he doesn't. There's nothing he won't do for them. Nothing.



Although the bulk of the novel is narrated by Mila, with a few chapters contributed by Tommy, the main characters — Tama, Esther, Cath, Jane and Tommy — feel fully fledged as they respond first to the tragedy at the beginning of the novel, then later to something that happens to Mila. Each of the characters is affected differently, depending on their innate character, by the tragedy then the trauma. Flawed, fallible, complex and nuanced. They're riddled with guilt, anger and sadness in the case of the immediate family, and quiet despair and empathy in the instance of

Jane and Tommy, who are close enough to be touched by the family's twin tragedies.

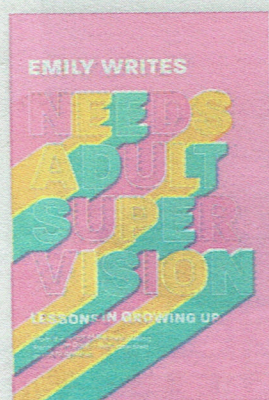
Mila's three brothers are not as fully realised, and I found myself wanting to know what they were experiencing. A couple of short chapters like the Tommy-focused ones, from each at different points in the novel, could have fleshed out these thinner characters and added even more vibrancy to the others. But this is a small quibble about an otherwise pretty good novel.

— Reviewed by Kelly Ana Morey



Lauren Roche

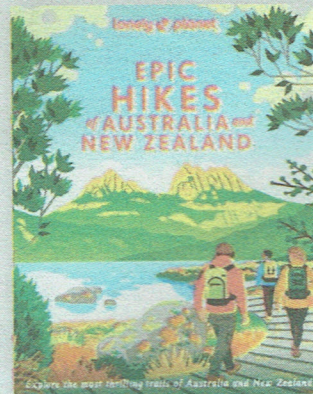
## Just out



Emily Writes follows up her bestseller *Rants in the Dark* with *Needs Adult Supervision* (Penguin, \$35), a collection of essays about growing up alongside your children — the heartwarming, the hilarious and the cry-yourself-to-sleep tough stuff.



French-Korean writer Elisa Shua Dusapin made a splash with her first novel, the sleeper hit *Winter in Sokcho*, set in a back-of-beyond South Korean hotel. She's back with *The Pachinko Parlour* (Scribe, \$28), in which a young Korean woman visits her grandparents in Tokyo during a crushing heatwave.



Promising a mix of classic and lesser-known trails, *Epic Hikes of Australia and New Zealand* (Lonely Planet, \$50) rates each walk according to difficulty (Easy, Hard or Epic) and offers tips for getting the most out of your outing. This is the newest addition to the *Epic Hikes* series (Europe, the Americas, etc), and truly, it's about time.