

SOUTH

WINTER 2025

ON TRACK

Naomi Arnold's epic Te Araroa Trail adventure.

GAME FACE

Writer Dominic Hoey on his latest novel.


LIFE & STYLE

Music, fashion, people, events, and more.

FRONT *of* HOUSE

Katrina Toovey on three decades of Dunedin hospitality



A woman wearing a purple rain jacket and a silver helmet is smiling at the camera. She is standing on a mountain trail with a steep, grassy slope in the background. The sky is blue with some clouds. The woman's jacket has a black strap across the chest with a buckle. A black water bottle is visible in the lower left foreground.

Naomi Arnold documents her Te Araroa experience in *Northbound*.

Last year Naomi Arnold walked the Te Araroa trail, a transformative journey that she's written about in *Northbound*

By Gavin Bertram.

Walking the line

“The way I visualised the trail was definitely uphill.”

"I forgot about the loneliness I'd felt earlier on trail. I was busy with laughter, years of memories, problems to sort through, landscapes and birds to admire, knowledge to share."

How do you prepare yourself for the unknown, for what will be the biggest physical and mental challenge you've faced?

You can't, Naomi Arnold says. She'd know, having walked the length of New Zealand on the Te Araroa trail solo last year and lived to write the story.

Her arduous, lonely, transformative journey of more than 3000 kilometres is documented in the recent book *Northbound*.

"I had never felt as bad as I did day after day after day for that long," Arnold reflects. "Every day was like the worst day on a tramp. The distances were huge; I think 62 kilometres was my longest day, but even on an average day you could do up to 40."

The Nelson writer, who'd studied at the University of Otago, was a fairly experienced trampler. But she'd never experienced the challenging backcountry that is a regular feature of Te Araroa.

After leaving husband Doug Brooks at Stirling Point in Bluff, the early part of the walk was a painful introduction to the realities of thru-hiking for Arnold.

But walking the trail had been a 20-year long dream inspired by reading *Te Araroa: One Man Walks His Dream* by Geoff Chapple, who'd first proposed the trail in 1994. Opened in 2011, it is now completed by thousands of trampers each year.

The idea had been haunting Arnold with increasing urgency, until in early 2023 she finally committed to it.

"Curiosity was one of the driving factors," she considers. "What would it be like? How would I change? How would my functioning in the world

change? But I didn't so much have a driving force as I just wanted to do it."

Of course, reality kicks in soon after the excitement of starting the trail for all walkers. It was perhaps more pronounced for Arnold, one of the just 10% of walkers who embark on the trail from Bluff, rather than Cape Reinga.

Largely dictated by writing work that hadn't been completed, the decision saw her begin on Boxing Day 2023. Leaving so late in the season meant she'd be walking through winter.

Being northbound also meant Arnold felt the weight of the country looming above her.

"I felt like I was climbing up the country; I was at the bottom mentally," she says. "The way I visualised the trail was definitely uphill."

Candid and compelling, *Northbound* includes all the painful details of what it takes to traverse this country's beautiful backyard.

Mud, loneliness, blisters, lightning storms, frozen nights, injuries, exhaustion, fear; the book spans the gamut of human misery. The counterpoint is the more fleeting sensation of exhilaration that Arnold experienced - and the almost subconscious meditation on her life that ultimately saw her emerge a changed person.

Much of the book was written while on the trail. As well as writing on her iPad during long evenings spent in huts, she dictated both audio and video notes while tramping. An entire day walking on the beach along the Kapiti Coast was spent transcribing some of those.

While the method was unconventional, the immediacy and intensity of *Northbound* is undeniable.

"It came very easily," Arnold admits. "It was the easiest thing I've ever written, it was so vivid. And when I got home I'd written up so many notes and scenes it

was all just sitting there."

There's a clear sense of that in *Northbound*, which is subtitled 'Four seasons of solitude on Te Araroa'. Although the pain of dealing with the endless difficulties of the trail is palpable, it recedes into the background as the stories and observations are so lucid.

Arnold's rapture at the natural environment, her beautiful, fleeting interactions with people, and the profound personal insights she has made the book feel like a spiritual quest of sorts.

Certainly the author returned to Nelson with "a life changed". Becoming the fittest she had ever been was a revelation, giving her the confidence that she can now take on anything.

And in a more fundamental way, Arnold has been changed by the deep internal reflection that the months of solitude enforced upon her.

"You don't know what you're missing until you step away because you're just on the treadmill of life," she observes. "It's the constant human struggle of wanting to be comfortable all the time, but finding the most value in being uncomfortable."

Even months after finishing the walk, Arnold was still enjoying the little joys of being home - comfortable sleep, warmth, fresh food, the feel of cotton.

But she is harbouring an ambition to take on another through-walk in the future, perhaps one of the big North American trails, this time with her husband.

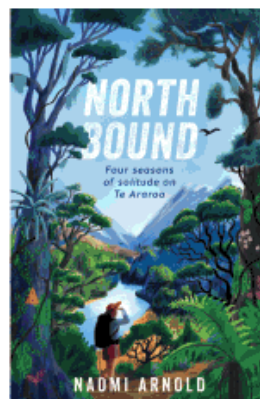
As Arnold writes in *Northbound*, Doug admitted that he wasn't sure who she'd be after nine months on Te Araroa.

"All I can say is, now he says that I have grown up and stopped blaming other people for my problems," she concludes.



The writer emerged from the trail with "a life changed".

• Naomi Arnold will speak at the NZ Mountain Film & Book Festival in June. See mountainfilm.nz for more info.



• *Northbound* by Naomi Arnold is published by HarperCollins.