Walking the length of **Aotearoa**

Nelson writer Naomi Arnold set out to fulfil a 20-year dream of walking the length of New Zealand. She speaks to *Charles Anderson* about life on the trail, traversing mountains, rivers, cities, from summer to spring, walking on through days of thick mud, blazing sun and lightning storms, and into cold, starlit nights.

Naomi Arnold sits on the edge of a bed at a holiday home in Taupō, staring at a stacked bookcase. She reaches for a volume, opens its pages and begins to read. She is 20 years old, freshly back from teaching English in South Korea.

The book outlined a vision of a trail, a line that stretched all the way from Cape Reinga at the tip of New Zealand's North Island to Bluff in the deep south. She read about Geoff Chapple and Miriam Beatson's dream to one day have a connecting path that opened up the entire country. A thru-hike that would be a jewel in the crown of Aotearoa's outdoors. It would traverse the whenua, through forests, beaches, mountains and valleys. Through rivers and gorges. It would be called Te Araroa.

Naomi closed the book and had a singular thought: "I'm going to do that one day."

"When someone draws a line on a map there is an expectation that people will follow it," she tells me. "Once it's there you want to follow that line. Then the line started to haunt me."

After it officially opened in 2011, Naomi began seeing Te Araroa everywhere. It followed her through her 30s as she started tramping around the Nelson area. In the Richmond Ranges, she would see little plaques peering out from the bush with its familiar sigil – a white metal rectangle featuring a black path winding through silhouetted cabbage trees. She saw it in Pelorus, at Blue Lake in the Nelson Lakes National Park. Every single year since 2011, the haunting grew.

She thought back to that promise she made herself on that Taupō bed. She would do it by the time she turned 40. Then came Covid. More years passed. And then, at the end of 2023, she willed it into existence.

It is Boxing Day. Naomi's husband, Douglas Brooks is driving her from Invercargill to Bluff, the beginning of the northbound trail – 'NOBO' in trail lingo. They do not talk much. Doug points out the Longwood Range – a 764m summit that sits 85km into the trail.

"Huh?" Naomi replies. "I'm going that way?"

"Haven't you thought this through?"

"I'm not that good with directions."

"Jesus Naomi, you're not filling me with confidence."

They take photos at the signpost at the bottom of the country. Then a smile.

"Well," she says. "I guess I should go do this."

And with that, Naomi sets off on an eight-month odyssey, travelling up the country, all 3028km of it.

She had not trained much for the mission at hand. She knew she usually went too hard and injured herself, and was worried she'd do the same with Te Araroa: blow out completely early on and the whole project would fail.

Doug was worried about, among other things, the Alpine Fault rupturing, causing a massive earthquake while his wife was plodding through the South Island.

What was going through Naomi's mind?

"I'm going to die."

She had no real notion of why she wanted to do it. She wasn't seeking any particular type of transcendence or revelation. She knew it was something she had to do. So she started walking. One foot in front of the other.

Naomi had resolved early on that she had to walk "Every F***** Inch" of the trail.

"I just knew myself. If I skipped a bit, I'd eventually find any excuse to skip more."

She had to respect the line.

"I respect maps," she says. "I like looking at maps. I find them quite magical. The fact that someone had gone to all the effort to mark out this line and that I could follow it. It just really appealed to me … even on the terrible days, I was still on the line, and that was comforting."

But soon, she discovered what that really meant.

Before long, she met the mud in the Longwood Range. Less liquid, "more like hardening cement". It immediately filled her gaiters. Each step was slow, exhausting, excruciating. She waded through pool after pool of deep, sucking mud for 8km, where each step could take up to 20 seconds. The mud stunk of rotting plants, and Naomi found herself floundering, crying, and hanging over her hiking poles in desperation. She felt like she had transformed into a "swamp thing".

Her first 40km day of walking was between Lake Ōhau Lodge and Twizel. She arrived in Twizel "hobbling, leaning on my poles, my hips and feet throbbing, tears in my eyes from the pain". It became a familiar refrain as she found her body adapting, agonisingly,

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through the pressure of immense days on the trail. And adapt it eventually did; by the third to last day of the trip, walking 62km along Ninety Mile Beach with only a single break came easily.

She was caught in a lightning storm in Waiau Pass. A huge crack of thunder and a flash of lightning filled the sky. The air felt hot and surged with charge. Naomi flung her poles away, worrying she would become a human lightning rod, and ran for cover between two boulders. She huddled under her tent fly as the storm raged around her, with rain so heavy a river formed between the rocks. She later described the experience as "f*****g terrifying."

But she also discovered a superpower. Going through all these trials made her realise a truth: with the right gear, she could feel safe anywhere.

"I think I just realised early on that I could just always put my tent up. I could put my tent up and just lie there for a while until the weather or fatigue passed. Even if I didn't have food, I knew I'd still be right for a while as long as I had water. And if I was upset, after a sleep, I'd be okay. I found that I always had the ability to reset a situation." She had to reset many times.

"My little toes were terrible in the last few hundred kilometres of the trail. The road walking just destroyed them. I couldn't really escape it. So it was just days of constant, agonising pain."

When she tore a knee ligament in a fall near Te Kuiti, she had to spend a week off-trail resting it, and a nasty flu set her progress back for another two weeks, as did spending weeks on her freelance writing work.

"I hated pausing the trail."

But every time she returned it felt like coming back to an old friend.

She remembers her nine days in the Richmond Ranges as one of her highlights – slow, trudging work over visible, palpable geology.

"You see ancient history and it's like travelling through time over a day."

As a kind of self-imposed therapy, she started making voice notes early on. She spoke to herself through the pain and adversity. She posted Instagram stories of trials and small tribulations. They were often funny, more often slightly unhinged. But it was entertaining viewing for friends, family and colleagues intrigued

Winter light filters through a spiderweb in the Tararua Ranges.

Naomi Arnold on Ninety Mile Beach, the day before finishing the Te Araroa.

by the journey she was on, largely alone. Sometimes she would walk weeks without seeing anyone. The solitude of the path and nature had its own impact.

One day, Naomi was washing naked in a South Island river and a giddiness came over her. She felt time rip open and was transported back thousands of years. She felt like she was in the body of an ancestor doing the exact same thing as her, the same movements, washing in the bush, in the sun, with a rag on the riverside.

"We've all got the neurobiology to be spiritual, and that had lain dormant in me until then. But being out there had sparked it. These potent signs and visions, because nothing else was happening other than walking; my brain was creating meaning and entertainment."

It was these notes, these videos, that would become the backbone of her reporting for Northbound, her book about her tramp.

I have known Naomi since the beginning of her career. We were at journalism school together in 2008 and both started at the Nelson Mail as junior reporters. I have watched her progress – winning awards for her ability to delve inside issues – everything from science, sports, nature and history, reporting from Canada, South Korea and Antarctica. But one of her true strengths is when she writes about herself in blistering personal essays that eloquently confess her thoughts and actions in her own exquisite style. Now, I share the opinion that she is one of the country's best writers. So a book project like this feels like a natural progression. She, alone with her thoughts, meeting the sorts of characters that are bound to pepper a trail spanning the whole country. But she did not approach the trail as a reporter. Most of the time, she was merely surviving.

Naomi started being scared of the men she met when she was alone; they were all a potential threat. Then slowly, everyone became a potential friend who wanted to help. She met everyone from almost-famous international trampers walking their own trail and broadcasting it to YouTube, to a week-long 'will she/won't she' pseudo romantic connection with a young German hiker.

"Once that happened, I was reminded of friendship, because it had been so long since I'd spent any decent time with friends. That encounter really made me

Having a rest on Motatapu Track.

gregarious again; meeting him and remembering what friendship and banter was like. After that I found myself being quite happy and open with strangers."

She credits those encounters with lifting her spirits in often difficult times.

The little girl who led Naomi to a fish and chip shop in Ahipara. Huey, the bus driver, who insisted on sharing his pie with her right at the end of her journey. Numerous trail angels who provided accommodation and assistance. Abhay and Jaya at a Hare Krishna farm near Kaitaia provided extensive hospitality, including food, shelter, and laundry. Names and these sorts of encounters permeate her account.

She says she is so grateful to the volunteers who maintain the trail for walkers. "It's a massive effort. There is so much maintenance. On the sections of private land, a farmer might cut a track through some scrub but it's overgrown within weeks. Then there is our DOC estate, our huts, which are so magnificent. It really needs to be treated well. There is such value in what we have in New Zealand."

At random junctions throughout the journey these people emerged, offering small or large graces. Even to the point, while in Auckland, Naomi worked up the courage to email the prime movers of the entire project – Geoff Chapple and Miriam Beatson, the creators of the trail and whose book had inspired her all those years earlier. She asked if she could take them for coffee. They instead told her to come and stay the night. It happened to be Naomi's and Douglas's wedding anniversary. Miriam broke open a bottle of bubbles to mark the occasion.

She credits Douglas as her "guardian angel", forever watching her progress on her GPS tracker and for often being at the end of the phone line when she was lost or on the brink of some mania. On several occasions he talked her down and guided her to safety.

And then it was time for the trail to end.

She was ready for it, but also … not.

"I had it sweet. I like the lifestyle of just messing around. It was like being a child again."

There were complications in that equation – like making sure she had enough to eat, making sure her

Te Araroa hiker tent city in summertime Wanaka.

toe didn't fall off, or her knee didn't wrench out of its socket, or, you know, not dying. But there was a simplicity to one foot in front of the other, walking her own trail.

When the moment came, it was, as everyone had suggested, an anti-climax. There was nothing particularly special about the exact moment of reaching the lighthouse at Cape Reinga, the end of the line. But there was an overarching feeling.

"I was content."

Coming back to Nelson was its own challenge. Naomi found she hated crowds. Eye contact was overwhelming. Whenever she put on makeup, she thought she looked like a clown. Coming back home meant she realised she had to once more think about the feelings of another person living with her – her husband. Gradually the adjustment came.

But she has found an enduring satisfaction in saying that she was going to do something, something big, and then actually doing it.

"For women especially, I hope there is something in that – if you want to do something you can eventually force the time, make it happen and go and do it." She took other things away from the trail. She doesn't care as much about small hiccups in life. Her car got broken into; she shrugs. She was bothered by so many things for such a long time on the trail that life now has a different perspective. She has food, water, shelter. At many points on the trail, having only water and shelter was enough to make her feel grateful.

Sitting now in a bustling cafe in her hometown of Nelson, her original premonition also did not come true: She didn't die.

Naomi Arnold's Northbound - Four Seasons of Solitude on Te Araroa is published by HarperCollins and available in bookshops now. To be into win a copy email editor@nelsonmag.co.nz with Northbound in the subject line.