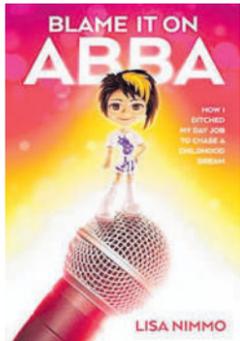


Taking a chance on me



BLAME IT ON ABBA
by Lisa Nimmo
(Graphetti Publishing,
\$35)

Reviewed by
Dionne Christian

Back in the early 00s, Lisa Nimmo was the driving force behind Kiwi rock-pop duo Pearl who were the support act for the 2006 concerts of Elton John and Eric Clapton, released a handful of singles and an album and kept on keeping on for some seven years.

Haven't heard of them? Reading Nimmo's surprisingly engaging story, especially if you live in Auckland, will help explain, in sometimes sobering detail, why they might have passed you by.

Blame it on Abba, which successfully crosses genres from memoir to business goal-setting and life-coaching manual, starts with Nimmo, then 32 and an effective radio advertising saleswoman, being persuaded to perform as Sporty Spice at a 1999 Christmas party.

It awakens a long-lost dream in Nimmo, who has no prior music experience other than performing Abba concerts as a child for family and friends. She sets out to transform herself from "closet-karaoke-singing salesperson" to a professional singer, musician and songwriter and eventually quits her day job to live that dream.

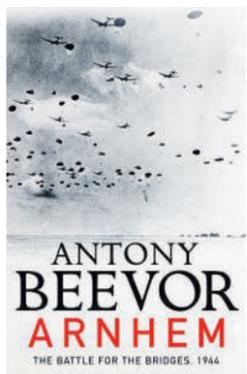
Talk about a radical reinvention. At 32, it might not seem like a late-life change but, as Nimmo discovers, thirtysomething was considered well and truly over-the-hill by the urban radio programmers, venue bookers and record industry execs who held sway over what we — the listening public — got to hear. Forming Pearl with fellow singer-songwriter Shelley Hirini, she needed every bit of business savvy, grit and determination from her past life if they were to get anywhere in New Zealand. Credit to them, for a time they did so and their success celebrated in lifestyle magazines and in their motivational speaking engagements/performances.

Privately, Nimmo, by then a mother of two young children, was chronically overworked, frustrated by the ageism they encountered and, with husband and Pearl music director Chris Jones, heavily in debt.

Blame It On Abba is an honest examination of what "living the dream" can really entail. The latter chapters make for uncomfortable reading as Nimmo highlights the disjunct between those glossy magazine spreads about Pearl's achievements and real life. Though she must surely want to let rip, she keeps her composure and resists the temptation to "name names", remaining almost well-mannered when re-telling the sexist and ageist attitudes she and Hirini dealt with.

This is a warm, entertaining and often enlightening read that will have you cheering Nimmo — and Pearl — on while shaking your head at some of the sh*t they deal with. Recommended especially if you're thinking of quitting your own day job to live a dream — you might come away with a few useful tips and hints as well as an honest appraisal of what it truly takes.

Once more unto the bridge



ARNHEM: THE BATTLE FOR THE BRIDGES, 1944

by Antony Beevor
(Penguin Random House, \$40)
Reviewed by
Guy Body

Sir Antony Beevor, arguably Britain's finest military historian, has long been able to operate a winning formula without becoming formulaic. His books are deservedly famous for dogged scholarship, an addictive narrative and a fearless approach to reappraising self-serving myths and puffed-up reputations.

His latest work, *Arnhem*, continues the winning form. Not least of his achievements is simply finding more to say about one of World War II's most analysed — not to say mythologised — disasters. Operation Market Garden was a British-led airborne attempt to create a back door into the Reich, by capturing bridges in the German-occupied Netherlands. This resulted in British paratroopers reaching the bridge at Arnhem — and being defeated after a ferocious battle.

Although this epic was splendidly covered by Cornelius Ryan almost 50 years ago in *A Bridge Too Far*, Beevor has made great (and properly-acknowledged) use of Ryan's unused sources in addition to new information from Allied, German and Dutch archives. The photos (many previously unpublished) and maps are an essay in clarity themselves.

As befits British military history, there are moments of Goonish humour (such as the paratroopers' war-cry "Whoa Mahomet!" — who would believe this Egyptian shopkeepers' lament could bring such a chill to German spines?). But these moments are rare in a narrative brimming with horror and pathos, as close as any reader should want to get to the reality of war.

When Beevor butchers a sacred cow, it stays butchered. The lionised British commander Bernard Montgomery comes across as a conceited blimp, who was fine when he stuck to his slow and meticulous knitting but who had no business conducting an operation requiring German-style speed and flexibility (although Beevor makes it plain that Market Garden was fundamentally unwinnable, whoever was in command).

For Beevor, the greatest heroes are the Dutch people. Their bravery, stoicism and forgiveness of Allied failure shine throughout the book. What is too often overlooked is that the battle of Arnhem was a brilliant German victory. It was, for the Dutch and all of Europe's terrorised peoples, thankfully the last one.

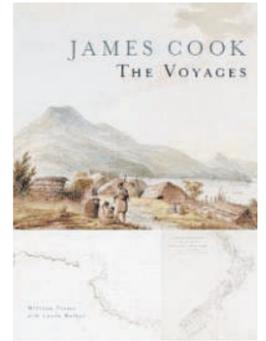
non-fiction

Mark Fryer & Jim Eagles

JAMES COOK: THE VOYAGES

by William Frame and Laura Walker
(Bateman, \$50)

It's the illustrations that make this book stand out from the others rolling down the assembly line for the 250th anniversary of the start of Captain James Cook's three world-shaping voyages. The authors are archivists at the British Museum, which is staging a major exhibition of its Cook-related treasures, and their book draws on that fabulous trove. The text is well worth reading. But it is the pictures by artists employed on the voyages, paintings by Tahitian high priest Tupaia, photos of specimens gathered, Cook's charts and samples of his log entries, plus other works of art, that are the real source of wonder. (JE)



REPORTER: A MEMOIR

by Seymour M. Hersh (Allen Lane, \$55)

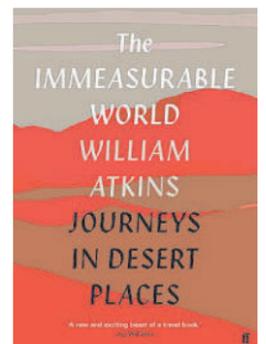
Seymour Hersh made his name reporting on the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and doesn't appear to have paused for breath since. This is a chronicle of big stories — Watergate, secret CIA projects, war in Iraq — and heavyweight publications such as the *New York Times* and *New Yorker*. It's also something of an investigative reporter's how-to guide: cultivate sources, keep digging, check your facts — and have no faith in the official version. And, inevitably, it's a reflection on the days when more news outlets had the time and resources to deliver the scoops that are Hersh's specialty. (MF)



THE IMMEASURABLE WORLD: JOURNEYS IN DESERT PLACES

by William Atkins (Faber, \$37)

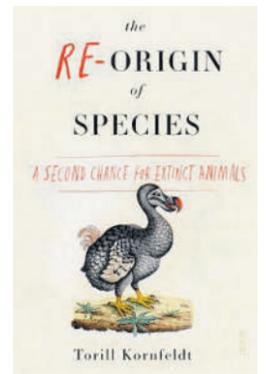
By definition, deserts are dry, but they're not lifeless — or lacking in variety. Atkins finds life wherever he goes, from Egypt's Eastern Desert, to South Australia's Maralinga nuclear-test area, the Burning Man festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, or the wasteland that was once the Aral Sea. Not just animal and plant life: this is as much about the people who live in arid places. Atkins is no explorer — it's too late for that — and this isn't your intrepid man-against-nature narrative. It is, however, the best sort of travel writing, sharply observed and vividly written. (MF)



THE RE-ORIGIN OF SPECIES

by Torill Kornfeldt (Scribe, \$40)

Imagine if you could re-animate one of the woolly mammoths that regularly emerge, perfectly frozen, from the Siberian permafrost. Or maybe coax a chicken embryo to turn into a baby dinosaur. Kornfeldt meets some of the scientists trying to make such feats reality, bringing long-extinct species back from the dead. And she poses some big questions. How feasible are such efforts? (Answer: much harder than it looked in *Jurassic Park*). What could be the unintended consequences? And what's the point, given that we have plenty of not-quite-extinct-yet species to worry about? (MF)



THE HUNTERS: THE PRECARIOUS LIVES OF NEW ZEALAND'S BIRDS OF PREY

by Debbie Stewart (Random House, \$50)

Debbie Stewart, founder of the Wingspan National Birds of Prey Centre, has written a marvellous tribute to the sleek, charismatic hunters of our skies that have fascinated her since childhood. These range from the terrifying, extinct pouākai or New Zealand eagle, the largest raptor that ever lived; the kāhu or swamp harrier and the much rarer endemic falcon or kārearea; to the self-introduced barn owls of the Far North. It's filled with intriguing tales — such as the uplifting story of the groundbreaking project to re-introduce falcons to Rotorua. (JE)

