

Author Kirsty Powell brings Bridge to Nowhere settlement to life in new novel

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The Bridge to Nowhere in more recent times. Photo / File



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With her first novel, *The Strength of Eggshells*, author Kirsty Powell has taken the unusual step of placing a main fictional character amongst real people.

After visiting the Bridge to Nowhere, which spans the Mangapurua Stream in Whanganui National Park, Powell became fascinated with the settlement that existed in the valley until 1943.

The land in the valley was allocated to 26 returned soldiers and their families after World War I and the isolation posed all kinds of challenges for them.

After reading Arthur Bates' 1981 book *The Bridge to Nowhere*, Powell began interviewing descendants of the Mangapurua Valley families and their testimonies inspired her book.

"Their stories are so interesting that I felt no need to rewrite them.

"Instead I have written my book around them and with their permission, they feature as themselves in my book."



Kirsty Powell's debut novel *The Strength of Eggshells* is set in the Mangapurua Valley above the *Bridge to Nowhere*. Photo / Supplied

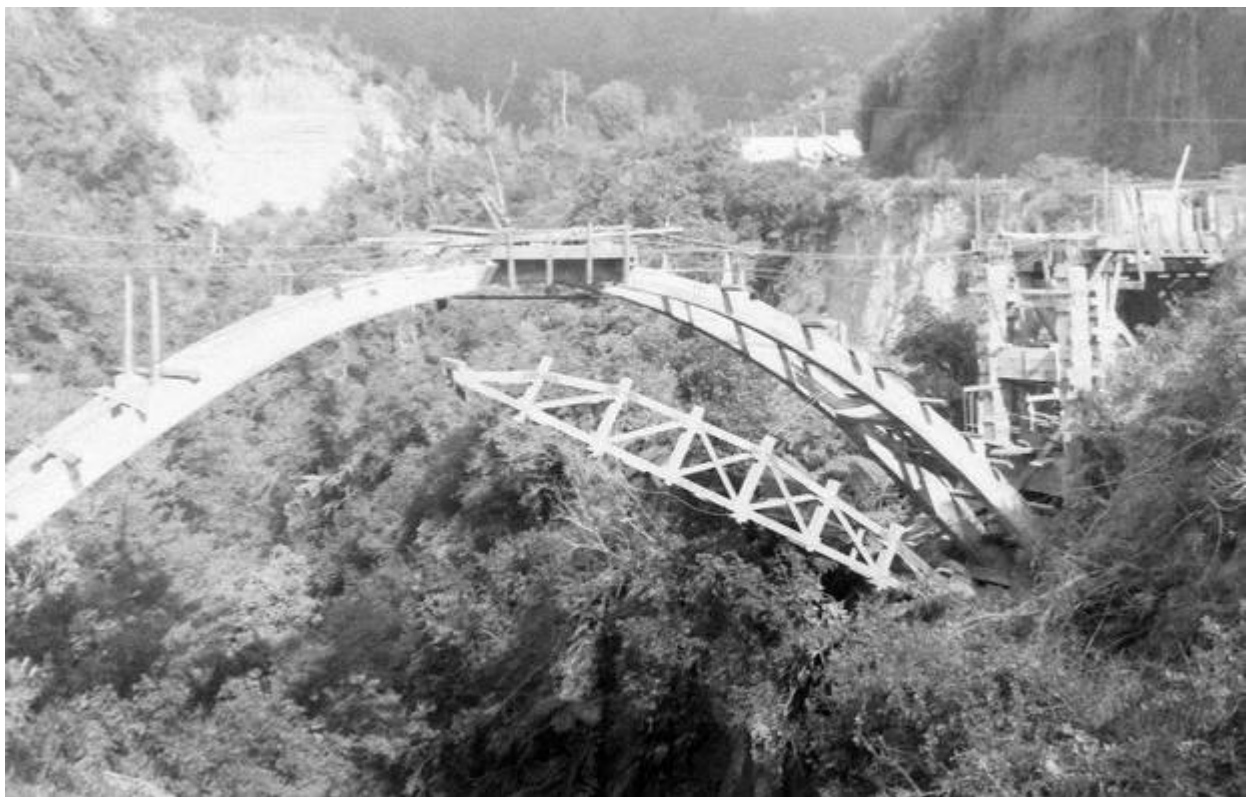
Powell says the history of the valley is still strongly held by the families.

One of them is 92-year-old Muriel Roberts (nee McDonald) who appears in the novel as herself, a 14-year-old girl working as a Land Girl for her father when the valley closed.

"Muriel was such a wonderful person to interview.

"Her memories are so vivid and as she spoke I could picture her as a young girl leaving the valley on horseback.

"She even remembers the names of the family horses and that she loved shearing with her own specially made pair of left-hand shears she was given as a 9-year-old."



The Bridge to Nowhere under construction in the 1930s. Photo / Sanford Family Library

Powell's main fictional character is Kate, a third-generation descendant of one of the Mangapurua Valley families, who returns to the deserted valley searching for her past.

Like the author herself, Kate rides a motorbike and Powell said the book title is a reference to the safety testing of motorbike helmets.

Kate is tall and handles a motorbike like a professional but she has insecurities that match her height.

She sets out to discover what became of her grandmother Meredith who travelled up the Whanganui River on a paddle steamer to marry a returned soldier.

Powell, who grew up in an isolated rural community east of Eketahuna, has a Masters degree in Creative Writing and has previously published her poems and short stories.

She now lives in South Auckland.

The Strength of Eggshells is published by Cloud Ink Press, an Auckland-based publishing co-operative with a focus new Kiwi voices.

"We are excited to publish Kirsty Powell's debut novel," said publisher Dione Jones.

"She has intertwined three generations of Kiwi women, each with their own story, using the rich backdrop of the history of Aotearoa New Zealand."

Powell will launch Strength of Eggshells in Whanganui at Paiges Book Gallery at 5.30pm on Friday, November 22. She will also hold a launch at the Angel Louise Cafe in Raetihi on Saturday, November 23 at 12pm which will be attended by Mangapurua Valley families.