

Book review

Headlands

New stories of anxiety

Category: Book Reviews / Personal Stories

Author: Naomi Arnold

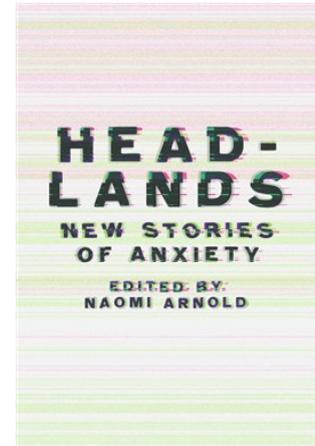
Year: 2018

Publisher: Victoria University Press, NZ

ISBN: 9781776561896

Audience: For Community

Summary: A collection of stories by New Zealanders with experience of anxiety



Headlands is a collection of stories by New Zealanders with experience of anxiety. The stories are mostly experiential, often raw, sometimes hard to read, but all are courageous and invite the reader to share the author's experience. A few venture into analysis and offer references for further reading, making the book a useful starting point for someone wanting to explore the literature as well as the experience of anxiety.

The gathering together of so many individual voices in one book creates a sense of community which helps to counter the isolation often associated with severe anxiety. The essays demonstrate both commonalities and differences in experience, and offer a range of approaches to living with and managing the condition. The book shows that anxiety isn't just the problem of isolated individuals, but a widespread societal condition we all need to understand, not just for ourselves but for our friends, whanau and communities.

The writers describe the experience of a wide range of symptoms of anxiety – muscle tension, pain, a sense of paralysis, breathing difficulties, sweating, fainting, hallucinations, freaking out – as stress hormones activate the body's fight / flight / freeze responses. Many find relief in redirecting these responses – breathing and relaxation exercises, running, kickboxing and other physical exercise. Some writers describe attempts to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. Some explore their own emotional narratives and ways to uncouple triggers and reactions and find calm through meditation, writing, music and other arts.

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As acknowledged in the introduction, despite efforts to invite contributions from people from a range of backgrounds, contributors are mostly female, mostly pakeha, mostly well-educated high achievers – which could be encouraging for readers who can identify with those experiences, but potentially alienating for those who identify as other. But then, following a common thread in the essays, a loosening of too tight identities and the expectations associated with them may be a key to breaking the grip of anxiety. If we can all stop and listen and open ourselves to each other’s experiences, we can begin to ease each other’s pain. Headlands is a useful starting point along that path. The challenge in the book is to come down from the headlands and begin to actively listen to each other, in real life.

Reviewed by Priscilla Cameron

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