

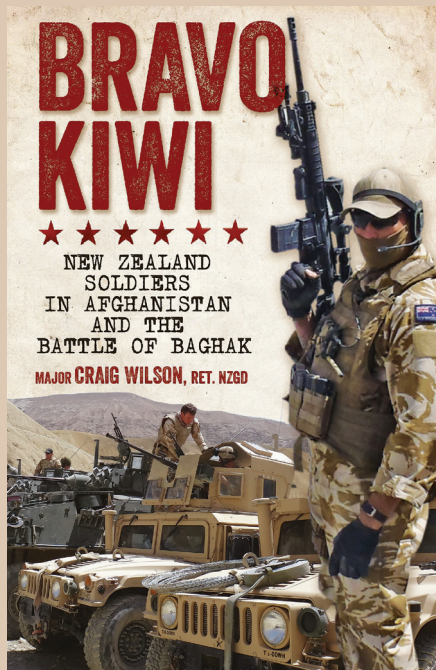
Book Reviews

**Bravo Kiwi - Major Craig Wilson retired
Bateman, RRP \$40
Reviewed by Daryl Crimp**

This is the story of the NZ Army's deadliest tour of duty since Vietnam: Major Craig Wilson, combat leader, and the men and women of Bravo and Kiwi Companies arrived at Romero Base, Bamyán Province, Afghanistan, in 2012 as the security situation worsened and culminated in the battle at Baghak - and its aftermath.

Written by former SAS, twenty-year army veteran, and recipient of the New Zealand Gallantry Decoration, Craig Wilson, *Bravo Kiwi* grabs you by the lapels from the first page. At the introduction, you are dropped straight into the hot zone, with bullets whipping and cracking around you, and blood being spilt by the time you hit page two.

It's pacy and raw - almost enough to suck the air out of you. But it is not sensationalistic or gratuitous; it is a cold hard jolt into the reality of what it is like to have 'baddies' shooting at you in the theatre of war. And when 'the snake bites' it's real, it's terrifying, and it is a test of character, training, and comradeship.



The first three pages of this book cleverly set you up so there is no way you are going to stop reading until you get to the end.

From chapter one, Wilson cuts to the 'back story' or build up to the offensive, which could be boring, as it deals with training, preparation, and basic army life.

What saves it from the pedestrian is Wilson's storytelling ability, lively anecdotes, and good crisp editing. He makes the mundane interesting and introduces us not only to army life in New Zealand but also to the culture, the psyche of the soldiers, and the challenges faced by the 'hierarchy' in building a platform to go to war.

Throughout, the narrative is honest and engaging. Wilson does a splendid job of introducing his ensemble cast of soldiers and army personnel against a backdrop of endless exercises and planning.

Switch to the dry hell hole in Afghanistan and you can almost taste the dust, feel the monotony of barrack life, and sense the building tension as the clock ticks down to the inevitable IED encounter. Then Wilson cuts back to the book's opening scene as the bloody battle of Baghak is played out.

It's raw and brutal but honest and reads like a war novel or script for a major movie - only it's reality. And chilling at that.

Highly recommended.

**This Mortal Boy - Dame Fiona Kidman
Penguin Random House, RRP \$38
Reviewed by Daryl Crimp**

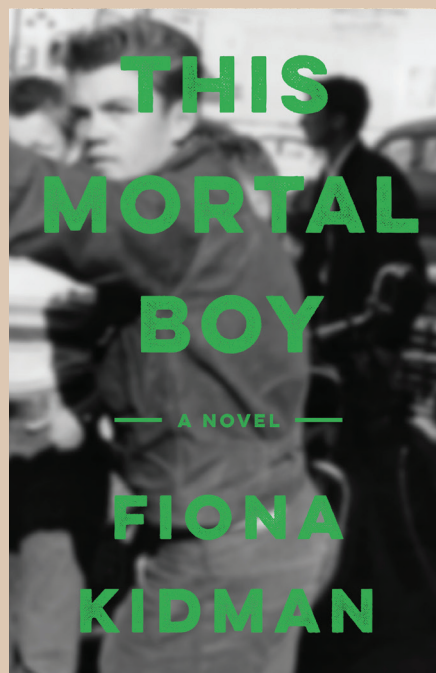
Dubbed the 'jukebox killer', 20-year-old Albert Black's last words as he went to the Hangman's noose was, "I wish you all a merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year."

It could well read from the opening of a Jo Nesbo thriller but every word of it is true and it is much closer to home than you might imagine. *This Mortal Boy* is a faithful recreation of the events that led to the second-to-last execution in New Zealand and is crafted as an engaging novel from the pen of Dame Fiona Kidman, which has become her trademark genre.

One would expect a novel to be written about 'the last' execution but this is evidence of Kidman's ability to sniff out a great story.

It is the tragic account of Irish immigrant Albert 'Paddy' Black and the circumstances surrounding his murder of another youth in a milk bar in Auckland in 1955, and the

subsequent hanging for this crime. Meticulously researched and smoothly written, *This Mortal Boy* is hard to put down because it is intriguing on so many levels. First off, it is a fascinating story, but it is Kidman's 'fleshing out' that gives it a richness and



depth that engenders empathy toward the culprit; he is endearing, flawed, likeable, and vulnerable.

Other characters are deftly portrayed too, so the result is a rich tapestry of a slice of New Zealand life that is not too distant from the past. That in itself is chilling and heart-warming at the same time, because Kidman captures the mood of the time; the stereotypes, social prejudices, moral hypocrisies, double standards, community fears, and the contrast between generations.

It seems hard to believe we were a nation 'like that' so recently but, at the same time, it is inspiring and revealing to see how we have matured as a 'people' in half a decade.

As much as it is a fascinating story and a good read, *This Mortal Boy* is also a literary mirror worth looking into.

Recommended summer reading.