



***Tough* by Amy Head.**
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Prime.

Amy Head grew up in Hamilton, Auckland and Christchurch, often visiting the West Coast for summer holidays. In her debut collection of short stories, *Tough*, Head's

focus varies between the West Coast's present and its gold-mining past.

Her powers of social observation revel in the neuroses of the mining community. The first story, "West Coast Road", is a long narrative about the engineer, Edward Dobson, and the forging of routes between Canterbury and the West Coast. It is a strong description, with historical flourishes, which follows the lives of the Dobson family and the construction of Arthur's Pass.

"The Sinner" is a historical tale set in the Victorian gold fields of the West Coast, where "newcomers courted Laurence with drink." The characters are brought vividly to life in Head's picturesque language:

The American pointed. 'Couple of good hours from here out to the bottom of the saddle. That's where we head tonight. Then a gutbusting climb tomorrow.'
'Damn,' Duncan said. He twanged it slightly.

Head's attention to detail is beautifully expressed in "Flood" when Constable O'Brien arrives at a digger's camp unannounced:

The digger nearest to the legs of O'Brien's horse pointed to a raised terrace behind the camp. O'Brien thought he would visit hell itself for a position in front of a good fire.

The title story, "*Tough*", about a gang of robbers, is wonderful in its attention to detail:

When they made their getaway they left behind a derelict house in charred ruins. There were scraps of clothing mixed with the embers. They left behind a packhorse they had shot in the head and left to slide down a bank. But this wasn't desecration enough: when they returned to Nelson they had also left behind five human victims. They kept hold of their loot for four days.

For all its humour, *Tough* maps out a terrain which is, at least partly, one of guilt, misunderstanding, pain and confusion. It also suggests that these experiences can be translated into something of value for there, "After Ngakawau the coast pulls up beside us and sticks around. The beaches are stonier up here and Nikau palms stand up in front of the water." ("Camping"). *Tough* explores the "messiness" of life with honesty and flair as we see in Melissa in "Home Grown" "taken prisoner while she was walking home from the dairy" but, years later, "Melissa looked into Rex's eyes and yes, she could see the shadow there. He had more to say. She could see it coming, as though he was going to be sick. Whatever she had been expecting, this was very far from it."

These and related topics are never far from Head's consciousness, and help to form some of the stronger stories in the book, such as "Maggie Quinn" and "Visitors". She is never apologetic about writing about disasters such as a river bursting its banks or making up a story about a boy who decides to become a sinner, and is confident when asserting that

Because he failed the blood test, administered as the helicopter chopped away from the mountain, Aiden wasn't entitled to compensation for the accident. Instead, Leanne took in boarders during his rehabilitation – geologists and specialist mechanics (one who listened to machinery with a stethoscope). ("Visitors").

This is far from being the sum total of head's stories, for she writes eloquently about such diverse things as the history, the landscape, the people and the issues of the West Coast. Here is a short-story writer who is developing her own style of thinking and is still experimenting with different ways of using language. She already has a great deal to say to us, and there is much more that we may look forward to.