

Dambusters' story still capable of inspiring awe

CHASTISE
Max Hastings
HarperCollins

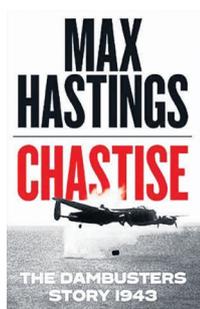
By JIM SULLIVAN

For those of us brought up on the 1955 film with its haunting theme music, the Dambusters story was one of unalloyed bravery providing an epic turning point in World War 2, but as we left the theatre on a patriotic high we had been given only a partial understanding of what it all meant.

Max Hastings' examination of the events of what was called Operation Chastise is the latest and one of the best revisions of the events. The breaching of the German dams in May 1943 by four and a-half-ton bouncing bombs had only a very minor effect on the enemy's war machine but caused the deaths of 1400 civilians, more than half of them Russian and Polish women transported to northwest Germany as slave labour. However, the bravery of the men of the RAF's 617 Squadron and the audacity of the crazy bombs they used remain intact.

Hastings, with due attention to the role of Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC, takes us through the intriguing process of forming a squadron for a special mission. Those chosen were already an elite among the pilots, navigators, bomb aimers and gunners of the air force but they also needed special, almost indefinable, personal qualities which are well described. It was all done in a rush and events tumbled together, but a day-by-day summary as an appendix provides a useful guide to the five months of experimentation, training and the attack itself.

The skilful arrangement of the story carries the reader along effortlessly. The idea, the planning, the imagination and practical skills of Barnes Wallis, the top-secret intensive training for a mission to targets which were not revealed until the last minute, and the after-raid lives of the men who survived (of the 133 aircrew that took part, 53 men were killed and three became prisoners of war) are all described with energy and sympathy, as is the roundup of the harrowing recollections of those on the ground who survived the massive flooding after the dams were breached.



Among the Dambuster crews were British, Canadian, American, Australian and New Zealand airmen, the Kiwis being wireless operator Flying Officer Len Chambers, of Karamea, and pilot Flight Lieutenant Les Munro, of Gisborne. Chambers was in a Lancaster which dropped its bomb at the Mohne Dam while Munro was forced to turn back early when his plane was damaged by flak over Holland. Munro would be the last surviving Dambuster pilot and when I spent a day with him in Tauranga, recording his memories a few years before his death. He appeared somewhat taciturn, perhaps because of the memories being rekindled, I thought, but I learnt from the thorough research in *Chastise* that his manner was always thus.

Today, the Dambusters attack would be classified as a war crime, given the civilian casualties, but Hastings sets it out as an event of its time: "The aircrew who executed Chastise will continue to deserve the admiration of their descendants as long as the British, together with the Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and American peoples, cherish their wartime heritage. They too, like all the men of Bomber Command, were victims, in that their commanders deliberately obscured from them the commitment of the 1942-45 offensive to the systematic terrorisation and killing of German civilians, together with their own meagre prospects of survival."

Hastings' reputation as one of the best of war historians is enhanced by *Chastise* and, while objectivity demands a warts-and-all telling, the Dambusters story is still one which engenders awe for the deeds of the men who flew the bombers, and the hero worship boys experienced after seeing the film more than 60 years ago is undiminished.

Jim Sullivan is a Patearoa writer.

Focus on dark facet of modern society

ADDRESSING MODERN SLAVERY
Justine Nolan & Martin Boersma
University of New South Wales Press

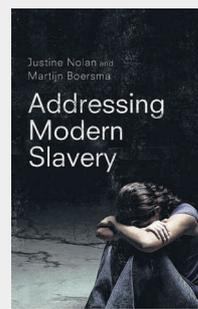
By TED FOX

Modern slavery in its various forms is not an abnormality confined to the fringes of society and the dark corners of the economy. It is not something that takes place only in impoverished regions, solely perpetuated by shadowy figures.

It is connected to all of us, Australian academics Justine Nolan and Martin Boersma tell us in their detailed study.

"Modern slavery" is the current buzzword say the authors, but, quoting the Labour Exploitation Group 2016, research shows that if labour abuses, such as non-payment of a minimum wage, unfair dismissal, forced and unpaid overtime, denial of benefits and denial of the freedom of association and collective bargaining are prevalent and left unchecked, more severe exploitation often develops.

If you have a cellphone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer, you are connected to modern slavery. With the increasing demand for cobalt,



used in lithium-ion batteries, the pressure is on the suppliers of the mineral. Thousands of impoverished people make their way to the Democratic Republic of Congo in search of cobalt and fortune.

The Congo is also home to several forms of modern slavery, including forced labour, debt bondage, sexual slavery, forced marriage and the use of children. Around two-thirds of the world's cobalt is supplied by the DRC, with one-fifth mined informally from small hand-dug holes that defy even basic safety standards.

State-sanctioned forced labour occurs on a large scale in North Korea, with an estimated 2.6 million people subjected to exploitation.

Chinese textile companies increasingly use North Korean factories to take advantage of cheap labour, labelling

garments "Made in China" and exporting them around the world. Australian surf brand giant Rip Curl sold clothing made in North Korea, blaming it on a subcontractor.

Modern slavery's presence in the corporate supply chains is a reality, say the authors, but to many of us, including the companies, it remains an abstract concept.

There is a strong chance that the products you use and the services you rely on are linked to such slavery. Because of that connection, we all assume some level of responsibility and (potential) control over it, the authors tell us.

Ultimately, as stated by the Australian Government: "there is no silver bullet to end modern slavery. Government, business and civil society all have a role to play and we need to work collaboratively."

The power of consumers is potentially a critical tool in influencing business behaviour in relation to modern slavery.

Based on years of research, reflected in the copious end notes, this study is an impressive confrontation of a dark aspect of society.

Ted Fox is an online marketing and social media consultant.

Another absolute gem from Knox

THE ABSOLUTE BOOK
Elizabeth Knox
Victoria University Press

By CUSHLA MCKINNEY

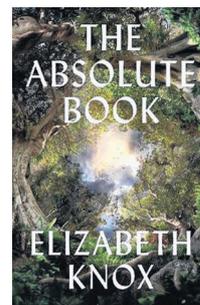
For the sake of transparency, I am a long-time Knox fan and thus a far from impartial reviewer. However, this also means I approach each new novel with great expectations. *The Absolute Book* more than lives up to them.

The story starts with the murder of 18-year-old Bea Cornick. Although occupying a scant few pages, this single act of violence changes the course of her sister Taryn's life forever, and with it the fate of the world.

Angry and grief-stricken by Bea's death, Taryn is determined to impose a harsher penalty than the six years to which her killer, Timothy Webber, is sentenced and tacitly commissions an itinerant hunter to exact her revenge. When Webber drowns under suspicious circumstances shortly after his release, police interview Taryn but there is nothing to tie her to his death and the case is dropped.

Years later, when the publication of Taryn's first book, an examination of threats to libraries past and present, brings her to public attention, the past catches up with her.

First there are phone calls, wordless exchanges more eloquent than any verbal threat and which lead the authorities to reopen Webber's file. Then Taryn and



Jacob Berger, the detective assigned to tail her, are attacked by a demon and saved by the intervention of the half-human Swift, who sweeps them — and the story — into the realm of the Sidhe, the fairy folk of Celtic legend.

Although Swift is frustratingly reticent with information, Taryn slowly pieces together the broader events that have led her to this place, discovering that she and Jacob are caught up in conflict that stretches across worlds and time and that her involvement stretches back to childhood. Among her realisations is that rather than punish her for her sins, the demons are hunting a manuscript known as the Firestarter (a name acquired because it has survived the conflagration of at least six libraries), last seen in her grandfather's possession.

Swift, who wants the Firestarter for reasons of his own, enlists Taryn and Jacob's help to find it before Hell does, and Taryn finds herself on a quest through to purgatory and back in search of a

hidden treasure that will determine the fate of multiple worlds.

From its adoption and re-gendering of classic mythological narrative to its exploration of how language and memory shape and reshape the world, *The Absolute Book* contains far too much to cover in a brief review, and doing so would spoil the pleasure of their unveiling. Knox's delightfully wicked sense of humour is also clearly evident — those condemned to Purgatory are trapped by bureaucratic red tape and spend an inordinate amount of time waiting for trains — and she peppers the story with cultural, literary and mythological teasers for those in the know, including one or two specifically for a Kiwi audience. And although its physical and cultural roots are solidly European, the story includes enough of New Zealand to give a thrill of recognition to readers who still delight in seeing our country on the international stage.

At a more mundane level, I was also particularly struck by Knox's ability to bring a physical setting to life. My one reservation is that the epilogic final chapter felt unsettlingly abrupt, but this is as much because I wanted the story to continue as dissatisfaction at its convenient tidying up of ends. At a time when the world seems all too short on magic, I recommend *The Absolute Book* absolutely.

Cushla McKinney is a Dunedin scientist.