Novelist Isa Pearl Ritchie talks to Sarah Lang about how our views about food can border on the religious – and how she deals with her own illnesses.

Isa Pearl Ritchie, 34, was unwell for many years. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (also known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome), Depression, Anxiety, Insomnia, Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Food intolerances. To help improve her digestive symptoms and her overall health, she tried various elimination and reintroduction diets including low-FODMAP, which was difficult as it excludes lots of foods including legumes and many vegetables. 

‘After excluding certain foods, when I did eat them I reacted worse to them. So I reintroduced different foods really slowly – and now I eat everything. Though I try not to eat much crap, because then I feel horrible.’

Since age 12, Isa has had Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME), which currently has no cure and can only be managed, mainly by pacing yourself. ‘I couldn’t do lots of things. I had periods of time where I couldn’t get out of bed.’ Isa was a solo mother for many years to daughter Tesla (now 10). ‘When my daughter was young, I felt exhausted and guilty because I couldn’t play with her much.’ The ME has come and gone. ‘I have a bout of it then get better. I’m vigilant because it’s a delicate balance: eating, sunlight, exercise. But the main factor for me is stress.’

Isa, who now has another partner, manages her intermittent anxiety and depression better. ‘We have this false dichotomy between physical and mental illness, although the mind is part of the body. Let’s talk about mental illness as a physical thing.’ And, as a character in her novel asks, why isn’t nutrition part of mental-health treatment? ‘People are starting to talk about that, but doctors are dominant in our healthcare model and they don’t learn much about nutrition.’

Food and mental illness are dominant themes in Isa’s absorbing novel Fishing for Māui. Set in her hometown Hamilton, it’s told from the perspectives of nine very different narrators (focusing mainly on five characters) from a part-Māori family. Michael is getting in touch with his Māori heritage, smoking marijuana and eating pies. His vegan girlfriend Evie breaks into battery farms to set hens free. Michael’s nine-year-old sister Rosa feels neglected by her busy mother, Valerie: an overworked, slightly-overweight GP who eats low-fat food. Valerie’s other daughter, Elena, is heavily pregnant and obsessively blogging about unprocessed, full-fat and fermented foods.

Here’s Elena in full flight: ‘Now people are on a diet of processed crap, soy, corn flour and canola, white bread and white sugar. We’re clearly going to devolve if we carry on this way.’ Isa says her own changing views on food don’t mirror that of one single character, though she admits they’re closest to Elena’s. ‘Food has changed so much over the last century,’ Isa says, ‘but our biology has changed so little and our bodies haven’t adapted to all this processed food.’ Isa eats meat, but isn’t anti-vegan or anti-vegetarian like some of her characters. ‘It’s interesting that tensions come out over different perspectives on food. It’s almost a religious thing.’ Is Isa religious? ‘I come from a family of atheists and personally believe that people make religions out of all sorts of things, including atheism. Religion has too many rules for me, but I have my own weird views. I like Jungian synchronicity, the collective unconscious, analysing your dreams.’

As the novel progresses, it focuses more on Michael, who is treated in a mental-health unit for psychosis. ‘I wasn’t crazy; everything else
was,' he says. The novel was initially sparked by Isa’s observation of a family member’s experience of psychosis. ‘I talked to that person afterwards and their experience was so different from what everyone else thought it was. There’s shame around psychosis, because you “lose” your mind. People see psychosis as dangerous. They probably think of psycho-killers.’

In the book, Michael says racism in New Zealand is ‘tucked away in the corner of everyone’s vision. Some don’t want to see it’. Isa largely agrees. ‘Many people don’t believe there is racism in New Zealand and there is. It’s changing, but racism is so subtle and embedded that it’s often hard to spot.’

Isa, whose parents split when she was young, has a Māori stepfather. ‘I’m Pakeha by ancestry but my family is Māori, including four younger half-brothers and a step-sister my age.’ Te reo is her first language, and she went to kohanga reo (Māori early-childhood-education centres) and, initially, kura kaupapa (Māori-language immersion schools). In mainstream schooling, she struggled with English literacy. ‘Several teachers said I wasn’t creative.’

At the University of Waikato, she did a sociology Master’s degree on different discourses about nutrition. Moving to Raglan, she spent four years doing an anthropology PhD on food sovereignty through the lens of small-scale local food providers in Raglan, to explore food’s complex interconnectedness with social and political values and practices, and wealth and poverty. ‘Being picky about what we eat is a largely privileged thing.’ Now she can call herself Dr Ritchie.

Isa comes from a long line of academics. Her great-grandparents were well-known Wellington ethnographers Ernest and Pearl Ritchie (hence Isa’s middle name) – and Ernest’s brother was historian J C Beaglehole. Meanwhile Isa’s maternal grandparents James and Jane Ritchie were Waikato University professors, and her mother Jenny is an early-childhood researcher. Isa decided against a career in ‘exhausting’ academia.

In 2011, while studying, she began Fishing for Māui. She has kept the setting of Hamilton in 2011/2012, with mentions of iPods and the Occupy movement. Hamilton, she says, isn’t the boring bogan town that’s often the butt of jokes, with increasingly arty and alternative subcultures. ‘I like it more now than I used to,’ she jokes.

Three years ago, she moved to Wellington (where she had often visited her father) for a policy-analyst job at the Ministry for Primary Industries, and is now a policy adviser at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. All that time, she’s been intermittently writing and rewriting the novel. ‘My writing process is like gardening: often there’s nothing above the surface, and lots of composting time.’

Isa has self-published Fishing for Māui under her imprint Te Aroha Press. ‘Te Aroha is my Māori name, given to me by my adopted grandmother [a family friend] when I was 12. Many writers are self-publishing nowadays because the publishing industry is in disarray – dismantled by Amazon and so on. I did approach some publishers, who said this is good but not right for us now. Even then, I had this ideological issue with not necessarily the owning of my work but of owning information.’ Hers is the second novel ever to be published under a Creative Commons Aotearoa licence (meaning others can copy and distribute her work – provided they credit her, and on specified conditions).

In 2012, Isa self-published her first novel The Seekers’ Garden as a paperback and e-book, selling online only as she knew little about the industry. This time, publishing consultant Karen McKenzie (the book’s publicist) gave Isa useful information about how to find her own designer, typesetter, printer, and distributor.

Isa, who is working on a third novel, is excited and nervous about publishing Fishing for Māui. ‘I hope people see it’s about sharing different ways of being in and seeing the world. There’s no one right view.’