



By Jacqueline Owens

### A few things to ponder:

- 1) *Vividwater* has been described as a 'Jane Austen dystopia': a polite façade covers people competing for scant resources, only it's water, not material stability via husbands. Do you think this is accurate?
- 2) How close does the world of *Vividwater* seem to the world of today?
- 3) Alex does morally questionable, mean, and outright awful things – she feels conflicted, but she still does them. How do you feel about a main character who is not terribly good?
- 4) Alex Pym, the protagonist of *Vividwater*, is spiky, snarky, and envious. Do we need protagonists to be nice to enjoy a novel?
- 5) How realistic is the world of *Vividwater* – is it beyond what could happen, or are we sleepwalking into it?
- 6) A lot of dystopias are in worlds where civil society has broken down, but in *Vividwater* people are still acting like everything is normal. Is this more realistic?
- 7) What do you think is in store for Alex after the end of *Vividwater*?
- 8) Is Lawrence more sheltered than Alex? Does this make him more idealistic?
- 9) In *Vividwater*, race is used cynically to divide and rule AotearoaNZ – is this a realistic picture?
- 10) In *Vividwater*, despite some lip service and a few token programmes, gender equality hasn't advanced and class divides are worse. Is this inevitable in societies fighting for resources?



- 11) Being a mnemopath, a professional memory machine, is Alex's livelihood and her identity, but also a source of unhappiness. Does this ring true with your experience?
- 12) Many people with prodigious memories, like [Alexander Aitken](#) and Solomon Shereshevky, had unhappy lives in part due to their gifts. Is it better to have a good memory, or to be able to forget bad things?

If you have any further questions, please get in touch at: [Contact me – Vividwater](#)

## Alexander Aitken



The New Zealand mathematician, Alexander Aitkin, was educated at Otago University, graduating in Mathematics and Latin, before serving in World War I in his early 20s. He was known for his prodigious memory from his WWI days. Despite his gifts (he was also an accomplished violinist), his memory was a source of a lot of unhappiness: he had periods of depression, and was never able to forget what he had experienced in the trenches in northern France.

Te Ara, the Encyclopedia of New Zealand has [interesting articles](#) about Aitken.

Aitken's memoir of his WWI experiences is well worth reading:

[Gallipoli to the Somme: Recollections of a New Zealand Infantryman by Alexander Aitken and editor Alex Calder- Auckland University Press](#)

As are memoirs by the former Otago University mathematician, P C Fenton:

- [To Catch the Spirit - A C Aitken](#)
- [A Necessary Balance: Alec and Harry Aitken 1920-1935](#)

There's even a children's story about his violin: [anzac-violin-tn.pdf](#)

Narrated here: [The ANZAC Violin - Alexander Aitken's Story - Narrated by Lisa Shacklock](#)



## Solomon Shereshevsky



Shereshevsky is best known as the subject of *The Mind of a Mnemonist*, by the Russian psychiatrist Alexander Luria. Luria first met Shereshevsky, S in the book, in the 1920s when Shereshevsky was a 19-year-old journalist. Luria spent the next 30 years trying and failing to reach the limits of Shereshevsky's memory.

Unlike Aitken, who had a successful career as a Mathematics Lecturer at Edinburgh University, Shereshevsky's memory hampered his career. Being unable to forget anything made him unable to distinguish between vital information and trivia, and he drifted from job to job.

Luria's book on Shereshevsky, *The Mind of a Mnemonist: A little book about a vast memory*, lives up to the promise of its sub-title. It is an absorbing read:

[The Mind of a Mnemonist by Alexander R. Luria | Goodreads](#)