

# HELEN BROWN'S next CHAPTER

Long-standing *Next* columnist and now wildly successful author Helen Brown tells *Next* founding editor Lindsey Dawson why she's moving on

**I REALLY WANTED TO SIT IN** her local cafe in the colourful, raffish Melbourne suburb of Prahran, and talk and talk the way old friends do. But never mind. The phone's good. And I didn't need to ask her much, because I already know a lot of her story. Helen, my old friend, is suddenly becoming Helen my famous friend.

She probably feels like your friend, too, because she's been writing a column for *Next* since 1997, back in the days when I was editing this magazine.

This issue contains Helen's final column for *Next*, for now. She's moving on to bigger things because the whole world wants her now.

Her latest book, *Cleo: How an Uppity Cat Helped Heal a Family* (Allen & Unwin, \$32.99) is a runaway success story. And naturally, her publishers want more.

*Cleo* begins with Helen's first son Sam picking out a black, runty kitten from a litter. He was killed, at nine, before the kitten was big enough to become his. But wise Cleo saw the shattered family through major ups and downs for the next 23 years.

This one pet's appeal, demonstrating the healing power of all animals, has captured hearts everywhere.

I can 'hear' Helen grinning down the phone as I burble about her sudden fame – her story serialised, for instance, for the six million readers of the UK's *Mail on Sunday*. "Yeah, I'm a 30-year overnight success," she drawls.

Before moving to Australia in 1997 (her husband Philip Gentry had scored a banking job there), Helen had for a long time been working as a feature writer for New Zealand newspapers, and her weekly column was a fixture in eight provincial dailies.

"It's a craftsmanship really, I've always thought – not an art or a profession. I feel like someone who's picked away at a lot of bricks over the years and have tried to be true to myself and true to the readers.

"There is always some background noise about what people think you should be writing about. I suppose I've gone through phases of not being very fashionable because of that," Helen says.

Women's stories, especially those about domestic and everyday things, don't often get much respect in the literary world, so it's terrific to see Helen's writing doing so well.

We go back a few years. In the early 90s she was the force behind our legendary Tuesday lunches in Ponsonby. As a writer working from home she craved doses of company and conversation, so a bunch of us regularly rolled up to the fancy furniture store Rose and Heather, which offered ladylike tea and scones at lunchtimes. They must have dreaded those Tuesdays when the rowdy writing women, and a few brave men, set up such a gossipy racket.

We all traded news, but Helen's was more intriguing than most. She was at one stage a solo mum and we got to hear about the lovely younger man she'd just met (ooh!), and her winning of a three-month writing fellowship at Cambridge University (wow!). She went away, and then was emailing home about her wedding – to the same lovely man – on the shores of Lake Geneva (aaah!).

Home again, she came to Tuesday lunches in an increasingly rotund state. Pregnant again (wonderful!). When she interviewed the Dalai Lama he laid his hand upon her belly and blessed the baby. None of us could match that moment.

Helen had (still has) chutzpah. When she launched →

A new cat called Jonah (as in Lomu) entered Helen's life just after her mastectomy in 2008.



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1. Helen in her home library. 2. A treasured portrait of son Sam aged about eight. He died aged nine. 3. Brotherly fun; Rob and Sam. 4. Helen with Cleo in Melbourne.



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one of her books, *In Deep*, at an Auckland city store, she had herself carried in shoulder-high, bestowing mock royal waves over her cheering friends, borne on a litter by a quartet of grinning muscly men.

About five years ago, fending off stage fright, she toured New Zealand theatres in a one-woman show also based on her life and times. The show, *A Slice of Banana Cake*, made buckets of money for hospices around the country.

Given all of that, you'd think she'd be at ease with the publicity machine. Not really. "I keep getting invitations to speak but I'm not that desperate to do it. I found that one-woman show really draining."

But she'll need to keep doing it. In the UK, *Cleo* made the *Sunday Times* bestseller list for three weeks in hardback. Translations are spreading over Europe and heading for Russia, Turkey, Korea and China.

Distribution of her book in the US begins in September, and the Germans want Helen for an author tour in October.

"They regard it as 'an important book' there," she says in a voice that's a mixture of amazement and amusement.

But she has a cool head. Taranaki girls aren't easily impressed by razzamatazz. "I have the advantage of living very quietly. My life is pretty ordinary most of the time."

Plus, there are other realities – such as recently having a new nipple tattooed on her post-mastectomy reconstructed right breast. "Now there's a grounding experience."

All the same, her life has had some stellar weeks lately – such as a whistlestop tour to meet publishers in Lisbon, Istanbul and New York.

The highlight: An hour spent talking to teenagers at a Portuguese school. "Fortunately they spoke English. I looked at their faces and thought they're no different to kids I've talked to at my daughter Katharine's school, with just the same big issues in their lives."

I'm not surprised she got on well with them. Years ago we both happened to be involved in a writers' festival in



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New Plymouth. She talked inspirationally to local teens then too, urging them to "think huge".

Now, at 56, she's living huge. New Zealand wordsmiths are accustomed to getting a meagre few thousand dollars as an advance, if they manage to sell a manuscript at all. When Helen's book was auctioned in London, eager publishers pushed the bidding above £50,000 [\$108,000].

In this digital era, with books in the doldrums worldwide, that's news most writers can only dream about.

Helen has been turning out books for a long time. *Cleo* is her 10th, following in the footsteps of titles that include *Confessions of a Bride Doll* (1983), *Fresh Starts and Finishing Lines* (1990) and *From the Heart: Laughter, Loss and Living in Australia* (2001).

Despite that track record, it was a lack of confidence that led her to write a new book.

"I was ready to do something different. I went to a writing course one weekend and I was absolutely awestruck by the talent of everyone who was there.

"I already had this idea about *Cleo* and at the end of the weekend we had to write two paragraphs about a book idea. When I spoke about mine there was a sort of silence in the room. I thought, *Oh, this really could work.*"

Now readers are posting their own touching tales on Helen's website ([www.helenbrown.com.au](http://www.helenbrown.com.au)); stories about their felines – many other *Cleos*, plus a host of characters with funny names, such as Hercules, Licorice, Fonzy, Gizmo, Bob and Elroy.

There's a letter from London police officer Patrisia Portway, a 28-year veteran of one the city's roughest areas. She's currently 'Mum' to nine cats, "all of whom have been scooped up from drug dens or brothels, about to be →



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5. A proud Helen (far right) at son Rob's wedding to Chantelle.

6. A publicity shot for her one-woman show *A Slice of Banana Cake*.

7. Receiving a blessing from the Dalai Lama when six months pregnant with her youngest, Katharine.

8. Family portrait after Katharine's arrival.

9. Eldest daughter Lydia asleep with *Cleo*.



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thrown to pitbull terriers as a sport, or just abandoned at our station. I don't have it in me to turn them down."

Patrisia finished reading *Cleo* in her local Starbucks, crying so hard that a member of staff offered to call her husband, assuming she'd had an awful day. "Thank you for a truly fantastic read," writes the hardened and deeply moved cop. Bereaved parents are also posting grateful notes on Helen's website.

It's 27 years since Helen's son Sam, intent on carrying an injured bird to the vet, stepped out from behind a Wellington bus and was killed by a car. The passing of time didn't make that black day any easier to write about.

"There were bits I was wanting to gloss over, but I had a wonderful editor, Jude McGee, who sent me 15 pages of questions. 'And what happened then? How were you really feeling at this point?'"

"It wasn't as bad as living through it and it all happened a long time ago. I'm also so aware that it's happening to people every day. The wonderful thing is that the book does seem to be giving people hope."

As Helen worked at weaving her two marriages and three other children into the story, she was hit by another crisis – the discovery of a 6.6cm-wide cancerous growth in her breast. Mastectomy was her only option.

She stopped her newspaper columns then but in late 2008 was writing about her journey through surgery for *Next* readers and pushing on with *Cleo* when she could. "I can't be sick," I told the surgeon. "I've got a book to write!" "What's it about?" he asked. "Healing," I said. We both looked at each other wryly." Today her prognosis is good.

Helen's enjoying Melbourne now after a decade of being "desperately homesick". Her husband Philip is now CFO of the AWB. "When did we reduce life to acronyms?" she says with a laugh. Translation: Chief financial officer of the Australian Wheat Board.

They come home often and she doesn't think of the Kiwi-Oz divide as two countries. "I think of it as a region. I'll never lose my New Zealand mentality. I can't help it, and I don't want to. It is different from the Australian mentality but there's room for both."

Helen's younger son Rob and his wife Chantelle are expecting a baby in September – "a girl, called Annie at the moment". Elder daughter Lydia, 25, a devoted Buddhist, is doing her masters in psychology. Katharine, 17, is not a Buddhist, despite the in-utero blessing from the Dalai Lama, and wants to study medicine.

The century-old family home is called Shirley, according to the brass plaque at the front door. "Philip said, 'I'm not going to live in a house called Shirley!' But she's a very forgiving old girl. She has a desert of a garden that I am trying to improve. There's an apple tree out the front that rainbow lorikeets come and sit in."

Ruling over all, of course, is another cat. "He's a dysfunctional Siamese named Jonah, as in Lomu. My sister Mary found him in a pet shop while she was nursing me after the mastectomy.

"I'd sworn I'd never have another cat, but he's very vain and funny, helped hugely with the writing of *Cleo*, and has turned out to be a healer in his own right."

Taking care of fitness requires a "personal torturer" who comes over twice a week. "And I walk every day. It's how I research, mulling things over as I go for a walk."

Her next book is already taking shape in her head. "The publishers want some kind of sequel. They want the story to continue. But I would dearly love also to write about growing up in Taranaki."

"But surely you could sell that only in New Zealand?" I said. "No," comes the reply. "I think it could be an anywhere book. Tell a story that people want to read and it doesn't matter where it's set."

See? It's about thinking huge. **N** *Next* sincerely thanks Helen for the joy she's brought to our readers over the past 13 years, and wishes her well. Read Helen's last column on page 144.

**RIGHT:** The book that has earned Helen worldwide recognition. *Cleo*, the star of the story, had a profound healing effect on the family after the death of nine-year-old Sam.



PHOTOGRAPHS JAMES BRAUND, TARANAKI DAILY NEWS AND SUPPLIED MAKEUP HAYLEY MAC STYLING INDIE FOORD

## OTHER BOOKS BY HELEN BROWN

As well as witty social commentary, Helen has perfected the art of from-the-heart autobiographical writing in some of her nine books that preceded *Cleo*. She's already planning her next book, which she would like to base on her childhood in Taranaki.

