



The launch of Helen Brown's latest book, ***After Cleo: Came Jonah*** provided an opportunity for deputy editor **Grant Shimmin** to catch up on the latest chapters in Brown's life.

One more cat, one more chapter in family's story

For someone who's only a couple of years removed from writing an international bestseller, and has what seems certain to be another hitting the shelves, Helen Brown sounds remarkably grounded when we talk on the phone.

No different, in truth, from our first interview shortly after the release of *Cleo*, which according to her publishers, has now sold 500,000 copies worldwide.

Not that she's indifferent to the phenomenal success of the book about the kitten that entered their lives in the dreadful aftermath of her son Sam's tragic death, and helped to bring healing.

"It's crazy," she laughs when that impressive sales figure is brought up. "I can still hardly believe what happened with it." The sequel, *After Cleo: Came Jonah*, deals at some length with the process of writing that book, the struggle to find a publisher and her doubts about its potential appeal.

There's a delightfully humorous line early on in the book, when she describes how she and her husband Philip have just purchased a new home at auction, going well beyond their agreed limit, and are wondering how they'll find the money.

"Maybe you'll write a bestseller," he says.

Of course, when she wrote that line, *Cleo* was already well on the way to that status.

"It was fun to write that," Brown says. "But then, he's always said: 'Don't you worry, you'll write a bestseller one day.'" Plainly, she never quite believed him.

So does she feel different as a writer now, having achieved that?

"No," she says. "I've done it for too long," a reference to 30 years of writing a weekly column, which the *Timaru Herald* carried until she put it on hold to write *Cleo*.

She indirectly attributes some of her newfound success to the provincial editors who dropped her column, as some did.

She says they "did me a favour", preventing her from becoming "too comfortable" to go the book route.

"I think if I was 25, [writing a best-seller] might have had a different effect on me," Brown says.

But after "a long apprenticeship, and a lot of knocks", she's not about to go letting the book she calls "a 30-year overnight success" give her delusions of grandeur. "I want to keep on learning," she says.

In fact it took a long time for her to come to the decision to write a sequel. *After Cleo* is the book she was adamant she would never write about the new cat she was never going to get.

"I swore I'd never write another book. It's just that life takes over," she says. Constant questions from people about what had happened to people like her younger son, Rob, beyond the *Cleo* story, helped push her to the point where she decided "maybe I'll do it again".

But not without some doubts.

"The nerve-racking thing about a sequel is that you're worried you'll let people down," she says.

Plainly, though, she had another story she really wanted to tell.

Yes, it's about Jonah, the new cat which was such a help to her in writing about his predecessor, but as with *Cleo*, it's also about momentous events within her family, in this case her own encounter with breast cancer

and her daughter Lydia's decision to leave Melbourne for a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka.

"I always thought I was spiritual, but a Buddhist nun, that's a whole new packet of incense! It really challenged me," she says.

Recounting the latter story has required a lot of honesty on her own part in the book. Being a columnist for three decades was good training, she says. "I don't mind sharing my own faults".

But such a memoir also "requires great generosity from your family".

With *Cleo*, it was Rob, so traumatised by the death of his beloved big brother, who she had to get to read the manuscript, because she was telling his story.

"In this book, it's even more exposing for Lydia," she says. "Some of our battles are depicted there.

"I hoped to write it with enough space around it so people could identify with her as well as me," she says.

It helps that Brown clearly sees something of her youthful self in Lydia, though a large chunk of that recognition has come in hindsight.

The rebellious teenager-anxious mother dynamic is also present in her recalling of her battles with her own mother, when she'd decided to run off and get married at 18.

"The delight of it all is that she's started writing the rebuttal. She's even asked to see my chapter outlines," Brown says.

Her encounter with breast cancer is not only a key thread to the new book, but a strong inspiration for its writing.

"I wanted to write about breast cancer in a way that made it a book you could give to someone who had it," she



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explains, "because my prognosis is good.

"It's heartening to read about someone getting well.

"Of course it's not always a good outcome, but it's good to focus on that." So what about the young man whose name is in the title, named after All Black Jonah Lomu, no less?

Though it's clear he's a lot more temperamental than Cleo – he still has to be kept inside because of the business of the streets around the family's home in inner city Melbourne – there's no doubt he has a gentler side.

"He was a great comfort, he always seemed to know when I was down," Brown recalls of her recovery.

"He loves it when someone's sick, then he's nurse Jonah."

His behaviour clearly swings to the

opposite extreme fairly regularly, however, including going missing on the day of the launch of *Cleo*.

Jonah's "outrageous behaviour" and Lydia's free-spiritedness have left a lasting mark on Brown.

"Between the two of them, they helped change my definition of love. It's a lot more about acceptance and letting go," she says.

I don't get around to asking if she's thinking about a third book. It's probably too soon for that.

But maybe, as she keeps learning, life might just take over again. Or the questions from the readers she is so devoted to will make it inevitable.

■ *After Cleo: Came Jonah*, Helen Brown. Allen and Unwin, \$35.



The boys: Helen's husband Philip with Jonah



Meet Jonah: Author Helen Brown and Jonah, the inspiration for her latest book, *After Cleo: Came Jonah*.

Photo: JAMES BRAUND