



The love of a cat

Best selling author Helen Brown will be in New Plymouth at the end of the month promoting her new work. The former Taranaki woman tells how she handles fame.

One of the most common questions I'm asked is if writing two international best sellers has changed my life.

The answer depends on what I'm doing at the time. If I'm blinking under false eyelashes in a television studio, lunching in Paris with my UK publisher or signing books for a queue of surprisingly ardent fans in Vienna, I say yes. Being author of *Cleo* and then *After Cleo Came Jonah* has metamorphosed me from middle-aged housewifedom into an astonished global superstar (well, sort of).

Ask me on another day when mysterious clouds of dust are floating through the down lights in the living room ceiling (due to the attic space being lined by a nice Kiwi builder the previous day). Or Jonah the cat has spread the contents of his litter tray over the laundry floor. Or I'm worried sick about one of our (technically grown up) kids. Then the answer is different. My life hasn't changed one bit.

As with all things, the truth's somewhere in the middle. While

my German publishers have invited me to the Frankfurt Book Fair in September, and the Americans want me to stay in New York for a month next April to launch *After Cleo Came Jonah* over there, my priorities haven't budged. Husband and family's still top of the agenda – and I reserve the right to walk to the letterbox in my dressing gown (even though these days the occasional literary tourist has been known to peer over the fence).

I might've taken things more seriously had success tapped on the door when I was in my 20s. Egos are gullible at that age. Having it happen in my 50s after a brush with breast cancer has been an incredible surprise. An overnight success, some call it.

But 30 years of column writing for New Zealand newspapers was a solid apprenticeship. Readers were always quick to let me know what worked for them. Many became lifelong friends, and I'm looking forward to catching up with some of them later this month when I'm back home in New Plymouth to talk about *After Cleo Came Jonah*. Even though I live in Melbourne these days, I

carry New Zealand and its people in my heart. It will always be home.

On my last trip to Vienna, I kept a pebble from Mt Egmont in my pocket. The only way I could hold my nerve standing in a sumptuous concert hall where Mozart had performed was to clutch that little rock and know the mountain had given permission for me to be there.

The main emotion I've experienced having *Cleo* sell half a million copies around the world and translated into 17 languages (last count) is gratitude.

Even then, it's not the same level of thankfulness experienced when a surgeon says she got it all and the prognosis is good.

■ Helen Brown is the author of *Cleo: How a small black cat helped heal a family* and *After Cleo Came Jonah: How a crazy kitten and a rebelling daughter turned out to be blessings in disguise* (Allen & Unwin). Helen Brown will be speaking at Benny's Books at 5pm, Wednesday, May 30. Contact Benny's Book for more information on 06 759 4350.





Best seller: Former Taranaki woman and *Daily News* columnist Helen Brown who has penned two international best sellers.

