

HELEN BROWN

We had the privilege of asking a few questions to Helen Brown, international best-selling author, columnist, TV presenter and scriptwriter, on her new book...

What were the challenges you faced writing fiction for the first time?

After a couple of international best sellers in nonfiction, fear of failure in a new field is inevitable, I guess. The prospect of inventing a plot and characters out of thin air was terrifying to begin with. But as months went by, the characters sharpened into focus and started running the story themselves.

What were your sources of inspiration behind *Tumbledown Manor*?

When I was growing up, Dad used to tell stories of a grand house near Castlemaine that his mother lived in as a young woman. He had hardly any family so I assumed his imagination was running away on him - till one day he dug out some old photos from the bottom of a cardboard box. The house really did exist and it was beautiful.

Dad's long gone, but a couple of years ago, Philip and I drove out to Castlemaine. I'd been on tour in the US and was feeling tired and dislocated. We stopped outside the house (which by the way wasn't looking at all tumbledown). Basking in the afternoon sun, it felt like a connection to Dad and the people who went before him. I said to Philip "Thank God it's not on the market. I'd want to buy it on the spot."

How does the story reflect your past and present private life?

Several of my women friends went on roller coaster rides in their 40s

and 50s. Husbands have walked out on them, their health has gone off the rails or they've been fired from jobs they've loved. It's all happened around the time teenage kids were playing up and elderly parents were making demands.

I've sat in cafes with them and wondered if they'd ever get through it all. But a few years on, most of these women are grateful for the tough time they went through. It forced them to reinvent themselves. Rejection can be the greatest gift.

These are the women I wanted to honour with Lisa's story in *Tumbledown Manor*.

Tumbledown Manor tells a story of Lisa who leaves a tumbling life and arrives at a crumbling house. What was the biggest adversity you have ever faced in life and how did you emerge better out of it?

Losing my nine year old son Sam was by far the hardest thing. He was run over and killed back in 1983. Our family imploded and there was no grief counseling. I thought I'd never recover.

At the time I was writing a weekly column in Wellington, New Zealand, and some of the best support was from readers. A few wrote in saying they'd also lost a child and managed to survive. Some had even managed to find joy in life again.

Three decades later, I sat down to record our tragedy in a way that might have potential to help others. I wove our story around a small black cat we had at the time. To my



astonishment, Cleo became a New York Times best seller and is in 17 languages. I continue to be deluged with emails from around the world. No matter where people live, they all suffer the same joys and losses. To help others, even in just a small way, is the most rewarding thing a writer can do.

Your books seem inspired much from your personal experiences and family life. Tell us about one comedic moment in your life you'll never forget.

When my first book, a collection of newspaper columns, was published back in 1981, I was very excited to be asked to a book signing in Palmerston North. It was a wet Friday night and there was a rugby game on somewhere (never a good omen in New Zealand).

The bookseller set up a table in the back of the shop and smothered it with gleaming new copies. Pulling up a chair, I glanced around the shop. It was empty. I was the only attendee at my own book signing.

After what seemed like hours, a man appeared. He shook the rain off his coat and approached furtively. I could've kissed him when he picked up a copy said he'd buy it. I asked if he'd like a dedication but he insisted just my signature would do.

I handed him the signed copy and said I hoped he'd enjoy reading it. "Oh I won't be reading it," he said. "I just collect signed copies of books and wait till the author dies."

Tell us something about the book that the reader will not know.

The cat in Tumbledown Manor is based on one I fostered in New York for six weeks last year. Bono was a half wild lunatic who couldn't find a home because he had kidney disease.

I became deeply attached and started blogging about him on Huffington Post. Hundreds of messages came in saying how cute he was, but nobody would adopt him. My heart ached at the thought of returning him to the shelter. I thought about bringing him back to Melbourne, but the quarantine restrictions were daunting.

The week before I flew back to Australia, a wonderful woman climbed the steps to my apartment to meet him. When Bono finally stopped hiding and trotted out from under the bed, the bond between them was electric. He now lives on bottled water and has a seven-story cat tower to play on.

What is a typical day like for a full time writer like yourself?

The writing months are like Antarctic winters. Friendships go on hold, and Philip begins to wonder if he married a werewolf.

I begin the day with coffee from Spoonful across the road in High Street, and maybe a walk. My personal trainer, Stephen, comes to the house three times a week. Stephen's great. Over the years he's helped me lose weight and bounce back from a mastectomy. He laughs at my bad jokes. I've trained him to tell me about his life so he can't make me do too much exercise.

After that, our insane cat Jonah bullies me into my study. He likes to sit on my lap while I work. On a good day I'll write close to 1,000 words – but only after I've deleted half of what I wrote the day before.

Philip arrives home around 7.30 knowing I probably haven't cooked anything. Anyone who lives with a writer deserves a gold medal. We might go to a movie or a play at Red Stitch theatre. But usually we go to bed early to keep the cat happy. He leaps on the bed and nestles between Philip's legs so he has to sleep on his back all night.

How has the publishing industry changed since the emergence of the digital world?

Most publishers are less willing to take risks with experimental literature and first time novels (I was lucky with Tumbledown Manor). Some writers take it personally, but publishers are just like anyone else. If they publish a string of commercial flops they'll be out on the street.

It takes a lot of skill to write for a wide audience. If a book's commercial, people are reading it. I have no problem with that.

It's tough out there but there'll always be people who love the touch and smell of real books. I'm one of them.

What advice do you have for young aspiring writers wanting to make a mark in Australia's publishing world?

Learn the craft. Go to writing classes or (without expecting to find a job after it) journalism school. Read books about structure and character

development. Become an observer. Take notes on the tram. Never stop learning. There will always be greater writers than you. That said, only one can write your story in your voice.

Toughen up. Thrive on rejection. Stick with it.

What are you reading at the moment?

I always keep a collection of Mary Oliver poems on my bedside table. Her nature poems are wise and deep, a reminder humans aren't the most important thing on earth.

A young Melbourne newcomer who's making a big splash internationally is graphic designer Thomas Pavitte. His dot to dot books of famous people and landmarks take pride of place everywhere from Tate Modern's bookshop in London to high end art shops in New York.

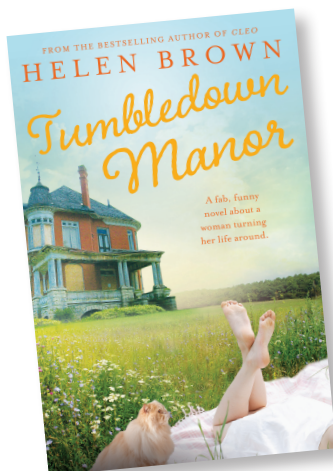
Any plans for the future?

In between helping South Pacific Pictures with their latest draft of Cleo the movie, I'm dreaming up a novel based on the women friends I've made in Vienna. I spend a lot of time travelling these days and Vienna has become a bit of a soul home. Those women are fantastically empowered – and they know how to party.

Helen Brown is the author of Tumbledown Manor, published by Allen and Unwin. Tumbledown Manor will be available in September at \$29.99.

TUMBLEDOWN MANOR

BY HELEN BROWN



Life's going down the gurgler for romance writer Lisa Trumperton. The deadline for her next novel is looming, her daughter won't eat but has a new tattoo each week, and now her Wall Street trader husband has run off with a woman at work.

Lisa makes a quick escape, home to Australia, where at least her girl-magnet son seems to be making hay. Determined to grow older disgracefully, she turns her back on a trim and tidy townhouse that is close to shops, aged-care providers and her bossy older sister, instead buying a grand old house in the country that once belonged to her great-grandfather.

But like its new owner, Trumperton Manor has seen better days. Crumbling, filthy and possibly haunted, the old house defies Lisa's attempts to restore it. Add flood, fire and family secrets, plus a stray cat with attitude and an overly familiar handyman, and the cracks begin to show.

Richly observed and laugh-out-loud funny, Tumbledown Manor is for anyone who believes it's never too late for a makeover.

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