

Helen of Taranaki

A New Plymouth old girl was back in town recently, speaking to a mainly female audience about something that would have equally benefited men - how to deal with life.

I'm typical of the men who didn't attend, probably.

When I bought Helen Brown's first book, *Cleo*, nearly a decade ago I put it down after one page because it seemed to be about cute cats.

As she reminded me at the New Plymouth launch of *Bono: The rescue cat who helped me find my way home*, "it's a metaphor, Jim", stopping short of adding "for crissakes, man", which she would never do in public but might in that playfully intelligent way she has in social discourse.

Helen Brown is one of Taranaki's most successful literary progenies, ever. She's a *New York Times*-acclaimed bestseller and has now produced many books, some fiction, some non. Her insights into life's challenges are incisive but not cruel. You'd need to be sociopathic not to be deeply affected by her account in *Cleo* of having a child run down and killed a few metres from home.

She has that rare ability to produce what seems simple prose, the kind readers devour easily without noticing its actual technical mastery (sorry, mistressy).

I was taken aback when she emailed before her book tour and asked if I would speak at her "home" stop, Poppies Bookshop. Why me? You played an important part in my life. Uh, oh. You're in *Cleo*, remember, and now they're making it into a movie and your part's even bigger, although you're in Wellington, not Auckland.

Obligation rose like a swallowed plum stone - I had to admit my reading of *Cleo* was a non-event, and I hadn't even contemplated buying part two of what is now a trilogy, the one about another cat, *Jonah*.

As an aside, I'm a cat person. Mum had Abyssinians. Our final cat travelled the length of the country with us in the campervan. Oddly, as Helen herself observes, she's more a dog person, and owned one when the terrible/wonderful *Cleo* arrived in her emotionally crushed household shortly after son Sam's death.

Anyway, the admission had to be made: I haven't read *Cleo*. Surely someone who's read all your books should speak. No, you're it, says Helen. Okay. I still have *Cleo* on my iPad via Kindle. Well, says Helen, there is someone in the book who resembles you quite strongly.

I tried to keep my enflamed ego in check, reading a quarter of the book before finally giving in and running a search on *Auckland Star*, then *Sunday Star*. Nothing. I was forced to browse ahead, and found I was there in actual name (for crissakes).



That was the only thing I recognised. I'm cast as a smiling, helpful boss whose only gentle demand was she produce evocative feature stories, as well as something virtually impossible for feature writers, editorials. Called "instant wisdom" in those days, they are the paper's sterile corporate view of the world's issues, whereas features demand humanity and feeling.

My aim was something I may not have explained to Helen at the time, but which she picked up instinctively. By the time my white knuckles gripped the *Auckland Star's* helm, I couldn't help but perceive the parlous state of women's influence at the sharp ends of daily newspapering. After all, I'd been trained by the *Taranaki Herald's* June Litman and later worked for the even more legendary Jean Wishart, editor of one of the world's most successful family magazines, *NZ Woman's Weekly*, secretly read by many men.

Helen became one of the country's first regular woman editorial writers at a major news outlet. An everyday thing today, of course, as it should be, but novel, then, and maybe more than a little threatening to the good old boys.

It was a useful theme for the brief talk I gave at Poppies. The audience seemed to appreciate it. Many remembered those days, I suspect, and how much had yet to be achieved then. Still a way to go, I think, given most Kiwi men may be guilty of judging the enlightening work of the Helen Browns in the same way I inexcusably did when I looked at the kitten photo on the cover of *Cleo* and made an egregious judgement.

I'm still reading *Cleo*. There's a lot of wisdom to absorb from it. And there's a couple more cats to go. Better late than never, Helen.