

Creature comforts

Writer HELEN BROWN reveals how the healing powers of fabulous felines changed her life in times of strife

CATS have a habit of padding into my life when I need them. Mickey the grey tabby polydactyl was no exception.

As a 12-year-old in provincial New Zealand, I felt fat, confused and virtually friendless. Neither a child nor yet a teenager, I hovered between worlds. My ambitions of becoming a ballerina were disappearing faster than Mum's sponge cake off my plate.

With gloriously eccentric parents engrossed in their own dramas inside our dilapidated wooden castle, I embarked on a desperate quest for connection. Options were minimal.

Another round of eye surgery offered a promise of parental attention and time off school (which I loathed). Sometimes, I simply wanted to vanish with the fairies who shimmered down my bedroom wallpaper at night.

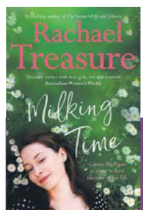
Looking back, I now realise the transition from childhood to adolescence is one of life's most challenging. Like many 12-year-olds, I needed help. In today's world, I'd have probably been diagnosed as suffering emotional dysregulation and anxiety with a dash of dyslexia. My parents would no doubt have given me a smartphone. I'd have snatched it up and disappeared into an addictive labyrinth of heightened insecurities.

Back in 1966, when phones were firmly attached to walls, my father tried something different. He presented me with a stray kitten from the town gasworks he managed. The moment the scrawny tabby gazed up at me, I experienced a visceral shift.

This beautiful, half-wild creature was just as lost and lonely as I was. As I lowered my hand to touch his forehead, a powerful emotion surged through me. For the first time, I experienced love for something beyond myself. I christened him Mickey.

Caring for Mickey taught me more than any artificial intelligence could ever do. The feline's calm presence offered the

unconditional love I craved. Through him I experienced the flow of give and take involved



Check out our Book Of The Month, Rachael Treasure's *Milking Time*. You can get it for 30 per cent off the RRP \$34.99 by using the code TREASURE at Booktopia. Offer ends May 31. Paperback edition only.



Feline friend: Helen Brown writes about the transition from childhood to adolescence in *Mickey: The Cat Who Helped Me Through Times Of Change*.

in any friendship. He taught me to read his mood by the twitch of a whisker, the flick of an ear.

Our relationship was complicated by the fact Mum hated cats. Hiding him from her in a makeshift cabin under the house only strengthened our bond. Mickey was someone to talk to. He listened without judgement. He also became something to talk about, enhancing my tenuous connection with other kids.

He was a role model, too. A sedentary child, I had no interest in outdoorsy stuff. When Mickey scaled the tree beside our letterbox, however, I had to climb after him. Perched on a branch below him, I discovered the delights of surveying the street from a leafy fortress.

After a while, Mickey and I began communicating on a psychic wavelength.

Humans are wired to create bonds of trust with other living creatures. Our dependence on the hyper-reality inside our phones is eroding those abilities. Pets and other creatures remind us to tune into our animal selves, to observe nature and tune into subtle energies.

Mickey was the first of several cats to guide me through challenging times. Three weeks after my nine-year-old son Sam was run over and killed in 1983, a small black kitten appeared on our doorstep. Little Cleo brought laughter and optimism to our grief-ravaged household. Fast forward

to 2008 when, after my mastectomy, an outrageous Siamese kitten called Jonah exploded into our lives. Jonah is flossing his teeth on the edge of my computer screen as I write this, urging me to stop typing and live in the "meow".

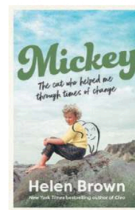
A few years later, in the throes of a midlife crisis, I flew to New York to foster a rescue cat, Bono. While trying to find Bono a home through a Huffington Post blog, I learnt where I belonged – with beloved family back in Australasia.

Melbourne University psychology lecturer Dr Lydia Brown says science has yet to uncover the full picture when it comes to the healing power of animals. However, one study found that classroom visits from a therapy dog were more effective than relaxation classes in reducing stress hormones over a school term.

"Having a pet can add to stress and financial pressure," she says. "But they can also bring joy and teach us to live a present and meaningful life away from the screen."

I hope *Mickey: The Cat Who Helped Me Through Times Of Change* will encourage parents to consider choosing a kitten for their child before they hand out a smartphone. Animals help teach us to be better humans.

Mickey: The Cat Who Helped Me Through Times Of Change by Helen Brown, published by HarperCollins, is out now.



THIS WEEK'S TOP SELLERS

FICTION

1. **King Of Sloth**, Ana Huang, Hachette, \$22.99
2. **Funny Story**, Emily Henry, Viking, \$34.99
3. **My Favourite Mistake**, Marian Keyes, Michael Joseph, \$34.99
4. **Only The Brave**, Danielle Steel, Macmillan, \$32.99
5. **A Calamity Of Souls**, David Baldacci, Macmillan, \$34.99
6. **Private Monaco**, James Patterson and Adam Hamdy, Century, \$34.99
7. **A Court Of Thorns And Roses**, Sarah J Maas, Bloomsbury, \$22.99
8. **Red River Road**, Anna Downes, Affirm Press, \$34.99
9. **Fourth Wing**, Rebecca Yarros, Hachette, \$24.99
10. **Iron Flame**, Rebecca Yarros, Hachette, \$32.99

NON-FICTION

1. **Wholesome By Sarah**, Sarah Pound, Plum, \$44.99
2. **RecipeTin Eats: Dinner**, Nagi Maehashi, Macmillan, \$44.99
3. **Sister Viv**, Grantlee Kieza, ABC Books, \$35.99
4. **Atomic Habits**, James Clear, Random House Business, \$36.99
5. **The Simple Dinner Edit**, Nicole Maguire, Plum, \$39.99
6. **\$10 Meals With Chelsea**, Chelsea Goodwin, Ebury, \$36.99
7. **Air Fryer Queen**, Steph De Sousa, AWW Cookbooks, \$29.99
8. **Love Life**, Matthew Hussey, Thorsons, \$34.99
9. **Ikigai**, Héctor García and Francesc Miralles, Hutchinson, \$27.99
10. **Surrounded By Idiots**, Thomas Erikson, Vermilion, \$24.99

KIDS

1. **The Scarlet Shedder (Dog Man 12)**, Dav Pilkey, Scholastic, \$19.99
2. **Powerful**, Lauren Roberts, Simon & Schuster, \$22.99
3. **Bluey: What Would Bluey's Mum Do?**, Puffin, \$14.99
4. **Powerless**, Lauren Roberts, Simon & Schuster, \$24.99
5. **Bowerbird Blues**, Aura Parker, Scholastic Press, \$19.99
6. **Bluey: At The Beach**, Puffin, \$5.99
7. **Taylor Swift (Little People, Big Dreams)**, Maria Isabel Sanchez Vegara, Frances Lincoln, \$19.99
8. **Bluey: My Mum Is The Best**, Puffin, \$16.99
9. **Bluey: Little Library**, Puffin, \$9.99
10. **Bluey: Bus**, Puffin, \$14.99

Source: Nielsen BookScan