



15 JUL, 2024

'CATS ARE MY LUCKY CHARMS'

NZ Womens Weekly, Auckland

Exclusive

Helen's purr-fect pals 'CATS ARE MY LUCKY CHARMS'

With the help of some beloved felines, the Kiwi writer triumphed over tragedy

Author Helen Brown has endured more than her fair share of heartache. In 1983, the mum-of-four lost her son Sam to a road accident in Wellington when he was just nine years old. Shortly after, a cat came into Helen's life and inspired her to write *Cleo*, the *New York Times* bestselling book about the cat that helped her grieving family heal.

Many years later, having relocated to Melbourne, Helen, 70, was recovering from a mastectomy when another feline entered her life. Bursting with character, Jonah became the star of her next bestseller. "Cats have tended to come to me at moments in my life when I've needed nothing more than a cat, even though at the time I've thought a cat is the

last thing I need," she says. "Dear Cleo came to me just three weeks after Sam was killed; Jonah arrived four weeks after I'd had a mastectomy, and Mickey stepped into my life when I was 12 years old and feeling utterly lost."

That was back in the 1960s when Helen was growing up in New Plymouth. She was at that

awkward age between childhood and adulthood. Simply called *Mickey*, this heartwarming tale is sure to be as popular as Helen's previous feline memoirs, which have sold millions of copies around the world.

But the book isn't simply about a cat – it's a love letter to Helen's parents: Her magnificent mother with her penchant for cigarettes and musical theatre, and her affectionate father with his abiding love for his family, Mount Taranaki and natural gas. It's also a fond portrait of her siblings Jim and Mary, and the extraordinary house they shared. A gothic, multi-storey mansion overrun by nature, it's a character in its own right.

Helen is forever grateful to her dad, a keen amateur photographer, for helping conjure her memories when writing *Mickey*.

"I was writing during Covid, stuck in my study day after day," she recalls. "On the walls, I had some of Dad's old colour slides printed out. His images are so vivid and powerful, it was as if they came to life and became more real and vibrant to me than reality. At that time, I felt completely disconnected from the world, which is exactly how I felt when I was 12, so it was easy to draw on those feelings and memories from childhood."



'It's as if cats come from a different world, how they observe and decide'

awkward age between childhood and adulthood.

"I had no sense of identity and very few friends, then my father found Mickey at the local gasworks where he was the manager."

A tiger-striped stray, Mickey was the last in a litter of wild cats the local poisoner had failed to dispatch. The kitten had one gummy eye, an extra toe on each paw and was in need of a good feed.

"Dad said an extra toe made a cat lucky and that old sailors used to love polydactyl cats because they believed their ship would never sink with one of these fellows on board."

As it turned out, Mickey was lucky. Once he learned to trust his new human, he became a source of unconditional love. As wise as he was affectionate, Mickey is the inspiration for Helen's latest book.



PHOTOS: GINA FABISH; HAIR & MAKE-UP: JACQUELINE MCFADYEN.



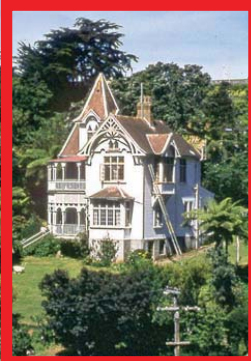
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With Mum and siblings Jim and Mary in the living room of their house on the hill (right).



Left: Beloved Mickey got Helen through a rough patch growing up.



Helen attributes her abiding affection for cats to their approach to life.

“It’s as if they come from another world, how they observe and decide what they want from a friendship. There’s also a lot of give and take, especially with a stray. Mickey taught me how to love, how to tune into subtle energies and how to look after something outside myself.”

Despite all she’s been through, Helen is content with where she’s at today. She has two grandchildren in Sydney and another pair living closer to home in Melbourne. Her husband Philip is a source of support.

“When you’ve lost a child and had two cancer scares, you learn to live more passionately,” she explains. “Even though I felt some trepidation about the intensity of this book tour, I saw people I’ve not seen in years and met my wonderful readers. I wanted to make the most of it!”

Elisabeth Easter

Mickey by Helen Brown (HarperCollins, rrp \$39.99)



PHOTOS: GINA FABISH - HAIR & MAKE-UP: JACQUELINE MCFADYEN.