

## Reading Group Questions

To what extent is this a personal journey of recovery?

What roles do pets have in an age of technology and splintering families?

Has the book changed how you might behave toward someone experiencing grief?  
If so, in what ways?

Is a cat person born or created?

Which character do you most empathise with and why?

How important is spirituality in this story?

## Extended Author Biography

Helen Brown was born and brought up in New Zealand. After attending school in New Plymouth she studied journalism in Wellington where she became a cadet reporter with *The Dominion*. After meeting and marrying a Brit, Helen lived in England briefly before returning to New Zealand and having two sons, Sam and Rob. She became a popular columnist for *The Dominion* and her first book had just been published when Sam was run over and killed. In the terrible aftermath of Sam's death, Cleo came into the family's life, helping them begin to heal.

After the birth of her daughter, Lydia, Helen's marriage broke up and she moved to Auckland to work for the *Auckland Star* as a feature writer and columnist. Helen met and married Philip Gentry in 1991. Their family, including their young daughter, Katharine, (not to mention Cleo) moved en masse to Melbourne in 1997, though Helen continues to write columns for the New Zealand media, where she's been voted Columnist of the Year several times.

## Helen Brown on writing Cleo

Snapshots of Cleo and our family often appeared in my newspaper column over thirty years. The articles were always 750 words and it never occurred to me they could form the backbone of something larger. The only thing that kept me writing columns for so long was the wonderful response from readers. Some readers have become quite close friends, even though I've never met them. They've helped me through some of my rougher patches. In return, some have approached me when facing major turning points in their own lives. Readers were quick to let me know through letters, and later by email, if they'd enjoyed something I'd written. The columns people loved most were ones about our family, and of course Cleo. When Cleo finally died at the age of twenty-three my inbox was flooded with commiserations and people wanting to share stories about their own pets.

When a friend suggested I write a book about Cleo I thought he was joking, but she'd been such a huge part of our lives it seemed right to pay her homage beyond the daphne bush we'd planted over her grave. I was about halfway through the book when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. When I told the surgeon I was too busy writing a book to be sick she asked what it was about. Healing, I told her. We both smiled. Nothing focuses the mind like working on a book that may be the last you have the opportunity to write.

A few weeks after I arrived home from hospital, I looked at the Cleo manuscript and was appalled. It was too bleak and self pitying. I deleted about half of what I'd written and started again. Later on, Jude McGee, a wonderful publisher at Allen and Unwin, encouraged me to revisit some of the emotional darkness. Sitting down at the computer on those days was like having root canal work without anaesthetic, but it was essential to portray the depths a grieving parent can plunge to. How else would it be possible to appreciate the light? I have

always felt a debt to grieving parents who wrote to me after Sam's death. Their letters were like flags waving across a stormy sea. We survived, they said, and so can you. I hope Cleo will go some way to repaying that debt and perhaps help others facing similar trauma. The book is also a tribute to the healing power of animals. Humans often overlook the unwavering loyalty and love pets provide.

P.S. I've just had my twelve-month check up and been given the green light.