



Blanche d'Alpuget opens the door of her central Sydney apartment smiling, her eyes shining if a little sad. As she walks, her hand automatically goes to shield her stomach. Her head is also protected, clad in a baby-blue skull cap, and wisps of hair escape at the back of her neck.

"I didn't go completely bald, but it fell out in great clumps, particularly on this side, the same side as the cancer," she tells *Stellar*, pointing towards her left ear. "I immediately went out and bought a wig, but you do that as a reassurance. I've never worn it. I only wear the skull cap."

It has been a hell of a year for the 76-year-old, who barely nine months after the death of the love of her life, former prime minister Bob Hawke, found herself staring down the barrel of another seismic event: a cancer diagnosis. She had been knee-deep in the page proofs for *The Cubs Roar*, the fifth and final instalment of her critically acclaimed *Birth Of The Plantagenets* novels, when everything changed. "I was taking my nightie off one Sunday morning when I saw it – a visible lump about as big as a 10c piece."

"It was late February," she continues, thumbing back through the pages of her diary, every week a blur of scribbled appointments that chart the course of a traumatic six months. When you're in a cancer spiral, she says with a sigh, "things will go very fast".

Her doctor immediately sent d'Alpuget for a scan and, she recalls, "I could tell from the woman's face while she was doing it that the news wasn't good." That night she phoned her son Louis, a close friend and probably some other people, but confesses, "There's a lot I can't remember." She was

Tears flow as she tries to explain her state of mind. "I thought, 'Bob's dead, I've finished eight years' work, I've had a wonderful life. That's it.' But it was really only the thought of my son – and I knew he'd be very upset."

Having chosen life, d'Alpuget steered herself for battle. "I'm a born fighter," she says. She was quickly swept up in a world of oncologists as she embarked on eight weeks of brutal chemotherapy to shrink the tumour before surgery. "I was unbelievably ill. I had to more or less stay in bed for three days after every treatment and had every side effect you could have – nausea, exhaustion and I really hated bleeding from my nose. There's no way around it: chemo is frightful."

At the end of her sessions and with her surgery booked in, d'Alpuget revealed her battle for the first time to *The Sunday Telegraph*. It was important for her to give hope to other women, she says. "You shouldn't think because you're over 70 that you can't get it. In fact, in the UK, 30 per cent of the women who get breast cancer are over 70. It really is an epidemic and I have to admit I had been quite foolish: I'd had one mammogram years ago. It hurt and I've never had another one."

During a gruelling surgery, her tumours were removed and her breast reconstructed using body fat from her stomach, leaving her with a scar from hip to hip. Waiting anxiously was her artist son Louis. "I think it took a big toll on him, especially when I had the operation. I had three surgeons working on me for eight-and-a-half hours. I ended up in ICU for four days and my blood pressure was 40. Had I not been in ICU, being monitored every half-hour with them pumping me full of drugs to get my blood pressure up, I would have been dead."

After a few days, d'Alpuget was told the

"I'M A BORN FIGHTER"

Blanche d'Alpuget was polishing off the final novel in her successful book series – and still mourning the death of her beloved husband, former prime minister Bob Hawke – when she discovered a tiny lump in her breast. Now, in an emotional interview with *Stellar*, she shares an update on her health and reveals why her cancer battle has been a blessing in disguise

Photography DANIEL NADEL Styling IRENE TSOLAKAS Interview JULIET RIEDEN

scared, and the following day learnt just what the lump meant. "It was stage two cancer, and around it were a few other little ones at stage one. I was really lucky that it was poking out although it was so early," she says with the wisdom of someone who has now come out the other side.

In deep shock, she went home to consider her options. "I toyed with the idea of doing nothing and letting myself die from it, but then the thought of my son made me determined to go ahead and go through the full horror."

operation was a success. She is now going through immunotherapy, which she explains will "recognise any cancer cells and jump on them".

Throughout her ordeal, she faced an uncomfortable legal stoush with Hawke's daughter Rosslyn Dillon over his estate. "I was concerned about it and it was very stressful," d'Alpuget admits. "It's all finalised now and I'm very happy with the outcome."

Emotionally, she is also on the mend. "I do believe that we're tested as humans. This has been a challenge. I've risen to it."

She is now celebrating the culmination of an outstanding literary opus with the release of *The Cubs Roar*. In the waiting period between the end of chemo and surgery, she worked on the book with a renewed passion. "I rewrote the ending," she explains. "Not the actual historical story ending, but details – and that was in the light of Bob's death – which was ultimately uplifting."

It seems apt that following Hawke's death, she has closed the circle on her foray

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into the 12th century, which sustained her through his final years. "When I used to go into my office every morning and shut the door, I just slipped from the 21st century into the 12th. It was fabulous," she says. "I was crying at the end of the book because they'd been my dearest friends for eight years and I was saying goodbye to them."

Asked what she learnt from the series' two protagonists – King Henry II and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine – d'Alpuget replies, "Women can learn the dignity of strength from Eleanor. She was a champion of women and, like her husband, a brilliant diplomat. While Henry had an enormous sense of justice – he was father of the English common law and instituted the jury system. He unified a country wrecked by anarchy into a cohesive, prosperous nation. And he had a great touch with the common man. He was a bit Bob Hawke-ish," she laughs.

D'Alpuget already has an inkling of an idea for her next project, which she thinks will be a contemporary novel. Her cancer has not only filled her with a sense of positivity but has also made her stronger. In fact, she tells *Stellar*, "I see it not as a curse... but as a blessing." ★

The Cubs Roar by Blanche d'Alpuget is published by Ventura Press, \$29.99.



BLANCHE WEARS
Carla Zampatti blouse, carlazampatti.com.au; own pants, boots, jewellery and head scarf; (opposite) Carla Zampatti jacket and blouse, as before; own pants, jewellery and head scarf



HEAR HER ROAR (from top) Blanche d'Alpuget with Bob Hawke's granddaughter Sophie Taylor-Price at the former prime minister's memorial service in June 2019; with Bob Hawke at the Woodford Folk Festival in Queensland in 2014.

OTHER PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD DOBSON; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: KRISTYAN LOW USING SISLEY PARIS