Q&A Kevin Milne

Kevin Milne has a cheeky, self-effacing humour that makes him so much more than a consumer champion. On the eve of the release of his memoirs, Milne talks about fatherhood, fighting a tumour and three decades of battling for the little guy on *Fair Go*.

RD: *You once called yourself a "non-celebrity". Would you agree you're a celebrity now?*
KM: I think I'm an even bigger non-celebrity. This morning when I checked my car in, the woman said to me nervously, "Oh, I've just forgotten your name for a second." I said, "There's no reason you should know my name!" People still call me "that guy from *Fair Go*".

RD: *You've been described as remarkably unremarkable, annoyingly ordinary – even compared to a jovial walrus. From your laughter, I'm guessing you wear all that as a badge of honour?*
KM: Absolutely. It's my responsibility to be exactly who I am when I go to the shops, so people can see that people who work in television are exactly the same as them – they wear shabby clothes; they can look a bloody mess.

PHOTOS: COURTESY TVNZ

"After all these years, I'm honestly still amazed at the **way companies deal with complaints and with *Fair Go*"**

RD: *You used to report, research, write and field-direct for* Fair Go *as well as present. But this year you've pulled back to just hosting duties.*
KM: Yep, I'm just the pretty face now. It's funny – I still don't see myself as a presenter, just a journo who's outlasted the rest. But now I'm only up in Auckland on *Fair Go* on two days.

RD: *Meaning more time at home on the Kapiti Coast with your wife Linda and 11-year-old daughter, Tommie?*
KM: Yes, I missed out on things when my three sons were growing up, so it's been lovely being a full-time father – or house husband as Linda calls me. I cook meals, and take Tommie to school and to hip-hop, if I don't forget.

RD: *Back in 1984, did you ever imagine you'd stay so long at* Fair Go*?*
KM: No. But I was never interested in leaving just for the hell of it. I loved *Fair Go*. I've loved it more than you should really like any programme. It's been a big part of my life.

RD: *What's your most memorable David vs Goliath victory?*
KM: This wonderful woman lost her husband in a car crash and they'd taken out insurance only three to four weeks before. The insurance company said they weren't paying out because the papers hadn't arrived, which was a fair point. They'd had an errant insurance agent.

Anyway, about two years after the crash, we arranged to give her a cheque for about $100,000 – live. I'd been a bit sneaky so she didn't know she was going to get it. She just screamed. Later she said, "I want to thank the insurance company and Kevin," and I was feeling very pleased with myself, but it turned out Kevin was her boyfriend. It was nothing to do with me at all!

RD: *Is giving everyone a fair go a very Kiwi thing?*
KM: It's definitely something we really believe in. One way I think New Zealand is different from other countries is that we're quite happy for people to make mistakes as long as they face up and apologise, put things right, and don't do it again. That's what *Fair Go* is about. After all these years, I'm honestly still amazed at the way companies deal with complaints and with *Fair Go*. It surprises me they haven't seen the light and realised all they need to do is say, "We've looked at this, we've made a mistake, we're sorry, and we're going to fix it up."

"Call me old-fashioned, but I'm also there to get stuck into businesspeople **who use the rules to avoid being decent human beings"**

RD: *People have criticised* Fair Go *for being anti-business.*
KM: There's a group of businesspeople who hate *Fair Go* – they think we're rotten spoilsports. It drives me nuts. I had the opportunity to speak to a [business] group. I spelled out that we're there to get stuck into people who don't do their job properly. Call me old-fashioned, but I'm also there to get stuck into businesspeople who use rules to avoid being decent human beings. First and foremost, we're all human beings trying to live together.

RD: *Do many people realise* Fair Go *often agrees with the company regarding many complaints?*
KM: No, because those complaints don't make it to air. The first thing we do is ring the other party and say, "What's your side?" I have no problem with companies that say, "We've looked at this and, while we feel sorry for this person, we don't think we've done anything wrong. We're not going to pay out just because *Fair Go* has got in on it." I quite like that.

RD: *Do you still get angry on others' behalf?*
KM: You bet I do.

RD: *But you're good at dealing with conflict?*
KM: On a personal level I'm very bad at it. But on a professional level I love it. I particularly love fights with lawyers and senior businesspeople who have never been challenged before

because people are too scared.

RD: *You've been described as New Zealand's equivalent of Ken Barlow, of* Coronation Street *fame. Will you stick around like him?*
KM: No. I'm 61, and when you're over 60 there's something a bit ungainly about racing around the country, chasing after people, climbing over fences and all that. To be honest, I'm starting to find it more difficult to be a part of a team that's based in another city. So perhaps it's time to just give it away. *(In September, Milne announced he would leave the show at the end of this year's season.)*

"When you're over 60, there's something a bit ungainly **about chasing after people, climbing over fences and all that"**

RD: *Will it be hard to leave?*
KM: No. I could work another year or two but I feel I've done my best over a long period. Now's a good opportunity to do something different.

RD: *Such as?*
KM: I've spent a long time analysing why people make mistakes in business, why customers get angry. So I can probably be a lot of help advising companies. It's not grubby work, because all you're doing is stopping the problem before it gets to *Fair Go*.

RD: *Your book,* The Life and Times of a Brown Paper Bag, *is about to come out. Why that title?*
KM: That's how someone described me once, and I just love that image.

RD: *Why write it now?*
KM: I suddenly had the time this year. But it took a while for me to decide: could I actually write a book? I decided I wasn't going to do it; it seemed too much. Then [publisher] Random House said, "Sit down and write out the chapter titles, then a list of things you'd put into each chapter."

In the middle of the night I woke up and thought, *Right*. I flicked on the light and did what they'd suggested. I went to sleep about an hour later realising I could write a book. It was actually an enormous pleasure.

RD: *What does it reveal that we don't already know about you?*
KM: Where we got things wrong [on *Fair Go*] and the funny stories behind those. Like, last year, when I ran after a couple of women who turned out not only to be completely innocent but two very important visitors to NZ tourism. They got the rudest possible welcome in Wellington [Airport]. Also, I've worked with about 50 journalists on *Fair Go*, so I name my dream team: a presenter and five journalists. It won't win me many friends...

RD: *Much like picking bridesmaids?*
KM: Exactly.

RD: *Last year you were diagnosed with a brain tumour on the pituitary gland that thankfully proved benign. Is it still threatening your sight?*
KM: Yes. We thought it had stopped growing but it hadn't, and it's pressing on the optic nerve. So it looks like it'll have to be removed. But apparently it's the safest bit of brain surgery you can have. What makes it slightly riskier is that I have had a heart valve [replacement], and I'm on blood thinners. My surgeon's not interested in rushing in and I'm not either, so we're delaying it as long as possible.

RD: *How scary is all that?*
KM: At first, I thought the prognosis was a lot worse, and I was really scared then. I'm OK now, though still a bit scared. There's so much to do in life, so it's a damn nuisance. I really want to try to get healthier. I ought to be going on a diet and walking every day. Now the book's done, I'm going to.

RD: *During your health scare, did you feel you had much public support?*
KM: So much. I couldn't believe all the e-mails and letters. Unfortunately, a lot of people didn't send me their address. Everybody who did, I hope I'm right in saying I wrote to them all eventually. People wrote again, surprised I'd written back, and I'm thinking *Why?*

You've written and said you care. Some, like the nuns at Jerusalem near Wanganui, said they wanted to pray for me. I wrote back to say, "You little beauts, that's fantastic – anything that helps!" I got back to them when I found out the tumour was growing again, and I said, "Keep it up!"

RD: *What was it like writing about your difficult teenage years?*
KM: It's interesting what you find out in your own book. I was born with a stillborn brother, and my father died on my 15th birthday. But until I wrote the book it never occurred to me that two members of my family had died on the same day of the year. Then, my brother Brian died when I was 17.

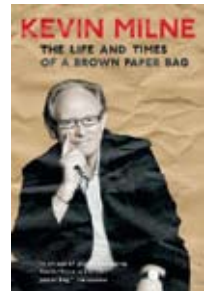
RD: *How hard was that double blow?*
KM: Hard. I had a really, really sad time in my teens, which I assumed was just what life was about. But my life took a huge turn for the better. I've sometimes thought that perhaps some of those dear people who left me have been looking after me from up in the sky. I'm not a religious person so it's really just a sentiment, but a lovely sentiment to have.

When it comes to being a father... well, we'd wanted a little girl for so long, I thought, *Kevin you can't have everything, maybe this is something you're not meant to have.* Then Tommie came along, our blessing. I've said to her, "Tommie, I will depart early in your life but there will always be a star up there from me."

RD: *How did it feel coming second only to Willie Apiata in the 2010 Reader's Digest Most Trusted People Poll?*
KM: It was an absolute thrill. People seem to like me and that comes from being in their living rooms for 40 years. That long-term relationship is part of trust. ■

WIN! We have ten copies of *The Life and Times of a Brown Paper Bag* to give away. To enter, tell us why you believe getting a fair go is important at readersdigest.co.nz/contests. Entries close November 19, 2010.

Righting wrongs: Gordon Harcourt, Alison Mau and Milne



Extract from The Life and Times of a Brown Paper Bag *by Kevin Milne, Random House New Zealand © 2010*

While on his overseas experience in 1973, Milne got a job as a plumber's mate at Camden Borough Council in London. The job involved unblocking toilets...

If we couldn't unblock them from the bathroom, we went outside and used a machine called The Sewermatic. It wound a flexible metal hose, with a vicious hook on the end, up the sewer pipe in the direction of the flat until it confronted an obstruction. The plumber would then push the reverse button and the hose would wind back in, hopefully with whatever caused the block caught on the end. My job was to remove that blockage off the hook. Nice. But a job's a job.

I often wondered what would happen if The Sewermatic found no impediment until it got to someone sitting on the toilet.

While working for the council, I spotted an ad in *The Guardian* for a journalist/scriptwriter to work on BBC2's main TV news programme, *News Extra*. I applied and was asked to front for an interview. The day of the interview was quite remarkable. In the morning, I had an interview for a PR job with British Post cancelled because an IRA bomb went off at Post Office Tower.

In the afternoon, when I got to the BBC Television Centre in White City, all was a shambles. Once again it was the IRA. Early in the day, they'd made a phone call to the BBC claiming they'd planted a bomb there. It turned out to be a hoax, but cops were everywhere and normal operations had just resumed. The interviews were running well behind – about 400 for this job, and there was tension in the air.

BBC interviews are very formal. You sit before a panel of five executives. The first question was, "Mr Milne, what work are you currently doing?" I replied that I was a plumber's mate for the London Borough of Camden – at which point most of the five exploded into embarrassed laughter. Bear in mind that the other 399 applicants would have been studying at Oxford or Cambridge. After they re-gathered themselves, the panel chairman apologised profusely, explaining that it had been a stressful day, but that was no excuse.

I told them I could understand their reaction, and maybe given the pressures they were under, they might like to break for a cup of tea. "Would you mind, old boy? That would be wonderful. Would you have one with us?"

"Certainly," I said, thinking it might lead to something.

As we chatted over tea, I regaled them with stories of my TV experiences back in New Zealand and life working The Sewermatic. I don't think they'd heard anything like it before. By the time the formal interview took place, there was little more to tell them. A fortnight later I opened a letter from the BBC. Firstly, they regretted that I had not been selected for either of the two advertised positions. But on the strength of the interview they wanted to offer me a contract appointment, doing the same job as advertised for the same money. Would I be interested? Would I what.

So, in May 1973, I began working as a journalist for one of the world's great news organisations.