

How will the world survive in a future without bees?

Nine year-old Peony lives in a shack in the orchard and dreams of becoming the best 'bee' the farm has ever seen, scrambling through the fruit trees to pollinate by hand with feather wands. She has love, she has enough to eat and if she could just become a 'bee' she'd be super-cherries happy. But her mother wants her to live in the city, where all the fruit is sent. Torn between two different worlds, Peony fights to protect her family and the world she loves.

'Quirky, original and heartfelt, this is an all too plausible dystopian adventure, exploring themes of family loyalty and the environment.'

- The Bookseller

How to Bee is **Bren MacDibble's** first children's novel to be available in the UK. It has been shortlisted for the Ditmar Awards in Australia and is a Notable Book selection for the Children's Book Council of Australia.

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How to Bee



BREN MACDIBBLE

Old Barn Books

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To all the kids who face hard times with courage,
and stand tall for the ones they love.





PEONY PEST



Today! It's here! Bright and real and waiting. The knowing of it bursts into my head so big and sudden, like the crack of morning sun busting through the gap at the top of the door. I fall out of my bunk and hit the packing-box floor. I scramble up, right into Gramps asleep in his chair in front of the potbelly stove.

'Cha!' he growls.

'Sorry, Gramps,' I say. 'It's bee day.' I pull on my pest vest and try to squeeze past him, but he holds out his foot.

'First eat, then bee,' he says, real firm. He cuts a wedge from the oatcake on top of the stove.

Cockies screech loud from the tree over our shack. They know it's time to get moving. 'I can't,' I say and try to squeeze past again. 'Foreman's waiting.'

My sister, Magnolia, sticks her fluffy head out from the top bunk. 'Stomp yourself, Peony-pest,' she groans.

'You won't diz me when I'm a bee,' I say.

'P the bee? Yeah, dying for that,' Mags says and flops back on the bunk. But she won't diz me when I'm a bee. Everyone likes bees. Urbs come out in buses from the city just to see bees work. The Urbs cling to the bus windows as the buses travel up and down between the rows of blossoms, and if they ever look out the back window after they pass me in my boring green pest vest, they'll see me standing there with my rude finger up, telling them how I feel about them getting all the fruit we work so hard to make.

I grab the oatcake from Gramps, duck around him and push through the sacking-lined door.

My chooks cluck when they see me and I flick the catch on the coop door. They push out and peck at the grass. 'I'm not doing pests today,' I tell them. 'You have to get your own. I'm a bee now.' I crumble some of my oatcake, so they cluck all happy around my feet. 'Mags is still a pest, she'll find you something to eat.' Mags is too

big and clumsy to ever be a bee. I take a bite of oatcake and crumble the rest and scatter it so I can get away without chooks on my tail.

Sometimes bees get too big to be up in the branches, sometimes they fall and break their bones. This week both happened and Foreman said, 'Tomorrow we'll find two new bees.'





ME AND AJ



I race to the meeting point down in apples, but eleven pests are already there. I smile at my friend Applejoy and he smiles back. It's gonna be him and me, like always.

'Peony? Are you ten yet?' Foreman asks when he sees me. His fluffy eyebrows push down towards his nose.

'Yeah, Boz,' I lie and look all caz.

He nods, and I join the other kids waiting.

Pomegranate digs me in the back with her pointy finger to tell me she knows I'm lying.

'Cha,' I whisper.

Foreman tells us what to do to try-out to be a bee. I've seen bees working. I know how it's done. He hands

us a leather cord, and when we all have one, Foreman says, 'Go!'

The pests rush first to the pile of poles and then to the feather box and scuffle over the feathers. I get my pole and stand back. I don't need those old rummaged-through muck feathers. I reach into my pocket and pull out feathers from my chooks. The best bum fluff. The softest fluffiest feathers. I lash them to the end of my wand just like I seen bees do and then I run to Foreman. 'I done, Boz,' I say.

He checks my lashing, nods and hands me a pouch of stamens. He nods towards the trees. 'Row one.'

I'm proud like I'm gonna bust. This is how I always imagined. Me, first with the lashing.

I run fast down to the apple trees. Pomegranate is right behind me. She got a nod from Foreman and she's running to row two.

I'm light. I'm quick. But Pomz can run along fence tips wide as my thumb. I seen her practising. She's long keen on being a bee.

I scramble into the branches of the first tree. Old, thick and spread wide, easy. I dip my wand into the pouch. The other end tangles in the branches. Pomz dips hers on the ground before she climbs. I'm too stupid for

not remembering that's how bees do it. I check over my shoulder. Foreman's busy checking lashings. Maybe he's not seen me do it wrong.

I pull the end of the wand out from the branches and start along a branch. A stick jams in my legs and I trip and fall straight out of the tree. I land on my stomach on the dirt. Pomz sniggers and scrambles up her tree. She's stuck the end of her wand into my legs!

'Cha!' I whisper and scramble to my feet. Foreman don't like bees who fight. He's ripped bee vests right off the backs of bees who fight. I climb back into my tree. Foreman's still busy. Didn't see me fall, but I've lost my lead. Pomz is already doing one side of her tree.

I flick the feathers from flower to flower, every flower I can reach, and coz I'm fast and light and a good climber I can pretty much reach them all. This tree will have lots of fruit soon and Foreman will remember that the first row was the one Peony done.

Pomz is running up the main branches of her tree without hanging onto anything. She's heavier than me but faster coz of her balance. She jumps down and runs to her next tree.

Applejoy has his lashing nodded and he runs past to row four just as I jump from my first tree. 'Go, P!' he says.

'Go, Aaj,' I say back. I dip the wand in my pouch, with a big show in case Foreman's watching, so he can see I did it proper, before I climb the tree. The pouch is already half empty. I don't know if I'll have enough to finish the whole row. I spilled some when I fell. I don't want to tell Foreman I spilled some, so when he comes to check my skills I just smile.

'Good bee,' he says.

I'm full to busting again. I will be a bee today!





THE NEW BEES

Lessons start on the speakers. Urbs don't like that we farm kids are too busy to get educated, so lessons get played over the speakers while we work.

Today's lesson's just for us. It's about the history of the bees. Not us. The real ones they used to have thirty years ago before the famines.

I think they looked like pests. Not the kids who kill pests but the actual bugs. They flew on little wings like some pests from flower to flower to collect nectar to make something sweet like sugar to share with people. 'Honey,' the speaker says over and over, like honey was the whole point of bees, not this job I'm doing now.

I don't know what honey tastes like. Gramps knows. He says, 'Sweet like honey,' sometimes. When the real bees flew from flower to flower, they did this job. One tiny bee could do the work of twenty kid bees every day. And the speaker says there used to be millions of them.

I think all the bees went away coz they looked small like pests. Before the famine, farmers didn't have enough farm kids to catch the pests so they sprayed poison on the pests, but the poison didn't know which was bees and which was pests.

Scientists still have some of the little bees and they say one day they'll bring them back to work on the farms.

I don't want the bees to come back. I want to be a bee. Coz Mags and me is farm kids, and we can stay in our shed with Gramps and we get food enough for all of us even though Gramps can't work much no more, except for packing time. Everyone works like a dog at packing time. Little or old, there's so many jobs, everyone works.

Before the famine, Ma was little and lived with Gramps in the city with the Urbs. Life was bad, there was no food, and no shed to live in. When the farms came to the city and asked them if they wanted to work just for food and a place to build their shed, they came on the

buses with the other people who were tired of living in the streets, and being hungry, and being attacked while they slept.

Ma works back in the city now, coz she says if we don't make some cold hard cash we'll be living in a shed forever. But I like our shed. I like the trees. I like our chooks. If I get chosen to be a bee today everything will be super-cherries.

I jump down and run to the next tree. Pomz is just ahead of me. She looks over her shoulder and scowls a face like a dried apricot that I'm catching her.

There's five trees each in our rows, and when I get to my last tree, there's not enough stamen powder in my pouch to cover the feathers properly. I can pretend, but it's important to get powder on every flower, that I know for sure. If the last tree in my row has no fruit in a few weeks' time, Foreman will be telling me all about it and asking for my bee vest back.

I run two rows down where AJ's in his fourth tree. 'I'm out and I've got one more tree!' I tell him, holding up my pouch. He holds out his and lets me dip. He's a good friend.

'Go! Go!' I tell him and he goes back to work.

Pomz is already in her fifth tree. Foreman's watching

us both. We're the leaders. He seen me reload from AJ's pouch. He'll guess I spilled.

I scramble into the tree and get to work, touching each of the flowers gently.

I jump down just after Pomz and we race to Foreman. We arrive together coz I'm faster at running.

Foreman nods and puts Pomz first in line and me behind. That don't mean nothing, I tell myself.

AJ races the girl from row three and beats her to stand in line behind me.

Being first or second doesn't mean you're instant bee. Foreman has to like your style. You have to be gentle to the flowers and branches and not clumsy. With four of us done, Foreman blows his whistle and the other pests run up from their rows to hear who has won. It was one of us four. AJ pats my back. He thinks it's me. I hope it's him as well, not Pomz, coz she's too heavy and mean.

Foreman gets out two new black-and-yellow stripe vests. 'The new bees are...' He stops and looks at us all. Me especially. I think my heart is gonna slide out my mouth. 'Pomegranate and Applejoy.'

I turn around and give AJ a quick hug. I don't let him see my face. 'Yay, Aaj,' I say but my voice is croaky. I run.



APRICOT SLICES



I get to our shed and slam right into Gramps and I can't tell him what happened coz all I can do is gulp at air and slap at my wet cheeks.

'Shh,' he says. 'Just too young. Next time.' He hugs me tight as he can for a moment, my wet face buried into his smoky shirt.

I am too young. I'm not ten, but I kept up with Pomz and AJ who are. If Pomz hadn't tripped me and made me spill the pouch I'd be first. But she did that coz she knew I was lying about my age. Age is stupid.

Mags is never gonna bee. And with me and Mags growing and needing more food for us and Gramps,

I have to bee soon. Gramps pats my back until I can breathe properly again.

'You and Mags are the best pests the farm's ever seen,' he says. 'You get back out there and show your spirit. Bees gotta have spirit. Next time they need a bee, Foreman's just gonna call you, straight out.'

I nod.

'Mags and the chooks is down in pears today,' Gramps says and turns me around and pushes me off.

I wipe my face on my sleeve and walk down to pears.

Mags looks surprised to see me. 'Peony,' she says like she's breathing out my name. My chooks cluck around my feet. They don't care I'm still a pest after I told them I'd be a bee. They're probably happy. More food for them.

Mags points down the row. 'I'm going that way,' she says. I pull my skewer out of my vest and check the ground for pest holes, then the trunk, then I scale the branches looking for sap suckers. I find some caterpillars, pluck them off the leaves, cluck to the chooks and drop the caterpillars down to them. The chooks dive on the squirming pests.

I work two rows with Mags before I can tell her. 'Pomz tripped me and I fell out the tree,' I say.

Mags leans back against a trunk, wipes her hair from her face and nods. 'I knew it was something.'

'I ran out of powder and had to get some from AJ. Boz saw me and probably thought I spilled it being clumsy,' I say.

'You's never clumsy,' Mags says.

'Pomz and AJ got bee,' I say.

Mags thinks for a while. 'They's good. Not good as you, but.'

I take a deep breath and go back to looking for pests. Kids are the best at pest catching, small hands, good eyes, fast and good at climbing. Me and Mags with our five chooks, we're a good team. The chooks keep us fed with eggs, all from the pests we feed them. I dunno how people fed chooks from before when they poisoned the pests.

The farm's full of circles. Bees, flowers, fruit. Pests, chooks, eggs. People, bees, flowers, fruit, pests, chooks, eggs, people...all overlapping circles. I don't understand how it went before the famine. Poison? That's like cutting the circles right through the middle. The circle can't go nowhere but a dead end. No wonder the little bees stopped working and left us to starve.

When the sun gets low, Mags and me follow the chooks home to our shed. Gramps has scavenged

apricots from the pulp bin, cut off the bad bits and has some apricot slices waiting for us.

All the good fruit goes to the Urbs in the city, but they won't take fruit with marks on it. So as soon as the fruit appears, adults put paper bags around the fruit while it grows, to keep off the birds and pests and flies. Apples cost loads, so none of us farm kids ever had a whole apple to ourselves. Just bits from the pulp bin on its way to be apple juice. Fruit is my favourite thing in the whole world.

Apricot slices is a treat to make me feel better but none of us say that.

