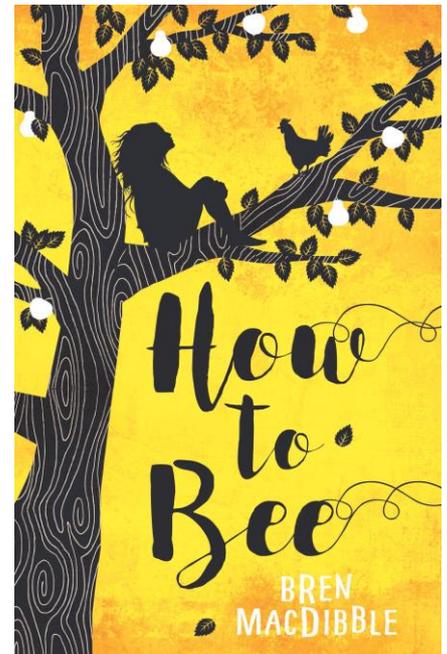


# How to Bee

By Bren MacDibble

May 2018 paperback ISBN 9781910646441  
Recommended for readers aged 9 – 12 years



## Summary

In a world without bees, flowers are pollinated by children with feathery wands. Peony just wants to be a Bee. Never mind that she's only 9 and Bees are supposed to be 10, she knows all there is to know about being a Bee and running the whole orchard if Foreman would just give her a chance. Peony's mother has other ideas, she wants to drag her off to the city, to a fine house to work for a rich family.

But how can Peony leave her beloved sister, grandfather, best friend Applejoy, and the orchard behind? And just for money? Don't Ma know what's important anyway?

*How to Bee* is a beautiful and fierce novel for younger readers, and the voice of Peony will stay with you long after you read the last page.

## Use in the curriculum

*How to Bee* will suit Primary classrooms studying climate change, and the environment and ecosystems.

It can be used in the English curriculum as an example of the speculative/dystopian genre and as a study of style. From its first lines, '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', we recognise a narrator who is full of energy and enthusiasm. The vibrancy and drama of the opening lines is further heightened by the unusual narrative choice of first person/present tense, and by writing in a very colloquial, conversational way: 'Coz Mags and me is farm kids'. Bren MacDibble maintains this original voice right through the novel until the plot's clever conclusion.

## Activities and discussion questions

### Pre-reading research

Before opening the book ask students to research the subject of bees. Break your class into groups and assign one of the following areas to each: the role bees play in nature, theories relating to why bees are becoming extinct, how and why Chinese farmers in Hanyuan are pollinating their crops, and what we can do to help slow the rate of bee extinction.

Once their research is complete ask one person from each group to present a short talk to the rest of the class on their subject.

### Pre-reading comprehension exercise

After the last talk is presented ask students to answer the following questions:

- 1) Why are bees important?
- 2) Name three things that might be causing bees to become extinct.

These classroom notes were prepared by Allen & Unwin Australia, the original publisher of *How to Bee* and are reproduced here with their permission for use in UK classrooms. We welcome feedback from UK parents, teachers and librarians - please contact us on [info@oldbarnbooks.com](mailto:info@oldbarnbooks.com) or via our website at [www.oldbarnbooks.com](http://www.oldbarnbooks.com)



# In the classroom...



- 3) What do Chinese farmers in Hanyuan do to replace bees?
- 4) What can you do to help keep bee populations alive and healthy?

## **Imagery**

Read the paragraph on page 14 beginning, 'The farm's full of circles. Bees, flowers, fruit. Pests, chooks, eggs...'.

- a) Ask students to draw a circle and explain how each of these elements relies on the element before it to survive.
- b) What word could you use to replace 'poison' in this paragraph?
- c) Ask students to explain, using the circles they have already drawn, how 'poison' disrupts the food cycle.

## **Similes**

Authors use similes to help a reader understand a scene, characters or event. Explain that similes often use the word 'like' and give an example of a simple simile they will understand. Now ask students to find examples of similes in the chapter entitled, 'The Raggy People' (pp 51-54) describing:

- the city
- the mob of people surrounding Peony's car
- Ma pleading with Nico

## **Informal language**

*You's brave and you's strong and you's gonna do stuff that's important.* (p 114).

Ask students to describe how Peony speaks in the novel and to think about how the way she speaks might influence the way they picture her.

## **Characterisation**

Choose three adjectives to describe Peony. Now find a scene in the book to illustrate each word you chose. For instance, if you chose the word 'smart' describe a scene or scenes in the novel where she demonstrates her intelligence.

## **Empathy**

In a whole class discussion, invite students to describe their feelings about Peony's mother.

- Write down some of the key words used to describe her on the whiteboard.
- Next show the following image, <https://au.pinterest.com/pin/289215607291273315/> to illustrate that there are two ways of seeing many things. (Ask students if they see an old or a young woman at first, and then encourage them to keep looking and find the alternative image.)
- Now return to the discussion about Peony's mother and ask students if they can name good things about her and some reasons for why she may have been forced to become horrible to Peony.

## **Comparison**

Describe to your students in basic terms a beehive's social structure (see <https://agdev.anr.udel.edu/maarec/honey-bee-biology/the-colony-and-its-organization/> and The Hive at Kew Gardens: <https://www.kew.org/kew-gardens/attractions/the-hive>).

Emphasise that all bees have a specific task to perform and by performing their task the beehive grows and thrives. Ask your students if they can see any similarities between a beehive and the workers described by Peony on pp 38-39.



## Related texts/Further reading

***Darius Bell and the Crystal Bees*** by Odo Hirsch. Allen & Unwin, 2011

A sequel to the award-winning *Darius Bell and the Glitter Pool*, this is a very funny story of problem-solving, teamwork and pollination. Darius and his friends must solve the problem of the disappearing bees - and help their class win the Mayor's Prize!

***Flight of the Honey Bee*** by Raymond Huber, illustrated by Brian Lovelock. Walker Books Australia, 2014.

Picture book which tells an engaging story of a day in the life of Scout the bee, while also including small honey-combs of bee-related facts.

***The Book of Bees*** by Piotr Socha and Wojciech Grajkowski, illustrated by Piotr Socha. Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2016

A fascinating illustrated book of bee facts, tracking the history of bees from the time of the dinosaurs to their current plight.

***Bee & Me*** by Alison Jay. Old Barn Books, 2016.

A wordless picture book showing how one girl in a tower block is taught by the bee she rescues to plant seeds and bring plant life back to the city. With bee facts and tips.

***The Death of Bees Explained – Parasites, Poison and Humans.***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqA42M4RtxE>

Short YouTube animated video produced by 'Kurzgesagt- In a Nutshell', supported by Australian Academy of Science.



## Bren MacDibble

Bren was born in Whanganui, NZ, where the black sand beaches burn feet all summer long. Her parents worked farms all over the central North Island, and she and her three brothers worked with them, and spent many hours wandering the countryside and bush with their dog like a bunch of feral creatures. They were always on the lookout for sheep tracks on steep hills to use as slides, good trees to climb, hay barns to play in, fruit trees to feed them and creeks to swim and fish in. Of course, there was always farm work and schools to interrupt their fun, but at school they could borrow books, reading them and returning them as fast as they could.

After high school, Bren went straight to work in a legal office and then as a stevedore (loading and unloading ships). Then she quit everything and backpacked around the world, through South East Asia, China, Russia and Europe, and then down the east coast of Africa. She stopped off in Melbourne and never quite

made it home to New Zealand.



When she had her own children, she started creating stories again and dove straight back into her love of science fiction. She wrote short stories for children, young adults and adults. Bren mostly learns about writing by cramming as many well-written books into her head as she can. And there are so many, it has become apparent to her that life is far too short to read them all!

Bren still likes to travel. She has a touring motorbike and in 2014 she rode through the American west on a Harley. In 2016 she rode through Florida and along the coast to New Orleans.

Bren lives and works in Melbourne with her husband, two young men who used to be boys, and a nutty little schnauzer. She works in gifted education in the day, and teaches TAFE by night, and writes all the other hours her eyes can stay open.

Visit her at [www.macdibble.com](http://www.macdibble.com)

## Author's inspiration

'I was fascinated by the hand-pollinators of Hanyuan county in China's Sichuan province, where spraying has reduced bee numbers to levels where they cannot pollinate the fruit trees, so humans must clamber through the branches with pouches of stamens and wands of feathers.

'Then I thought about another story about how farmers in India were told they had to buy expensive pesticides to protect their pigeon pea crops and went into debt to do that, until the old people came to their rescue and showed them how to drag a sheet between the rows, and shake the bushes so the bugs would fall out onto the sheet and be snapped up by the chickens following. It was a real Gandhi moment when the farmers said no to the big chemical companies and instead hired local workers. And think of the bees! Apparently their crop yields soared, too. And fat chickens! They were winning all around.

'This set me imagining how a post-bee and post-famine world would look. Of course, the poor would suffer the most, unable to afford that most basic necessity: food. Mortgaging their houses to eat, the cities would soon be full of homeless people.

'Farmers would need workers to pollinate their flowers and to fight off their pests, afraid to use pesticides. Perhaps they would offer shacks and oats (wind-pollinated) in return for work.

'Fruit and flowers would be precious things. Fruit laid out like jewels in the shops. And possibly things you'd name your children after.

'Peony presented herself to me then, nine-years-old, old enough to learn everything about running an orchard, bossy enough to speak her mind, strong enough to keep her family together in a tough harsh world.

'Modern children are acutely aware of the world around them. Far more aware than any previous generation. They know the seas are rising. They know the polar bears, bees and frogs are dying. They worry about pollution and animal abuse. Reading stories set in a future where things have gone wrong and featuring characters like Peony - smart, with a whole lot of nerve, an ability to work hard and get by - can reduce a child's anxiety.'