

B is for Bee

By Sharon Bryan

Every now and then, someone I barely know will tell me something cool about bees, and I'll think, "How do you know I like bees?" And then I'll remember that I have several bee tattoos and they've probably seen my arms at some point.

I don't know exactly what triggered the conversion of my passing interest in bees into a near-obsession. All I know is I went from "Hey, bees are cool, and I even know what a couple of native bee species look like" to "I'm gonna be a beekeeper!" in what seemed like a very short period of time.

I had actually been thinking about getting chickens, and I'm not sure what happened.

You see, my yard is quite small, but I love animals. I'd love to get a dog, but I'd need to give it something to do to keep its mind off being in a tiny yard all day while I'm at work. Dogs like having some kind of gainful employment, and I thought, "Maybe if I get chickens, the dog can guard the chickens—that's a good job."

Then I gave up on the idea of having a dog and just started entertaining the idea of getting chickens.

As a librarian, it's impossible to take an interest in something without immediately borrowing many, many books on the subject and



then learning far more than you truly need to know at the "this could be interesting" stage of the journey. This is why librarians are the best people to have on your team at a pub trivia night—we are full of useless bits of information and compelled to answer questions.

Especially our own.

While I was reading about chickens, the fleeting thought popped into my head that bees are nifty, and they wouldn't need as much space

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or hands-on care as chickens. Plus, I read that when chickens get bored, they sometimes start eating each other.

Cannibalism.

Chickens are known to resort to cannibalism just for something to do.

When a dog gets bored, it just digs up your yard and wrecks your furniture. When bees get bored, they just leave.

(I'm only half joking. Bees don't actually get bored—they have work to do and they don't need you to keep them “enriched” or “entertained”. But they do just up and leave when they feel they are done with a particular area. This adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the idea of investing time and money into beekeeping.)

I started learning a bit more about bees and beekeeping and, as you might expect, it escalated, and I started deep diving into the topic and listening to beekeeping podcasts in my car. And then, during an ill-advised late-night spending spree, I bought a membership to the local beekeepers' club.

Normal people, when staying up late and making ill-advised purchases, spend money on things like fashionable shoes, fancy kitchen gadgets and improbable exercise equipment. I

joined a beekeepers' club.

As I write this, I'm not currently a beekeeper—more of a bee fancier. Bee enthusiast? Well, I like bees, and I'm going out of my way to make my garden bee friendly. I also stare intently at every plant I pass that has bee-friendly flowers on it when I'm out and about. I can watch the neighbour's basil for ages. My family, of course, think I'm mad. Then again, they always did, so this isn't a new development.

I'm in the middle of trying to fill my own garden with basil. Bees *love* basil. Personally speaking, I don't particularly fancy basil. I mean, a little here and there is fine, but I don't really have a huge need for culinary basil; I'm just planting it because the bees adore it. Blue-banded bees, resin bees, nomias, great carpenter bees—they all love basil. And the European honey bees go wild for it.

By the way, European honey bees are not a singular species. There are actually several different types of honey bees—and they have noticeably different personalities. The Italian honey bee, which is the one you'll most likely encounter in North Queensland (where I live), is a very even-tempered bee. You can walk right up to a group of them beavering away on a basil bush

and they'll completely ignore you. They are essentially the Isa Browns of the honey bee world: the bee that many beekeepers recommend for someone starting out with bees, and good little producers. And, yes, I just used a chicken to describe a bee. Caucasian and Carniolan bees are the other main breeds you'll find in Australia, and they may be a bit more wary, but I've never yet been threatened by a bee going about their business. They tend to just check you out, decide you aren't a flower, and get back to work.

Although, there was one time when the local bees weren't entirely sure I wasn't a flower. A few years ago, I went on the Otago Rail Trail cycling tour in New Zealand and, on one particular stretch, every time I stopped I was almost immediately visited by an alarmingly large number of bees—both native New Zealand bees and European honey bees. At first, I thought this was interesting, but then I started to feel a bit concerned. Eventually, the guide noticed that my shirt was the exact same shade of yellow as the flowers on the droves of manuka bushes that had come into bloom. I ended up having to make a quick change of shirt for the rest of the day's riding.

That was not the last time I had to remove an article of clothing for the sake of curious bees.

My first visit to a beekeepers' club meeting took place on a Sunday morning, which shows you how keen I was. Sundays are usually my "recovery" days. I try to have at least one day a week when I don't do anything in particular, and

that's normally Sunday. The fact that I was willing to get up on a Sunday morning and go to this meet-up was something of a miracle.

The meeting took place on the grounds of a charming primary school in the middle of one of the older suburbs. The buildings were all built decades ago in the classic Queenslander style of raised wooden structures with wide verandas and louvered windows, and the grounds of the school had been turned into gardens with vegetable patches and water features. It was a beautiful, rustic, charming space. There was a lovely aura to the school—like it wasn't really an "educational institution" so much as someone's grandmother's place.

As part of the whole farmyard vibe that the school was cultivating, they had a couple of beehives tucked behind one of the administration buildings. After the club meeting, I joined the beekeepers who were caring for those hives and was given a quick hands-on introduction to checking the frames in an active hive.

The woman who was walking me through the process said I was a "natural". I don't know whether she said that because she was a friendly, welcoming sort who wanted to encourage new members, or because I calmly stood there and said:

"I think I have a bee in my pants."

"If it feels like a trickle of sweat running down, it's probably sweat," she said, "If it feels like it's crawling up it's probably a bee."

I continued to calmly help put the frames back

in the box and put the lid on as I said, “Hmm, it’s going sideways and up. I think I definitely have a bee in my pants.”

It turns out that you should tuck the hems of your pants into your socks when working with beehives, as the bees will look for every opening in your clothing to check out the large giant creature who’s currently tearing the roof off their house. They forgot to tell me this.

I’ve long been of the opinion that the best way to deal with a dicey situation regarding a critter is to stay as calm as you can. I am a big believer in the advice given on the cover of *The Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*: Don’t Panic. Nothing good comes from flapping around—especially when dealing with something that has a pointy end.

After we put the lid back on the box, we sent the male beekeepers around the corner while I dropped my trousers and the nice lady found the bee and let her out. I then resumed my clothing and the menfolk were allowed back while we went over to the other hive and checked that one too. This time, I tucked my pants into my socks.

The second meeting I attended was in a less charming setting. It was a shed in a park on the outskirts of town. This time, my pants caught on a loose screw and tore. I can’t blame the bees for that one, but I have to admit I never went back for a third meeting. I just don’t think my underpants are up to the occasion.

Image: “[Australian Honey Bee](#)” (CC BY 2.0) by [Jason Green](#)