

The rise & rise of Bri Lee



Australian author Bri Lee's fifth book, *Seed* – set against the haunting beauty of Antarctica – provides a gripping exploration of love on a burning planet

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For most, submitting a doctorate or becoming a published author would represent one of life's great achievements. For author, legal activist, academic and journalist Bri Lee? She's ticking off both career-defining goals in the very same week. "I could not have engineered this if I tried, but my new novel, *Seed*, is coming out on the exact date that my PhD is due," she says of her thesis, which examines the efficacy of new legislation protecting public-interest publications from defamation lawsuits. "It's just bonkers how it's turned out."

Today she's an award-winning author, but Lee's initial plan was to become a barrister. "I did a year as a judge's associate [in

Queensland's District Court] and it was an awful year of my life, which I wrote about in [her 2018 debut book] *Eggshell Skull*," she recalls. Coming in the wake of 2017's explosive #MeToo movement, Lee's account of her experience working inside the legal system while working through her own complaint of sexual abuse vaulted her onto Australia's literary landscape. The book was highly garlanded, earning Biography of the Year at the 2019 Australian Book Industry Awards and People's Choice Award at the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, as well as the Ned Kelly Award for True Crime and Davitt Award for Best Debut Crime Book that same year.

Parting ways with her planned career in the law, Lee swiftly carved out a new path as a writer. Her next book, 2019's *Beauty*

– a contemplation on society's obsession with physical perfection in essay form – quickly followed. Lee scrutinised the uneasy role class continues to play in Australia's education system via *Who Gets to Be Smart: Privilege, Power and Knowledge* in 2021, before penning her first novel, *The Work*, which was released in 2024: a steamy study of love and money in the art world.

Seed, published on September 30, takes place sometime in the near future and centres around Mitchell, an Australian biologist working on the fictional Anarctos Project, a top-secret seed vault

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in Antarctica. The setting was inspired by a trip to the continent Lee took in 2023 and by the real-life Svalbard Global Seed Vault – the world's largest backup collection of seeds at risk of extinction, located on a remote Arctic archipelago in Norway and with which Lee has long been fascinated. "I'm always looking for what I refer to as 'organically occurring pressure cookers' – real-life environments where drama [takes place] in a tight space and people are forced into tight relation with each other," explains Lee of her choice of narrative premise: scientists working together in close quarters, in near complete isolation from the rest of the world.

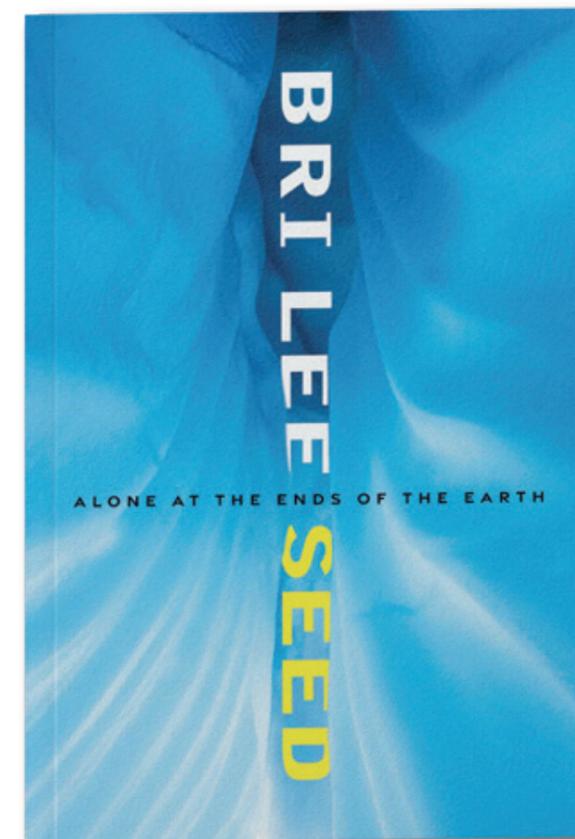
Mitchell, the book's protagonist, is plagued by society's nonchalance towards the climate emergency and, through his lens, the novel delves into the divisive issue of anti-natalism, of which Mitchell is a fierce advocate. "There are people who try really hard to do the right thing for social justice or environmental issues and a lot of people hate them for being 'goody goodies'," Lee contemplates. "They find that absolute resolution and commitment to values very annoying and frustrating. I wanted to explore what it looks like when someone is unwilling to look away from the devastation that humans have [caused] and absolutely commits to what they believe is the only acceptable response."

Outside of books, Lee has used her platform and legal acumen to advocate for legal reform around the "mistake-of-fact" defence in cases of rape and sexual assault and for the implementation of an affirmative consent model in Queensland. Her journalism has appeared in *The Guardian* and *The Saturday Paper*, and her investigative story for *The Monthly* into the financial fallout of Australian fashion label Ellery's liquidation, entitled 'Debt-à-porter', saw Lee nominated for a Walkley Award for Business Journalism in 2023. With the Sydney-based Women's Justice Network, she founded the fREADom INSIDE project, which supplies incarcerated women in NSW with books; stage two of the project raised \$55,000 to fund a year of book clubs within prisons.

In 2024, Lee launched Bibliocarta, a book-slash-travel club that whisks groups to select destinations across the globe and equips them with a collection of books deeply linked to their destination to enrich the experience. "I always have loved travel and I always loved reading and essentially it's those two things combined," she says. The program is an antidote to what Lee considers the "completionist" mindset assumed by some travellers. "[As in], 'If I see these 10 places [or] go to these four restaurants, I will have 'done' a place,'" she says. "[That's] the opposite thing of what a genuinely curious person wants to experience when they are travelling. All the people who travel with us are just like kind nerds." Earlier this year, Bibliocarta visited Morocco; in October and November, they will head to Ubud and Munduk in Indonesia for the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival.

Lee also pens her Substack, *News & Reviews*, which she began in 2021 and covers, as its name suggests, snippets of current affairs and her thoughts on anything from books to interiors. "It has grown in response to the different directions my career has taken," she reflects. The newsletter's next chapter, an "online seasonal readers and writers festival", will include live streams of author conversations, deep dives into the back catalogues of the likes of Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong and in-depth book clubs.

Lee is excited to tour *Seed*, although she has requested that none of her events be recorded. "Talking about things like anti-natalism and family planning – it's so fraught and it has to be done with good intention and intellectual honesty," she says. "[But] I genuinely trust my readers and the people who turn up to my events. They want to have these conversations, even if they're difficult." HB



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