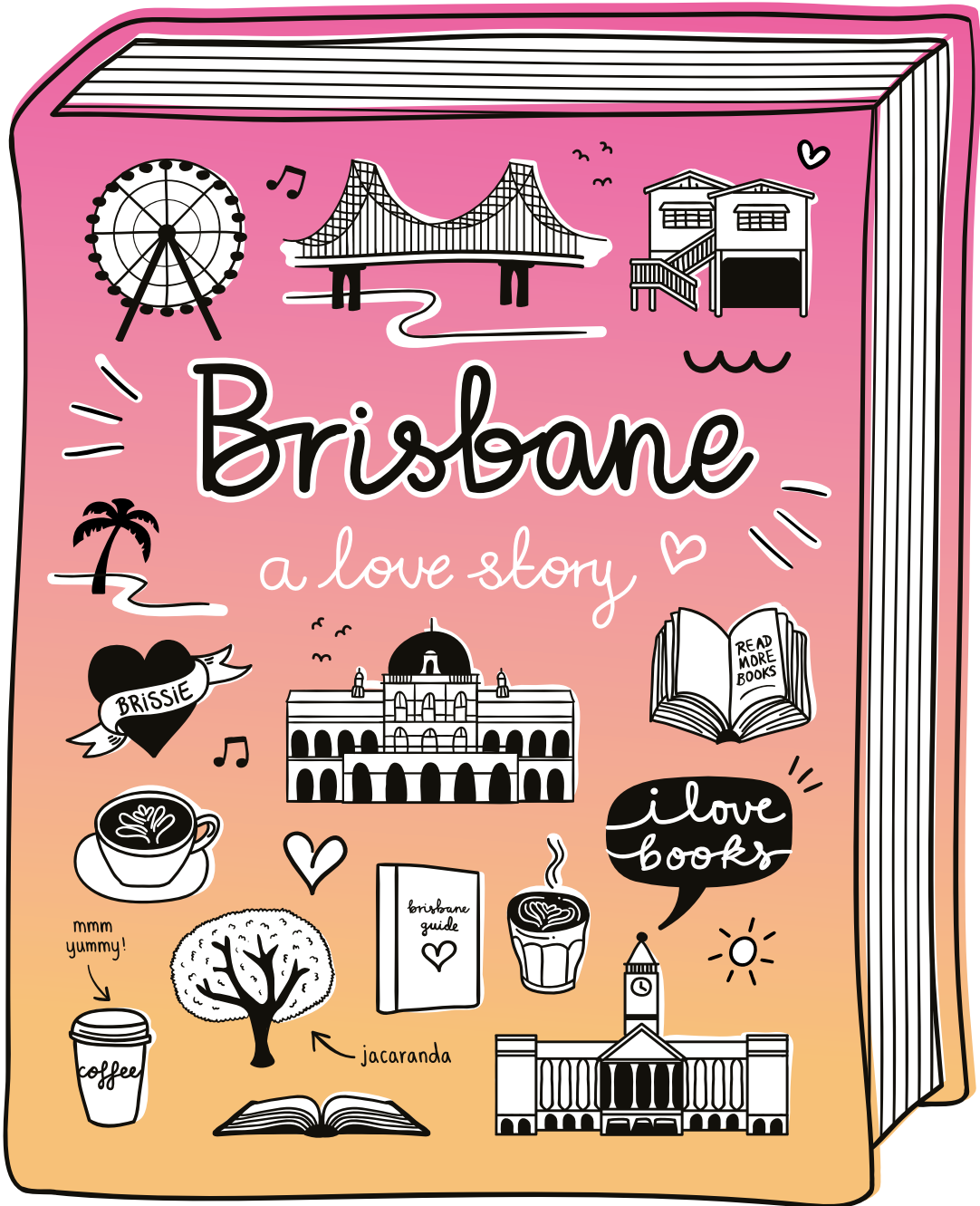




— A chance encounter in a Brisbane café reminds Akanksha Singh why she loves the balmy city. Here, she recalls that unexpected moment, retracing her journey of discovery through this surprisingly inspiring city —



Brisbane is at its best in autumn. Though the sunsets always bring with them a little nip that invites warm conversation and wine in equal measure, the days are ambitiously blue-skied and sunny and the air carries the faintest whiff of eucalyptus on its tail.

Days like this are best enjoyed outdoors, so I'm waiting for a friend at the urban chic Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) courtyard café, book in one hand, coffee in the other.

I came to Brisbane from Singapore in 2014, as a student on the cusp of realising my ambitions of becoming a writer. During that time, I spent many such days here, soaking in the breeze that swept across the patio, the sounds of clinking cups and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, while contemplating whether the switch from studying geology to writing was a mistake.

About a year ago, just as I was wrapping up the final semester of my studies, I sat at the same table as today, and across from me, a striking woman caught my eye. She must have been in her mid-seventies. She smiled at me and I returned her smile. I remember that initial encounter indelibly because it reminded me how friendly everyone always is in Brissie.

Maybe it's because I wasn't born here and, therefore, I am able to view the city through slightly rose-tinted glasses, but whenever I think about Brisbane, I think of it as a big city with a small-town vibe. It's large enough to tuck away little-known museums, art galleries, bookshops and cafés – yet small and contained enough that one never quite feels lost roaming unfamiliar streets alone.

Wedge between two beach icons – the Gold Coast to the south and the Sunshine Coast to the north – the Queensland capital sits slightly inland, its buildings clustered on the banks of a snaking, brown Brisbane River. Today, with a population of over two million, it's Australia's third-largest city.



CLARENCE CORNER BOOK SHOP



TASTY DELIGHTS AT CLARENCE CORNER BOOK SHOP



→ 1,000,000 →
ONE MILLION BOOKS

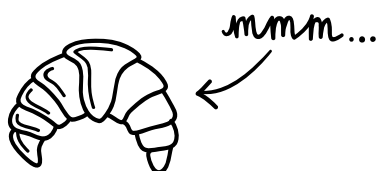
Not typically one for small talk, perhaps it was Brisbane's small-town feel that made me surprisingly receptive and sparked our conversation that day. Or maybe it was her opener: "Bit young to be reading Wodehouse, aren't you, dear?" she said, nodding at my book. I joked that I blamed my parents and she replied with, "How very Freudian of you."

After some meandering through polite chatter about how nice the weather was and how lovely the light shimming off the river looked on a sunny day, we stepped into a real conversation. Before I knew it, I was at her table, talking about Brisbane bookshops, the summer GoMA exhibit – a gigantic, colourful, fuzzy installation titled *Nervescape V* that looked like a Dr Seuss creation – and the best cafés Brisbane had to offer.

I traded King of Cakes in Taringa (kingofcakes.com.au) and their to-die-for almond croissants for her Bunker Coffee (bunkercoffee.com.au), a literal hole-in-the-wall café in Milton. She, a former English teacher, gave me a list of Aussie authors to look into (including Patrick White and David Malouf) that I've treasured ever since.

Many people will tell you that the only literary scene in Australia is in Melbourne. Ask a Brisbanite, though, and they'll tell you the really good ideas start in Brisbane and get transplanted to Melbourne – including the prestigious literary journal, *Meanjin*. The University of Queensland Press, standing firm since its inception in 1948, has burrowed its roots deeper into these parts with poetry, fiction and non-fiction that spans from Australiana to Indigenous culture.

Happily, as I've discovered through return visits, Brisbane continues to develop into a cultural hub in its own right. As the influx of people into Brisbane from Melbourne and Sydney continues, thanks to ballooning property prices, the city swells to make space for more creative types.



ARCHIVES FINE BOOKS



QAG CAFE AT THE GALLERY OF MODERN ART



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For one thing, live music in Brisbane is burgeoning – there are talented buskers on street corners singing about heartbreak and new love into crackly mics, as well as quirky gig sites such as repurposed World War II hangar The Triffid (thetriffid.com.au) and prestigious venues like The Tivoli (thetivoli.com.au), which brings world-class acts to Brisbane's backyard. Then, of course, there's the grand dame of live music venues: the Queensland Performing Arts Centre (qpac.com.au), which has hosted sell-out runs of everything from *The Lion King* to Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Brisbane Writers Festival, too, offers an increasingly impressive program of talks and lectures with each passing year (I still remember being amazed that one of the first stops on Jodi Picoult's Australian tour was the Brisbane City Hall). This emphasis on literature is what I think makes the city unique.



There are so many inviting bookshops dotted around – Archives Fine Books (archivesfinebooks.com.au), incongruously situated in the heart of the business district, boasts its million-book collection with a plaque that literally reads, "One million books". And there's never a short supply of readings on the leafy back verandah of Avid Reader Bookshop (avidreader.com.au) in West End.

As you wander further into West End, past graffitied walls, pop-up-shops and hip burger joints, you get what I think is a taste of the real Brisbane. It's a city that hasn't become sterile like many others tend to with growth (not yet, anyway) and still retains its laid-back and slightly gritty character.

There are plenty of genuine hidden gems you can stumble upon here. Gems like one of my favourite indie bookstores – Bent Books (bentbooks.com.au), where the cashier is always up for a chat about literature (I have never walked out of that store without making a purchase), and Clarence Corner Book Shop (cornerbookshop.com.au), where the collection is as tempting as the fig and brie toasties and almond milk flat whites in the adjoining café.



BENT BOOKS





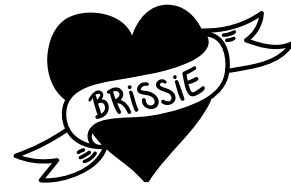
SCRUMPTIOUS READS

In fact, it was our shared love of libraries and indie bookstores – you know, the sort run by book lovers, where patrons and clerks actually discuss books – that cemented the connection between the schoolteacher and I. As we talked that day, I remember her saying the best thing about the city was the sheer number of libraries it had. As a student, I felt very fortunate to have plush libraries like the State Library of Queensland (slq.qld.gov.au) – with a river view to boot – at my doorstep.

We covered a lot in our nearly hour-long conversation. It lulled once and we both took sips of our second long blacks before she said, “So you want to be a writer, then, I take it?” I looked at the cover of my book, then over to the riverside where joggers streamed by and answered with an emphatic yes. It was the first time I’d said it out loud to someone.

I wish we’d exchanged names and numbers that day. I would have loved to look her up on a day like today when I’ve returned to Brisbane to meet old friends and pack the last of my boxes. I would have wanted to tell her that since that serendipitous encounter, I went on to attend the Yale Writers’ Workshop and have now actually started writing for a living. And that whenever anyone asks me how I got into writing, I think of Brisbane and her.

books
NOT
looks!



MORE TO DO FOR CULTURE LOVERS

1. Philip Bacon Galleries

> Explore the heart of Brissie’s art scene in this legendary Fortitude Valley gallery.

As one of Australia’s finest, it is renowned for exhibiting the country’s top artists.

philipbacongalleries.com.au

2. The Sit Down Comedy Club

> Pop into The Paddo Tavern on bustling Given Terrace for a night full of laughs as a host of national and international comedy acts take to the stage.

standup.com.au

3. Scrumptious Reads

> Tucked away in Red Hill, this culinary lovers’ book-nook has a menu to match with “Sweet Saturdays” – think ice creams, jams and jellies – and a cookbook club, too.

scrumptiousreads.com.au



READ THIS

For book lovers who want to learn more about how novels became a mainstay in the literary world, Steve Moore’s *The Novel, An Alternative History 1600-1800* (Bloomsbury) delves into the origins of famous classics as well as little known gems.

