



Remarkably Bright Creatures

By Shelby Van Pelt

Summary:

After Tova Sullivan's husband died, she began working the night shift at the Sowell Bay Aquarium, mopping floors and tidying up. Keeping busy has always helped her cope, which she's been doing since her 18-year-old son, Erik, mysteriously vanished on a boat in Puget Sound over 30 years ago.

Tova becomes acquainted with curmudgeonly Marcellus, a giant Pacific octopus living at the aquarium. Marcellus knows more than anyone can imagine but wouldn't dream of lifting one of his eight arms for his human captors --- until he forms a remarkable friendship with Tova.

Ever the detective, Marcellus deduces what happened the night Tova's son disappeared. And now Marcellus must use every trick his old invertebrate body can muster to unearth the truth for her before it's too late.

Shelby Van Pelt's debut novel is a gentle reminder that sometimes taking a hard look at the past can help uncover a future that once felt impossible.

Source: <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/remarkably-bright-creatures>



About the author

Shelby Van Pelt

Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, Shelby Van Pelt lives in the suburbs of Chicago with her family. **REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES** is her first novel.

MAY 20, 2022

Interview with Shelby Van Pelt

by Tallahj Curry

This month, NLA had the pleasure of interviewing Kristin Nelson's client Shelby Van Pelt, author of the debut novel *Remarkably Bright Creatures*.

In your new novel, *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (Ecco, May 3), an unlikely narrator—an octopus—steals readers' hearts. While his wit and charm appeal to readers, Marcellus doesn't talk. How did you decide the limits of his voice?

Figuring that out was one of the most challenging things about writing this book! At various times while drafting, I played around with allowing him to write (could an octopus hold a pen?) or perhaps chat with the other sea life at the aquarium. But, eventually, I realized I needed his communications to flow one way to reflect his loneliness.

There's also the matter of where readers would draw the line. An octopus narrator is already weird, at least in a book that's otherwise realistic. I knew I was not writing a fantasy novel and didn't have much latitude with world-building; rather than creating a world where octopuses can communicate, I needed to create a communicating octopus that felt at home in the real world.

In your recent [LitHub article](#), "Lessons Learned from a Year Listening to the Fictional Octopus in My Head," you remind us that "you write...therefore, you're a writer." Why is this mantra so important when writing your debut novel?

For anyone who produces any sort of creative work, writing or otherwise, I think there's this leap when you go from having it be a private hobby to sharing it with others. To selling it, even. To me, at the time, it all just felt so presumptuous. Maybe I even felt a little like Marcellus with his journal entries, firing off words into some sort of void, not sure anyone would ever receive them.

Remarkably Bright Creatures is already making waves since its release earlier this month. What advice would you give to authors hoping for the same result?

Well, I do realize how incredibly lucky I've been! But I can't tell you how many times I really doubted even querying because my book didn't seem to fit neatly in a marketable category. Finding comps was challenging. It's an odd book!

So, I guess my advice is: write the odd thing. Or rather, write the *you* thing, whatever that happens to be. And plan to invest time in your query letter! I spent more hours writing (and rewriting, over and over) my query letter than I did drafting the last several chapters of the book. Capturing the essence of your story in a couple of paragraphs is a huge challenge, and it can take a lot of work to get it just right.

Do you critique or beta read for other writers? What is the value in that?

Absolutely! I would never have finished this book without my critique partners.

There's this image of a novelist as a solitary creature, sitting in a cabin with a beautiful view, pounding out pages. They'll emerge at some point with a finished draft, ready to serve up to beta readers. And honestly...that sounds amazing! But as someone with two young kids, that's not going to be my reality anytime soon. And I'm not sure it would suit me, honestly. I tend to do a lot of critique in real time with my beta partners, exchanging a couple of chapters a week, discussing, then taking time to pause and course-correct as needed. If I did a whole draft without feedback along the way, that thing would be a mess.

I also really enjoy beta reading shorter pieces for other folks in my writing communities. Learning to give and receive feedback is so important, and it's a skill I try to practice as often as I can.

Finally, what tools in the literary space/community have been the most helpful in your writing process?

I'll put my plug for writing contests here! Sometimes, a frenzied weekend with a bizarre set of prompts is just what I need to shake off a writing slump. Many competitions also offer formal feedback and/or have a space, like a Facebook group or forum, where you can swap critiques with other participants. It can be a good way to find a writing community.

Classes are also great. I'm a big fan of continuing-education courses, library writing groups, and the like. I've participated in several of those over the years. I'm a deadline-driven person, so having regular pressure to prepare material gives me a needed nudge. As a bonus, they're often reasonably priced, and since anyone can join, there's usually a nice variety of folks from differing backgrounds and stages of their writing journey.

Source: <https://nelsonagency.com/2022/05/interview-with-shelby-van-pelt/>

Reviews

Booklist Reviews

Starred Review In the sleepy town of Sowell Bay, Washington, Tova Sullivan stands on the precipice of a new life. There's nothing left for her in her childhood home. Her husband is dead, and her son Erik drowned many years ago. With her grief threatening to consume her, Tova considers how she's going to move on while finding comfort in her job at the local aquarium. She's made friends with an intelligent octopus, Marcellus, who also provides his perspective on the matter. Especially adept at crawling out of his tank, Marcellus is searching for meaning as he comes to terms with the end of his own short life. Additionally, readers meet Cameron Cassmore, a Californian in Sowell Bay looking for his lost father, and Ethan Mack, a grocery-store owner who fancies Tova. As her involvement with both men deepens, Tova questions her intention to leave. Tova's gentle relationship with Marcellus is the heart of Van Pelt's debut. The octopus' point of view, though unusual, brings a magical haze to the novel, even as Tova and Marcellus realize their story is coming to an end. A unique and luminous book for fans of Eleanor Ray's *The Missing Treasures of Amy Ashton* (2021). Copyright 2022 Booklist Reviews.

Library Journal Reviews

Recently widowed Tova Sullivan copes with her grief by taking a job at the Sowell Bay Aquarium, where she works the night shift and befriends a giant Pacific octopus named Marcellus. Marcellus has little use for humans, but he likes Tova and wants to help her. Thirty years ago, her son disappeared on a boat somewhere in the Puget Sound, and Marcellus thinks he can figure out what happened. Another Octopus Teacher! The 200,000-copy first printing speaks volumes.

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Library Journal Reviews

DEBUT Marcellus, a giant Pacific octopus living in the Puget Sound's Sowell Bay Aquarium, is running on borrowed time as he nears the end of his life. He is befriended by Tova, the 70-year-old widow who cleans the aquarium and shines the glass of Marcellus's tank. Tova still grieves the disappearance of her only child Erik 30 years earlier, and the more recent death of her husband. Hundreds of miles away in California, Cam, a rock musician who's lost his band, his job, and his

girlfriend, finds the Sowell Bay High School class ring of his long-gone mother and heads out to track down the father he never knew. Cam's hard-luck life follows him north, and he eventually crosses paths with Tova when he is hired to take over her duties as she recovers from a workplace injury. Marcellus—a thief, escape artist with a mission, and brilliant observer of human behavior—narrates his chapters with a whip-smart wit born of his nine brains, three hearts, and the impatient urgency of wanting to help his beloved Tova before his time runs out. VERDICT Poet and short story writer Van Pelt has written an irresistibly wonderful, warm, funny, heartbreaking first novel, full of gentle people (and one octopus) bravely powering through their individual scars left by lives that have beaten them up but have not brought them down.—Beth E. Andersen

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Publishers Weekly Reviews

A cross-species friendship helps solve a pair of decades-old mysteries in Pelt's whimsical if far-fetched debut. After Tova Sullivan's husband dies, she takes a night job as janitor at an aquarium, where she enjoys talking to the sea creatures. She's particularly fond of Marcellus, a giant octopus who shies away from most human attention. But when Tova finds Marcellus out of his tank and helps him back to safety, he becomes fond of her. Meanwhile, Cameron Cassmore comes to town looking for his long-lost father and joins Tova on the night shift, disrupting her routine. However, the two soon realize that Cameron's mother, who disappeared after leaving him with an aunt when he was nine, and Tova's son, who died after falling off a boat decades earlier, might have known each other. Marcellus, who lived in the sea before his capture, is the only creature who knows for sure. Pelt imbues Tova, Cameron, and Marcellus with pathos, but her abrupt cycling between their perspectives can be disorienting, and her no-frills prose is ill-suited for the anthropomorphic conceit at the story's core. While the premise intrigues, this fantastical take on human-animal connection requires a bit too much suspended disbelief. Agent: Kristin Nelson, Nelson Literary Agency. (May)

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