



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 eighteen-year-old son, Erik, mysteriously vanished on a boat in Puget Sound over thirty 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.



About the Author

Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, Shelby Van Pelt lives in the suburbs of Chicago with her family. She is a longtime flash fiction and short story writer, and has had several collections published by independent presses.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of person do you think Marcellus would be if he were human? What qualities do Marcellus and Tova both share that make this remarkable friendship a success?
2. Each of these characters --- animal and human --- need each other in a specific way, even if they don't realize this at first. What qualities bind these characters to each other? Are they connected by loss, grief or something else?
3. On page 9, Tova empathizes with the sharks in the big aquarium tank, musing that she "understands what it means to never be able to stop moving, lest you find yourself unable to breathe." Why do you think she feels so compelled to keep busy? What would happen if she simply stopped?
4. In contrast to how Tova keeps busy, Cameron emerges as a character who deals with grief by remaining stagnant, refusing to even try to reach his potential, much to the frustration of those who care about him. Why do you think he sabotages himself? Have you ever had someone like this in your life?
5. Marcellus is extremely smart --- smarter than any human he encounters. Have you had encounters with animals --- octopuses or otherwise --- who demonstrated surprising levels of intelligence, emotional or otherwise? Have you felt "seen" by an animal or felt a relationship with an animal deepen upon earning their trust?
6. **REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES** takes place in a Pacific Northwest coastal town in the recent past. The watery Puget Sound setting plays a major role in the plot, but how else does the setting inform the novel? How do you think the novel would be different if it were set somewhere like Arizona or Minnesota?
7. Marcellus remarks on page 59 that "fingerprints are like keys, with their specific shape. I remember all keys, too." From the house key Tova loses to the ring of keys Marcellus finds at the bottom of the sea, the novel is filled with various types of keys. What do you think keys symbolize in this novel?
8. Tova reflects on her experience caring for her husband through his illness and eventual passing, and with no surviving family to do the same for her, she worries about being a burden on her friends as she ages. How do you view the role of community and family in caring for older people? How did Tova's views on this change throughout the book, and why do you think they did?

Discussion Questions cont'd

9. In the middle of the novel, on page 177, Cameron says to Tova, “conscience does make cowards of us all.” What do you think he means by this statement? Do you agree with this?

10. Tova’s Swedish Dala Horses are some of her most treasured possessions. Why do you think that is? Are there heirlooms in your family that carry a similar significance?

11. This novel explores different characters who are faced with major choices: they can open themselves up to something new and take an unexpected, daring opportunity, or they can continue on as they have been. Have you ever faced a moment in your life where a critical choice could change everything? Did you take the leap or not?

12. Marcellus’ life in captivity is much different than the life of an octopus in the wild --- and eventually, Terry reveals that Marcellus was rescued from the sea after a life-threatening injury. Aquariums play an important role in education and conservation, but some people view keeping animals, especially intelligent ones, in captivity with skepticism. What do you think?

13. In the last few pages of the novel, Tova and Cameron realize how they are truly connected. What do you imagine they are doing a year from the novel’s end?

Interview with Shelby Van Pelt

Tallahj Curry

May 20, 2022

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.

Interview with Shelby Van Pelt cont'd

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 deadlinedriven 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.