



Book Club Set

Remarkably Bright Creatures

By Shelby Van Pelt

About the Author

Shelby Van Pelt's debut novel, *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, was published by Ecco/HarperCollins (US) and Bloomsbury (UK) in 2022. Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, she's now missing the mountains in the Chicago area with her husband and two children.

About the Book

For fans of *A Man Called Ove*, a luminous debut novel about a widow's unlikely friendship with a giant Pacific octopus reluctantly residing at the local aquarium—and the truths she finally uncovers about her son's disappearance 30 years ago. 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 the Puget Sound over 30 years ago.

As she works, 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 tentacles for his human captors—until he forms an unlikely friendship with Tova.

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

Charming, compulsively readable, and full of wit, Shelby Van Pelt's debut novel is a beautiful exploration of friendship, reckoning, and hope—a reminder that sometimes taking a hard look at the past can help uncover a future that once felt impossible.

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?
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?

Author Interview

Q. What was your inspiration for *Remarkably Bright Creatures*?

A. An internet video, of all things! This was a few years ago, and I saw this clip of an octopus who was determined to escape its enclosure, and I just thought...there's a character in there. A little while later, I was in a writing workshop, and we had this prompt to write from an unexpected point of view, so my mind immediately went to that octopus. Exasperated and frustrated at the bumbling humans who were trying to keep him confined. The scene that I wrote in that class eventually became the first pages of this novel.

Q. Are Tova, Marcellus, Cameron, or any of the other characters in the novel inspired by or based on specific individuals (or creatures)?

A. Tova is loosely based on my late grandmother. Like Tova, she was a tiny Swedish woman who was as sweet as she was stoic. Emotionally inscrutable. Everything was always just fine. She kept herself busy, always. Cleaning, ironing, crocheting, crosswording. I rarely saw her idle. And like the inspiration with Marcellus, it just kind of occurred to me that there's a character in there. In that person who seems to always keep their world in motion, perhaps in fear of the reality that stillness might bring.

Q. How familiar were you with the giant Pacific octopus prior to writing *Remarkably Bright Creatures*? Did you have to do a bit of research?

A. I did a lot of research! But most of it happened after I'd already become quite attached to Marcellus, as a character, and his personality. I don't know whether a captive octopus would be capable of such a snarky disposition, but I did want the logistics of what he was perceiving and doing, physically, to be somewhat believable, if at a stretch.

For the basics, I relied on nature journalists like Sy Montgomery, whose wonderful nonfiction book *Soul of an Octopus* helped me shape some of the interactions between Marcellus and Tova. I spent a lot of time just observing at aquariums, hoping to have an octopus moment. And while those moments of connection were rare, they were always worth the wait. It's something about their eyes. They truly seem to see us, in a way that's almost a bit unnerving.

In addition, I sent sections I'd written about Marcellus to friends and contacts who work in marine biology and asked them to call my bluff when I'd gone too far. I did want Marcellus to feel real and possible, even though he's a fantasy character. It was a tricky line to walk!

Q. What was the most interesting or surprising thing that you learned during your research?

A. Probably that an octopus's brains are everywhere. Literally, their neurons are largely spread among their eight arms, instead of concentrated in a central brain, like humans. So, you know that multi-tasking meme where an octopus is doing eight different things with each of its arms? Like reading eight different books, or whatever? It's closer to the truth than we might realize. They really do have a brain, of sorts, in each arm. Other research has suggested that, perhaps because of this neural arrangement, octopuses have a sensory experience that is wholly unlike ours. Like, imagine if you could eat a hunk of excellent chocolate and taste it with your entire body. It's fascinating.

Q. Do you have a favorite band t-shirt that would devastate you if lost or mistaken for a rag?

A. Not exactly, but in a similar vein, I would be heartbroken if anything happened to my Boston Marathon jacket. Qualifying had been a goal for years, and I finally made the mark in 2012, only to run in 2013 with the bombing, which was a terrifying experience as I was very close when it happened. So, this long-coveted blue-and-yellow windbreaker is just stuffed in the back of my closet, and I'm weirdly conflicted about ever wearing it, but also super protective of it. And I haven't run another marathon since. That had nothing to do with writing or music, sorry! But I think that windbreaker was in my head when I wrote that scene.

Q. Do you still have your high school class ring?

A. No, I never bought one! I remember the advertisement flier going around during senior year, though. I do still have my high school letter jacket. I was a cross-country and track kid, and I loved that jacket! It's something I'll hang on to forever. I guess I have a thing about jackets?

Q. As a debut author, what have you learned during the process of getting your novel published that you would like to share with other writers about this experience?

A. After I signed with my agent (the amazing Kristin Nelson of Nelson Literary), she shared with me a bit about their process. And she told me that her associate, Maria, who takes a first pass at submissions, had written on the margin of my query letter: "this is either bananas or brilliant." I mean...it was bananas. But Kristin took a chance and read this "bananas" submission and agreed to work with me!

So, I guess my advice is: do the bananas thing. I know I had an incredible amount of luck on my side, but I can easily imagine a scenario where I tucked this character and manuscript away on the assumption that literary fiction narrated by an octopus would never be marketable. Really, you just never know. Rejection always sucks (and I have

had plenty of rejection on the short-story side of my writing life) but aside from the time and emotion you must invest, it really does not hurt to try.

Q. What was your favorite book when you were a child?

A. I loved *The Westing Game*. I still love *The Westing Game*. As a kid, I was enthralled by the wordplay and the mystery. And the unfurling of that mystery continues to thrill me when I reread as an adult.

But *The Westing Game*'s characters also shine. The constant shifts in of point of view somehow seem totally natural. And every time I re-read the book, I remain in awe of Ellen Raskin's ability to make readers care about at least sixteen different people, some of them having no more than a few lines here and there. It's a masterpiece, and a master class in both character and plot, and a highly enjoyable story, all in one.

Q. Was there a book you felt you needed to hide from your parents?

A. I absolutely do, and I don't think I've ever fessed up to it! It was the *Sweet Valley High* book featuring Regina Morrow, girlfriend of notorious heartthrob Bruce Patman. I can still picture how dazzled I was by the artwork of her on the cover, with her fluffy feathered hair. Anyway, she dies of a cocaine overdose at a house party. Super heavy stuff.

I consumed a lot of "teenage" books when I was a preteen, but that one hit hard. I was maybe eleven at the time, and I remember burying it in the library stack on return day so my parents wouldn't look too closely at it and potentially impose some rules around my reading habits. I'll tell you what, though...the schtick worked. Even to this day, anytime I hear the word cocaine, I think of poor Regina Morrow. I would never touch the stuff!

Q. Is there a book you've faked reading?

A. I totally whiffed on *The Scarlet Letter* in high school. I did read some of it, I think. I wrote some essays that went on these wild tangents about symbolism that had very little to do with the book, trying to make myself sound smart. No idea what grade I got, but I passed the class. And I don't even have anything against *The Scarlet Letter*! It's a classic! But I think it was senior year and I was just checked out of school at that point.

Q. Can you name a book you've bought for the cover?

A. Most recently, Chuck Klosterman's nonfiction book, *The Nineties*. The cover is just a photo of one of those clear plastic phones where you can see the neon parts inside...I wanted that phone so badly when I was a young teenager! I had such a nostalgic and emotional reaction to that cover. Sold!

Q. Is there a book that changed your life?

A. That's a hard question. Growing up as an only child, I think books generally changed my life in a rather big way. I spent a lot of time reading. I do remember this period in my twenties, early thirties maybe, before I'd ever set out to write much fiction myself, where I was reading a handful of authors that really made me take notice of the craft of writing, and storytelling, in a way I hadn't before. John Irving, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro. I'm still in awe of the heavy hitters!

Q. What is the question that you're always hoping you'll be asked, but never have been? What is your answer?

A. I'm surprised I've never been asked, not directly anyway, why Marcellus doesn't just leave the aquarium. Especially since one of the most well-known-on-the-internet octopus escape artists, the infamous Inky from New Zealand, does exactly that. Finds a drain. Goes home.

And the answer, of course, is that Marcellus is afraid of change, just like the rest of the characters in the book. In earlier drafts, I had him ruminating on the possibility of escaping in a more direct way, but I ended up cutting those sections back because I don't think he's quite self-aware enough to realize that he feels that way. It's one of the things that lets us, as humans, find common ground with him, I think.

Q. What are you working on now?

A. I'm always dabbling in flash fiction and short stories, and I do have another novel in the works, although it's early in the process. There's no octopus involved, at least not at the moment, but it does feature an unusual narrator. And like *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, it deals with characters who are kind of stuck within their own misbeliefs about themselves, in need of connection and community—and closure, for unanswered questions from the past. It's a very different setting, though, and although I really do miss spending my days with Marcellus and Tova, it's been fun getting to know this new cast of characters!

Other Links and Resources

Meagan's Book Club – Author Interview: Shelby Van Pelt, author of "Remarkably Bright Creatures":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGJavgzVy48>

TODAY with Hoda & Jenna – 'Remarkably Bright Creatures' Author Answers Reader's Questions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3L24A2-SzQ>

National Geographic Animals 101: Octopuses Video:

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/animals-101-octopuses/>

The National Wildlife Federation Octopuses:

<https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Invertebrates/Octopuses>

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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: