

Remarkably Bright Creatures – Review

By
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When trying to convince you to read *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, I could cite the masterful writing, and that's as good a place to start as any. There's Shelby Van Pelt's fresh use of figurative language. Similes like the one Cameron uses to describe the Washington state shoreline as "a monster with hundreds of long fingers...gripping the edge of the continent, tendrils of deep blue cutting channels through the dark green countryside in every unexpected way" (189) or like the one he uses for Ethan, the rough-edged but lovable grocery store manager, who's "got his brawny elbow slung like a freckled sausage on the rim of the open window" (190). And there are Ms. Van Pelt's evocative metaphors, many attempting to capture the ineffable qualities of grief, such as Tova staring one night at the ocean where her son drowned years before recounting how "Moonlight shimmies across the water, a thousand candles bobbing on its surface. Tova closes her eyes, imagining him underneath the surface, holding the candles for her. Erik. Her only child" (11).

The book surprises in all the right ways. There are two ticking time bombs introduced that add tension and a sense of urgency to the unfolding narrative. There's Tova's evolving plan to move to Charter Village (a plush retirement community) and Marcellus's impending death, which could come sooner from *The Consequences*. These fast-coming finalities give every revelation, no matter how seemingly small, a heightened sense of significance.

There's also Van Pelt's adept shifting between voices and time. I enter any book that relays its story through multiple perspectives with a degree of skepticism—aside from *The Sound and the Fury*, because I trust William Faulkner to handle anything, and to not make his shifting narrative voices feel gimmicky or experimental or a lame attempt at making a novel seem more deep, as is sometimes the case. When reading books with shifting points of view, I also anticipate that I will favor one voice over the other. That I will find one character more compelling or more necessary to the narrative trajectory. But that was not at all the case with *Remarkably Bright Creatures*. Rather than the shifting feeling like some hip structural choice, the changes between points of view felt necessary, with each section providing a piece of the unfolding story that the previous character or characters could not.

When I first looked into the book and learned that one of the central characters who would be relaying the tale was an octopus—Marcellus McSquiddles, I was also skeptical of this—far more skeptical than curious. Yet again, Ms. Van Pelt managed to make what could have been a random choice seem authentic to the narrative, even needed.

By the book's end, I found myself counting the Marcellus sections among my favorite parts. He became perhaps the character I felt most connected to, and not simply because his sections are the only ones written in first person—an anomaly the author pulls off seamlessly. As a nonhuman, Marcellus offers insights the others can't and provides a lens through which readers

can view the book's setting and characters, and humans in general, in a fresh and satisfyingly unexpected way.

After reading the book, I found myself compelled to finally watch the 2020 Netflix documentary, *My Octopus Teacher*, which I've been meaning to watch since it first came out. I felt I owed Marcellus at least that much, to be someone who tried to better understand and see him in the same way he helped me and the characters in the book understand so much about life and each other. While watching *My Octopus Teacher*, I wondered if Ms. Van Pelt watched this same documentary. From her closing remarks in the back of the book, it seems the novel's genesis came well before, but, having completed her novel during the height of the pandemic, she would have still been in process.

Through its three central characters (Marcellus McSquiddles included), the book probes deeply into what it means to experience loss and the multi-dimensional and often endless nature of grief. Loss is present in a palpable way from the moment we meet each of the them—from seventy-year-old Tova, to the newly-thirty Cameron, to the giant Pacific octopus who feels himself nearing death. Each of their lives is shrouded by what is missing, or by what should have been but never was.

In the book's initial paragraphs, Marcellus recounts, "I await the click of the overhead lights, leaving only the glow from the main tank. Not perfect, but close enough. Almost-darkness, like the middle bottom of the sea. I lived there before I was captured and imprisoned. I cannot remember, yet I can still taste the untamed currents of the cold open water" (1). We later learn that Marcellus was found injured and seemingly unable to survive in the ocean, that he was brought to the aquarium once rescued. But saved at what cost? He lost his freedom and his home, and then there are all the life experiences he never got to have, stuck in his glass tank.

When we first meet Tova, we are told she spends her night cleaning the aquarium where Marcellus lives "Because, it's something to do" (4). In the same section, we learn that she lost her husband a few years back to pancreatic cancer, that her only son drowned, that before her mother died she had to "[watch] her late mother's mind slip away" (9). That when watching the sharks and their endless laps around their tank, "[Tova] understands what it means to never be able to stop moving, lest you find yourself unable to breathe" (9).

While Tova has lost much in her life, including, most recently, her estranged brother, it is the loss of her son that has most profoundly made grief color all aspects of her life. As Tova acknowledges, "nothing is normal when you lose a child" (140)

Reading Tova recount the various ways she experienced and still experiences the loss of her son and witnessing all the small and big ways this grief weighs on her and tears her apart, I found myself picturing my mother-in-law's parents last June at the funeral of their eldest daughter—my mother-in-law. I can still see her 92-year-old mother draping her frail arms over the coffin, clinging as if unable or unwilling to let go, her tears dripping onto the coffin's slick surface. And her 96-year-old father standing just behind his wife, head bowed, his eyes glassy, his face contorted in pain. And I recognize that even when you lose a child who's in their sixties, it's still too soon for a parent to let go.

Losing her son when he was only 18, Tova has had decades to feel that heart-ripped-from-your-chest pain. Even now, years later, when she discovers a photograph of her son she's never seen before, it "hurts to look at" it (85).

Loss has also defined and shaped Cameron's life in many ways. In a way that's more similar to Marcellus than Tova, Cameron's loss lies in what he's never really had—present parents. His drug addict mother passed him off to be raised by his aunt when he was only nine and he hasn't seen her since. He's never known who his dad is, and that not knowing has also left its marks. This lack of parents and a traditional upbringing seems to have defined for Cameron what he can do, or, more significantly, what he can't do—like keep a job or truly succeed at any part of life. At 30, he's floundering, having just lost another job, followed by his girlfriend, and then there's the disintegration of his beloved band—Moth Sausage.

Though smart enough to quote Shakespeare and impressively capable at fixing things, he sees himself as a permanent outsider and lacks the confidence to be anything other than a failure. He goes through life "feeling...like an intruder spying on the typical human experience, an outsider looking in on normal, which is always just out of his grasp" (117). And his new boss when he starts working at the aquarium aptly notes, "I expect you're the sort that's had plenty of chances. Opportunities you don't even realize. But you throw them away" (147).

Marcellus, Tova, and Cameron all have a seemingly unfillable hole inside (a lost child, absent parents, a lost habitat and lost freedom). This hole of loss makes each of them feel like an outsider, like an observer in life rather than a participant. All three of these characters also find themselves facing one of life's precipices—aging, adulthood, death.

As Tova sifts through her own belongings, considering what to take with her into her next stage of life, the book presses readers to consider the objects we fill our lives with and to think about how each connects us to past moments or periods of our life, to the people we love or have loved before. These things that we attach with meaning and hold on to can be big, like a house built decades before by our own father, like a refinished attic turned playroom that never knew enough laughter and play. Or they can be small things—a found key, a concert T-shirt, a porcelain elephant (or a room full of them), a small, red wooden horse brought from our ancestor's homeland.

We see Marcellus consider the small treasures he keeps hidden in his tank, some because of their value to him, some because of their value to others. We see the way Cameron repeatedly rejects objects connected to his own past before finally realizing that some of them might actually mean something, that some might have the power to change his life. These big and small things the characters keep often hold the power to further or to heal present-day relationships. Some of these objects also have the ability to prevent or break developing connections, and to hurt the people who hold onto them.

Watching Tova, Marcellus, and Cameron weigh out their own belongings, readers are forced to confront all we hold onto and why—sort of like watching an episode of *Hoarders*, but with a more emotionally-charged aim. Rather than accusing us of some pathology, Ms. Van Pelt seems

more intent on asking readers and her main characters to weigh the value of each item, to relive each memory, before deciding whether or not it's time to let go. This is no Marie Kondo decluttering, not a time to ask "Which items spark joy?" Rather, it is a nudge to revisit our past, as represented by all we hold onto, while we consider which of those things—big and small—we want to bring with us into our future. Because, as Tova reminds, "You don't recover [from the past]. Not all the way. But you do move on. You have to" (346).