

Book Review: Remarkably Bright Creatures
By Shelby Van Pelt

It's great to read an author's debut novel. It's also great when that debut novel turns out to be just that: great.

Shelby Van Pelt's debut novel, "Remarkably Bright Creatures," is a delightful story of family, freedom, loss and love that is hard to put down. Set primarily in Washington State, the story is told from alternating perspectives of three very interesting characters: Tova Sullivan, a 70-year-old woman who cleans the Sowell Bay Aquarium; Cameron Cassmore, a 30-year old living in Modesto, California who can't seem to hold down a job; and Marcellus, an aging giant Pacific octopus.

Tova has experienced her share of grief. Her son, Erik, died at age 18 in a boating accident, though the police labeled it a suicide. Her husband died from cancer a few years ago, and early in the story her older brother, Lars, passes away. She finds solace in her nighttime cleaning duties at the aquarium, and occasional lunches with a small group of women of a like age who have dubbed themselves the Knit-Wits.

Cameron has just been tossed out onto the street by his girlfriend when she learns he has been fired from yet another job (and lied to her about it). He never knew his father, and was raised by his aunt Jeanne after his mother abandoned him at a young age. After finding an old photo of his mother with a young man who has gone on to become renowned Seattle-based real estate developer Simon Brinks, Cameron is convinced Brinks is his father and becomes determined to find him and make him pay all his back child support.

Marcellus, a most unlikely but just as likable protagonist, is known for getting into mischief by periodically escaping from his tank at the aquarium. After Tova rescues him one evening from an entanglement with electrical cords, they bond. He's also quite bright (this is factual, according to oceanconservancy.org), and becomes determined to help Tova learn what truly happened to her son Erik 30 years ago.

As you might expect, all three of these lives (and a few others) intersect. But it's not the surprises or massive plot twists that make "Remarkably Bright Creatures" an excellent read. The narrative is very well written, and the characters – complete with all their flaws and blemishes – are worth caring about. Likely because it's easy to see much of ourselves in them.

The sections narrated by Marcellus are perhaps the most interesting and revealing. His musings about humans, from their behavior to the expressions they use, are priceless – and spot-on accurate. Because who among us hasn't looked at our pet dog or cat and thought out loud, I wonder what he's thinking. Now, at least in the case of a giant Pacific octopus, we know.

I read "Remarkably Bright Creatures" because it was selected by the book club I belong to as a refreshing change from some of the more 'heavy' topics we've recently engaged. And it was one hundred percent the right prescription.

I'm giving "Remarkably Bright Creatures" a full 5 out of 5 stars; highly recommended. And if this debut novel is any indication of the level of literary quality we can expect from Van Pelt's future work, bring it on.