

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Shelby Van Pelt’s debut novel, *REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES*, will be published by Ecco/HarperCollins (US) and Bloomsbury (UK) in Spring 2022.

Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, she’s now missing the mountains in the Chicago area with her husband and two children.

[Author’s website.](#)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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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’s 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?

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

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).

### Publisher's Weekly

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)

### Library Journal

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

## Kirkus Reviews

A lonely woman discovers that sometimes humans don't have all the answers. Tova Sullivan's best friend is an octopus. A giant Pacific octopus named Marcellus, to be precise, and he is that--the novel opens with the first of several short chapters narrated in the first person (unlike the rest of the book) by the octopus himself, who can, as he points out, do many things we don't know he can do. What he can't do is escape from captivity in a small public aquarium in the fictional town of Sowell Bay, near Puget Sound. Tova, too, has lived in the town for most of her life, in a house built by her father. At age 70, she's stoic but lives with layers of grief. Her estranged brother has just died, with no reconciliation between them, and her beloved husband died a couple of years before from cancer. But the unsealable wound is the disappearance 30 years ago of her only child. Erik was an 18-year-old golden boy when he vanished, and the police, although they found no body, believe he killed himself. Tova does not. She fills her days with visits with her longtime friends, a group of gently eccentric women who call themselves the Knit-Wits, and fills her nights cleaning at the aquarium. There, she prides herself on keeping the glass and concrete scrupulously clean while chatting with the inhabitants, although she saves her deep conversations for Marcellus. Lately she's been concerned about the way he's been escaping from his tank and cruising through the other enclosures for live snacks--and sometimes visiting nearby rooms, which risks his life. Tova is too preoccupied to pay attention to the sweet but awkward flirting of Ethan, the Scotsman who runs the grocery store, but she does get drawn into the complicated life of a young man named Cameron who wanders into Sowell Bay. Although Tova and other characters are dealing with serious problems like loss, grief, and aging, Van Pelt maintains a light and often warmly humorous tone. Tova's quest to figure out what happened to Erik weaves her back into other people's lives--and occasionally into someone's tentacles. A debut novel about a woman who befriends an octopus is a charming, warmhearted read. Copyright (c) Kirkus Reviews, used with permission.

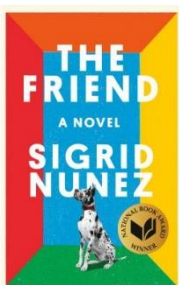
## READALIKES

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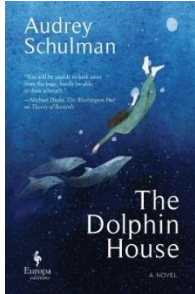
### ***The Reading List* by Sara Nisha Adams**

An unforgettable and heartwarming debut about how a chance encounter with a list of library books helps forge an unlikely friendship between two very different people in a London suburb.



### ***The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez**

When a woman unexpectedly loses her lifelong best friend and mentor, she finds herself burdened with the unwanted dog he has left behind. Her own battle against grief is intensified by the mute suffering of the dog, a huge Great Dane traumatised by the inexplicable disappearance of its master, and by the threat of eviction: dogs are prohibited in her apartment building.



***The Dolphin House* by Audrey Schulman**

Based on the true story of the 1965 "dolphin house" experiment, this spellbinding novel captures the tenor of the social experiments of the 1960s in award-winning author Audrey Schulman's tightly paced and evocative style.