

Remarkably Bright Creatures by Shelby Van Pelt

Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, Shelby Van Pelt now lives in the suburbs of Chicago with her family. Her debut novel, *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, was a Lake Forest Reads title.

1. What kind of person do you think Marcellus would be if he were human? What qualities do Marcellus and Tova share that make this remarkable friendship a success?
2. Each of the characters in the novel—animal and human—need each other in a specific way, even if they don't realize it at first. What qualities bind the characters to each other? Are they connected by loss, grief, or something else?
3. Early in the novel, 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. Some negative reviews of the book focused on Cameron and his lack of maturity. What did you think of him and how important is he to the narrative?
6. 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?
7. *Remarkably Bright Creatures* takes place in a coastal town in the Pacific Northwest 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?
8. Marcellus remarks, “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?

Remarkably Bright Creatures by Shelby Van Pelt

9. Tova reflects on her experience caring for her husband through his illness and eventual passing. 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 and why did Tova's views on this change throughout the book?
10. In the middle of the novel, 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?
11. 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?
12. Marcellus's life in captivity is much different than the life of an octopus in the wild. 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 are skeptical about keeping animals, especially intelligent ones, in captivity. What do you think?
13. The dictionary definition of a prisoner is "a person deprived of liberty and kept under involuntary restraint, confinement, or custody," whereas an escape artist is "someone (such as a performer or criminal) unusually adept at escaping from confinement." Which do you think better describes Marcellus?
14. The book uses a chapter device which toggles between a diary-style look into Marcellus's confinement and a broader, traditionally linear narrative. Did this format work for you?
15. "Like a tawny snake, one of his arms slithers toward her. In seconds, it winds around her forearm, then twists around her elbow and bicep like a maypole ribbon." This rather descriptive statement is typical of the book's writing style. Did you like the writing?
16. In the last few pages of the novel, Tova and Cameron realize how they are truly connected. Is that the resolution you were hoping for? What do you imagine they are doing a year from the novel's end?
17. The book starts by describing octopuses as remarkably bright creatures, but at the end, Marcellus says, "Humans. For the most part, you are dull and blundering. But occasionally, you can be remarkably bright creatures." In your opinion, which "creature characters" in this book were brighter? Which were duller?