

Stoic widow meets octopus

Remarkably Bright Creatures

Shelby Van Pelt, *Ecco*, 2022

Tova Sullivan, a longtime resident of the tiny town of Sowell Bay, mops floors, empties trash, and generally tidies up every night at the local aquarium, which overlooks Puget Sound.

The Knit-Wits, a ladies' meeting group whose four remaining members have not yet left town to be supported by their children, disapprove of her job: she is too small (under 5 feet tall), too old (70), and too good to be a janitor (not said in so many words). But Tova, who took the job shortly after her husband's death, needs a place to be "alone with her thoughts, when she needs a break from being alone in her house. When even the television can't punch through the unbearable quiet."

The quiet is not just the absence of a 47-year-long marriage; it's also the absence of Erik, her brilliant, athletic son, who at age 18, went to work one July evening 30 years ago and never returned. Everybody in town "knows" it was suicide. Tova knows better, but she has to believe without evidence, because there was none: just a sailboat gone adrift with its anchor cable cut.

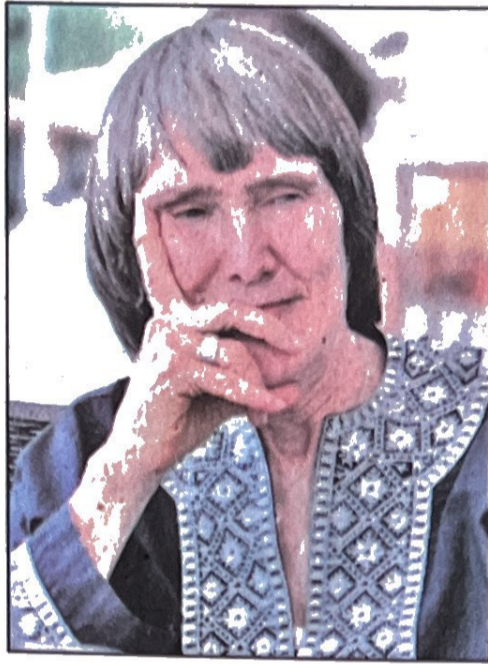
Into this extraordinarily perceptive portrait of Tova's busy loneliness and grief there appears a giant Pacific octopus, Marcellus McSquiddles, who has escaped his tank in the Aquarium, raided the trash, and become entangled in the power cords under the staff break room table. Tova frees him, and in what seems like gratitude, he wraps one of his tentacles around her arm and squeezes before slithering back to his tank. It is gratitude; Marcellus, in return for Tova's silence about his nightly excursions into other tanks (tasting a clam here, a sea cucumber there), becomes a valued friend to whom she can talk about Erik, her brother's death, and her reluctant

plans to move into a retirement home. The friendship means so much to her that she limps back to the Aquarium even after a sprained ankle keeps her from her janitorial duties.

Tova's replacement as janitor is Cameron Cassmore, a bright, charming 30-year-old Californian unable to outgrow his teenaged assumption that since his drug-addicted mother abandoned him with his aunt when he was 9, all his many failures are her fault, not his. We meet him at the nadir of his career. The girlfriend with/on whom he lived has thrown him out after he has been fired once again. Aunt Jeanne won't take him in; instead she gives him a collection of things his mother left for him, including a 1989 high school ring from Sowell Bay High School wrapped in a picture of his teenaged mom with her arm around a guy he's never seen. Adept online searches identify the guy as Simon Brinks, now a wealthy Washington state real estate developer. Cash! Cameron borrows money from Aunt Jeanne and flies north, planning to sue Brinks for a lifetime of unpaid child support. Unfortunately, his luggage (and with it the jewelry he has planned to pawn) gets lost in transit, and when he reaches Sowell Bay, Brinks is "unavailable."

Seeing Cameron's plight, the owner of the local grocery store, who has a secret crush on Tova, tells him about her sprained ankle, and suggests he should apply for her job. He does, and thus he meets Marcellus, witnesses the friendship, and unexpectedly develops a reluctant respect and affection for Tova, which Marcellus does everything he can to promote.

If you are looking for a compelling, amusing, and definitely nonsentimental book to read this summer, read this one. The characters (including but not limited to the octopus) are deftly drawn and completely believable. The Puget Sound setting is beautifully described, and the portrait of a brave elderly woman who is determined not to be overcome by life's tragedies is amazingly bright.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

