



Original Article

**Loneliness, Loss and Human Connection in Shelby Van Pelt's
*Remarkably Bright Creatures***

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Abstract:

Remarkably Bright Creatures (2022) authored by Shelby Van Pelt is a contemporary novel. It is a story about loneliness, loss, grief, companionship, family dynamics, and the goodness of human connections. The fictional coastal town setting of Sowell Bay, in Washington, the US, brings together all the unrelated individuals whose lives are influenced by differing experiences of loss and isolation. Tova Sullivan is a seventy-year-old widow, struggling with the unsolved disappearance of her son, Erik and the death of her husband, Will. Cameron Cassmore is a thirty-year-old man, lonely, abandoned in his childhood by an absent mother and an unknown father, has an uncertain identity. Marcellus, a highly intelligent giant Pacific octopus, experiences another form of sadness through captivity and separation from his natural environment. Besides them, Ethan, Avery, the Knit-Wits, Aunt Jeanne, and other people of the Sowell Bay community show different types of loneliness, loss, care, and companionship. This study examines Van Pelt's portrayal of loneliness as physical isolation and an emotional condition arising from bereavement, abandonment, ageing, displacement, unresolved questions, and the inability to communicate inner suffering. And loss as a tough experience involving death, disappearance, broken relationships, lost freedom, unrealised possibilities, and imagined futures is also explored. The study focuses on the novel's development which goes from isolation and loss faced by the characters, to connection, belonging, healing, and renewed hope.

Keywords: Loneliness; Loss; Human Connection; Grief; Companionship; Belonging; Healing; Family; Friendship; Human-Animal Relationship; Emotional Isolation; Community; Hope.

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Introduction:

Shelby Van Pelt born in 1981, is a rising American author. *Remarkably Bright Creatures* is her debut novel of 2022 and has achieved literary recognition. She is from Tacoma in Washington and worked as a financial advisor before writing fiction. Her bestselling, singular novel is known for its unique non-human narration by a Pacific octopus named Marcellus. The novel has sold millions of copies worldwide and inspired a film by Netflix of the same name.

In today's world, bustling with challenges involving diversity, differences and the rise of digital spaces and connections post-lockdown, loneliness is commonly felt in the everyday life of people. Our days start and end with text messages and online gossip and the simplicity of real-life connections has frayed over time.

Remarkably Bright Creatures is one such feel-good, slice-of-life style novel exploring loneliness, and companionship, and the unexpected ways fate works out for people. It shows isolation and the need for meaningful connections as it was written in lockdown. The mellow and humorous narrative moves through subjects like grief, isolation, alienation, identity, crises and belonging.

The story is mainly about Tova Sullivan and Cameron Cassmore's family mystery, Marcellus the Octopus' captivity, and other supporting characters' lives blending with theirs. The research problem is about loneliness and loss of the characters and the ways in which relationships and support systems help them to overcome those. The objectives of the study include: to study loneliness, loss and grief of the major characters, find out the importance of companionship and bonds, understand Tova's

feelings of alienation, and how relationships help them all to heal and gain positivity. The scope includes the book's depiction of themes like grief, seclusion, friendships, and gradual reconnection as experienced by the major and supporting characters. The main argument is how meaningful relationships and companionship help characters overcome their sadness and past losses in turn gaining support, healing, communion, and hope for a better future.

Theoretical Framework:

Relating to psychological perspectives on grief and loss, we see how death, disappearance and separation affect the characters. Grief is a complex mental response to various situations – be it loss of a loved one or disrupted relationships, causing anger, guilt, anxiety, fear, confusion, and challenges in acceptance. Psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross proposed the theory - five stages of grief in her book, *On Death and Dying* (1969), later elaborated in *On Grief and Grieving* (2005), co-authored with David Kessler. These are the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

After a loss, one gets numb due to shock, then frustrated, then tries to change the situation with “ifs” and “buts”. Soon the sadness settles; one might feel tired or isolated, and then finally the pain eases with time, and one starts living with their loss or change. Tova, Cameron, and other characters go through the same in the novel. They are troubled with their grief and frustrated with themselves and those around them. They learn with time to let go, grow out of their past and move on.



Certain existentialist elements and crises are also noticeable. Fear of death, not having a family to rely on in old age, and parental issues involving questioning of origin and identity are shown. Social support, companionship's significance, and the problems of abandonment are shown.

A Posthumanist viewpoint yields the importance of animals besides the human characters and how Marcellus, the Octopus, who becomes a friend to many, is not simply a symbol, but a sentient individual dealing with his lack of freedom and adapting to humans and their environment.

The ecocritical question is raised: whether it is right to rescue animals, keep them captive for the sake of their safety, or are they better off in the wild, surviving as they otherwise do in nature.

Loneliness in Remarkably Bright Creatures:

Loneliness causes deep inner insecurities and voids for the characters in the novel. They often feel alone and pessimistic.

Tova Sullivan: Loneliness Shaped by Widowhood, Aging, and the Absence of Family:

Tova is one of our primary protagonists. She has much loneliness and lasting grief. She is seventy and widowed. Her only son, Erik, disappeared at eighteen and was considered drowned. He was not recovered and Tova struggles to accept the case claimed as a suicide. This unknown disappearance leaves Tova very anxious and unsure. She constantly questions the past, her actions, and struggles to move ahead.

Her loneliness is very internalized, as the narrator says: "These women have always worn motherhood big and loud on their chests, but Tova keeps hers inside, sunk deep in her

guts like an old bullet. Private." (18) This "old bullet" metaphor suggests her grief is embedded inside her.

She continues her routine - cleaning, gardening, and meeting others but her pain remains hidden under these. Tova also feels lonely while being surrounded: "Sometimes she still feels as if she's a mistaken jigsaw piece who found her way into the wrong puzzle." (19)

This image captures her sense of exclusion. The Knit-Wits provide company to elderly ladies whose children grew up and moved away, but Tova's life is different because her child has disappeared. Her problems thus create an emotional barrier between her and her group: "Her void held no sweetness, only bitterness." (18)

Cameron Cassmore: Loneliness Caused by Abandonment and Absence:

Cameron has to face loneliness due to childhood abandonment. He never had a stable family. He was left with Aunt Jeanne by his mother Daphne when he was nine. A temporary separation ended up permanent: "The weekend turned into a week, then a month. Then a year." (34) He grows up without his mother and not knowing his biological father. He feels deeply incomplete and full of loneliness. There is absence of a family who should have been there for him.

His search for his father is due to curiosity, and a natural need to understand his roots and gain a sense of belonging. He explains to Snell: "My mother abandoned me when I was nine" and later admits, "I don't really have other family, you know?" (153). Aunt Jeanne is there for him but Cameron believes that she should not have to be responsible for him. His emotional instability is often visible. Messy relationship with Katie, housing difficulties,



fluctuating jobs, and lots of impulsive decisions. He is shown hiding his loneliness behind defence mechanisms - like using sarcasm, satire, humour and having arrogance and impulsiveness.

Marcellus, the Octopus: Loneliness By Captivity:

Marcellus' loneliness is through physical captivity and separation from his natural world. He is rescued after being injured in a fight with wolf eels and is placed inside the aquarium tank, far removed from the ocean and the freedom he once owned. Aware of his intelligence, captivity, and nearing death, he claims, "Darkness suits me" (1), a statement showing both resignation and isolation. Marcellus' sadness worsens as he's unable to communicate verbally with humans. Although he understands their behaviour and emotions, he cannot voice anything. His vast intelligence is for him, both a gift and a burden. His captivity matches human emotional confinement too. Tova feels this similarity and gets his attempts to escape through gaps in his tank. When Cameron asks why he escapes, Tova responds, "I believe he's bored", while Cameron remarks, "I guess it would suck to spend your whole life living in a tiny little tank." (182) Like Marcellus, Tova lives within a controlled environment that gives stability and restricts newness. This shared isolation of theirs starts an unusual yet loving bond.

Ethan Mack: Loneliness Hidden Beneath Sociability:

Ethan is the sixty-year-old Scottish owner of the local Shop-Way store, hiding his loneliness under extroversion and sociability. He helps Cameron by recommending the aquarium for a job and offers him his place to

stay, admitting, "It's nice having a bit of company." (261).

Ethan frequently converses with Tova and knows the town gossips, seeming quite socially connected. However, he has many personal losses. He grew up in a big family of fourteen and once imagined adult life in a "house bursting at the seams" (261). But his reality is different. His younger sister died due to a drunk-driving case and he was abandoned by Cindy, the lady he married. His concern for Tova and companionship with her and Cameron gradually relieve his isolation.

Avery: Being a Single Mother:

Avery, a successful young woman who owns a paddle shop, also feels lonely. She became pregnant at seventeen and faced great family pressure about her decision. She recalls that her family "Thought I'd be ruining my life, no matter what I did" (217), emphasizing how problematic others' opinions became. She is a single mother, and symbolizes independence with resilience.

The Knit-Wits: Collective Loneliness and Aging:

The Knit-Wits symbolize loneliness that comes with aging, mortality, time and its changes - "There were once seven Knit-Wits. Now there are four. Every few years brings another empty place at the table." (14) Their shrinking group is an inevitable loss, but their meet-ups become collective strength for loneliness. Thus, loneliness leaves its mark on the characters, each facing a different form. It paves the way for a common ground for reconnection.

Loss and its Different Forms:

Loss is one of the novel's deepest, most penetrating themes. It is shown by death,



disappearance, abandonment, distant relationships. Also by lost freedom, unrealized possibilities, imagined futures, dreams that never materialize. Van Pelt conveys how people grieve what they have lost plus what they could have had.

Tova Losing Erik: A Mother Losing Her Child:

The main loss in Tova's life is the disappearance of her son. After going sailing, Erik disappears, and his body is never found. His presumed death is ambiguous and prevents Tova and Will from getting normal grief or closure. Will's grief is also shown, he once broke the attic's window in despair. Even years later, Tova imagines children playing in that attic. Her grief is also for the life he never lived. While thinking about Tatum's pregnancy, she imagines Erik being in her place. She says, "He would've been a wonderful father." (335) Thus, Tova mourns her son plus the future he never had.

Tova Losing Will: Losing One's Partner:

Unlike Erik's disappearance, Will's death from pancreatic cancer is known and final. His death leaves Tova with memories of her dear husband and son. The house becomes very unbearable because it contains bits of her family and past. Eventually, she decides to sell it and move to Charter Village, telling Cameron it has "too many ghosts" (345). The house here is a symbol of emotional attachment and bittersweet memories.

Tova Losing Lars: Losing One's Sibling:

Tova's only brother Lars passes away, worsening her sadness, bringing an end to her family line. Time and grief affected the siblings and they had grown apart after Erik's incident. It is described by the tree metaphor: "But the

family tree stopped growing long ago, its canopy thinned and frayed, not a single sap springing from the old rotting trunk. Some trees aren't meant to sprout tender new branches, but to stand stoically on the forest floor, silently decaying." (236). Tova realizes that her family has finally disappeared now, leaving her with no future generations to inherit anything.

Cameron Losing his Parents and an Imagined, Normal Childhood:

Cameron's biggest loss is his mother, Daphne, who abandoned him in his childhood. It leaves him confused with "whys" and "what ifs". He repeatedly wonders why she left, whether she loved him, and if she is alive - why she never returned. He mourns a mother-son relationship that he never got. He also grows up without knowing his father. Naturally, he feels that his parents have abandoned him. His searching for his father is an attempt to gain a missing part of his identity. He is painfully disappointed when he finds out that Simon Brinks, whom he doubted, is not his father, just Daphne's close friend. Mourning the childhood and family he never had, he imagines what life could have been like with his parents and compares his situation with other normal families. Then he realizes that his ideal family exists only in his imagination. His loss is thus, of an imagined future.

Marcellus Losing His Freedom and Home:

Marcellus faces loss because of his captivity. The aquarium rescues and protects him but in the tank he remains separated from the ocean which is his natural home. The repeated chapter titles, "Day XYZ of My Captivity," emphasize his awareness about confinement. The ocean is freeing, gives a marine animal their identity and belonging, but the aquarium setting has safety at the cost of



freedom. Even the aquarium owner, Terry, is unsure if the animals are happy in the tanks but believes they are safer there. Loss similarly shapes Avery's life being a single mother. It affects Ethan's life after Cindy leaves. The Knit-Wits too experience aging and changing family dynamics. Thus, Van Pelt portrays loss as a messy web of absence of people, of possibilities, relationships, identities, and idealizations. It shows loss as unavoidable, but does leave room for new possibilities.

Human Connection as a Response to Loneliness and Loss:

Connection is shown as the novel's answer to loneliness and loss. Van Pelt suggests how healing is not completely removing past wounds. Rather, it comes from having meaningful and intentional relationships that provide strength, comfort and make us hope for the future.

Tova and Marcellus: Unexpected Bonding:

Tova and Marcellus develop a strange and deep bond. It begins through Tova's aquarium work but gradually becomes a comforting and empathetic presence. Marcellus helps solve the mystery of Erik and Cameron, while Tova helps him return back to the ocean. In this way, they heal each other's wounds.

Tova and Cameron: Found Family:

Tova and Cameron start out simply as co-workers but their bond grows way deeper. They share life incidences and become part of each other's daily routine. Marcellus helps reveal their relation later. This discovery gives both characters a family they never knew they had. For Tova, Cameron becomes a living heir from Erik. This transforms her understanding of loss and family.

Ethan with Tova, Cameron: Friendship and Support:

Tova and Ethan are good company for one another. Their gentle conversations hint a future relationship out of comfort, trust, gentleness, and mutual understanding. Ethan and Cameron develop a mutually beneficial friendship too. Ethan offers Cameron housing and employment and Cameron's presence lessens Ethan's loneliness, showing us what a mutual bond is. Conversations about music, drives, and shared experiences make them close despite occasional misunderstandings.

Tova and the Knit-Wits:

The Knit-Wits become Tova's reliable support system. Mary Ann, Barbara, and Janice visit her often, give her casseroles, reminding her she is not alone. Their continued friendship becomes their biggest strength during difficulties.

Cameron and Aunt Jeanne:

Aunt Jeanne is an example of how family is not defined solely by biology. After Daphne abandons Cameron, Jeanne raises and considers him "the blessing she never expected to have." (34) Their relationship is soft, genuine, full of care and comforting presence, and support that makes them a family.

Cameron and Avery: Mutual Vulnerability and Love:

Cameron and Avery develop a relationship based on honesty. They are vulnerable and mutually accept one another. Cameron shares his past, while Avery reveals her life as a single mother. They go paddleboarding, which allows them to have fun, laugh, relax, and be their younger selves. Cameron initially hesitates because Avery has a son, he later accepts her. Their relationship is not basic infatuation. It is genuine



understanding. They see and accept the good and bad in each other.

Avery and Marco: Parental Connection:

Avery's relationship with her son Marco represents security. Avery is responsible and has unconditional love for her child. Their ordinary activities - discussing groceries, chores, and laundry display the stability of a mother-son relationship. Cameron admires their bond. It is the family life he never experienced. Marco gives Avery purpose and motivation too.

Cameron, Elizabeth, Brad, and Elliot:

Cameron's childhood friends, Elizabeth and Brad, remain supportive despite him feeling like an outsider in their life. But they are present and offer shelter when he is homeless. Similarly, Elliot helps Cameron with food and his camper. These relationships show how friends help one another during hard times.

Terry's Connection with Tova, Cameron, and Marcellus:

Terry, the aquarium owner, provides care and support to Tova, Cameron, and Marcellus. He is compassionate for the marine animals and has environmental regard. His statement to Tova, "You're a lifesaver" (92), reinforces their mutual dependence. Together, all of these relationships create a supportive human-animal community.

Human-Animal Connection: Tova and Marcellus:

Marcellus is more than an aquarium-exhibited animal. He has intellect and emotional awareness. He exposes how humans feel confined in their lives; so do animals. This depicts the essence that connects all living creatures - emotions. Tova and Marcellus get each other's loneliness. Marcellus is empathetic towards her, helps her find out Cameron is her

grandson by stealing his license and fetching Erik's class ring to show her. Tova too helps Marcellus return to the sea. Tova confesses to him before parting, "I must thank you," and "You led me to him. My grandson," and "We must say goodbye, friend. But I'm glad Terry saved you, because you saved me." (333) In return, Marcellus narrates, "I did trust her with my life, more than once. Just as I trusted her with my death." (350) This shows their reciprocal, pure relationship, which surpasses human-animal differences.

From Isolation to Belonging:

The novel shows how loss causes loneliness and isolation but connection provides people the strength necessary to move forward. New relationships or people do not replace the lost ones. Cameron does not replace Erik for Tova and Ethan does not replace Will. But they do provide reasons to remain emotionally and socially engaged. The novel's progression from loneliness and loss - to new connections and belongingness is a positive depiction of life.

Memory, Grief and Healing:

For Tova, the death of her husband Will and brother Lars are important. She constantly thinks of Lars and their family home built by their Dad, how they got distant, and of Will and their time together. Even ordinary smells like the cleaning liquid at the aquarium reminds her of Will's illness and chemotherapy. Physical spaces hold memories. Her aquarium job provides structure and distraction, as her statement, "It's something to do" (92), reveals. Work is a coping mechanism, saving her from emptiness and giving her purpose. The same goes for Cameron and Ethan's past incidents. Their memories cannot be forgotten, but they do



heal by blending past losses into a new, better future. This is evident in Tova moving forward with her found family. Here, healing is not escaping one's past. Tova continues to grieve Erik, but she no longer allows grief to define her or her future. Cameron never finds his parents, but finds family, friendship, and love. Thus, Van Pelt's book suggests healing is building fresh starts with new people.

Community as a Source of Healing:

Sowell Bay's close-knit community is not just a geographical setting with its seaside and diversity among residents. It is also a symbol of belonging, co-existence, social support and collective wellness. Sandy tells Tova, "I never thought I'd live in a small town. Everyone's so friendly, but also so... I don't know. Up in everyone else's business?" to which Tova replies, "We prefer to say we care for one another." (240) The townspeople meet up, celebrate (For e.g., Mary Ann's farewell luncheon), help each other, and the Knit-Wits always motivate and extend their care and attention for Tova. Meanwhile, the aquarium is a place connecting the animals and humans, visitors and workers.

Most of them do not have a complete or conventional family, but they are all each other's "chosen family". This shows belongingness is a choice, undirected by blood relations or fate. The connection between Tova and Avery, who meet up in the last few chapters, shows the beauty of new connections. Both comfort and confide in each other.

The Significance of the Ending:

The last chapters feature the resolution. Tova and Cameron reconcile - Marcellus fetches Erik's ring owned by Cameron (through

Daphne's box of belongings) and Tova realizes it all.

We see Tova helping Marcellus return to the sea, for which he is grateful. Cameron does not run away anymore, comes back to Sowell Bay and talks things through with Tova. And Tova decides not to go to Charter Village or leave Sowell Bay. This is important because she is not avoiding her life anymore but is looking forward to it. "It's almost a new day. Her first day as a grandmother." (335)

The last chapter is a fast-forward to a month later. Tova and Cameron have moved into a new condo, having found a grandma and grandson in each other. Ethan often chills at their place, listening to music and Cameron and Avery have gotten closer. Tova is hopeful and rejuvenated, and Cameron, too, works for a contractor and has decided to attend college. The two experience a significant transformation. At last, the characters are shown gathering for a meal. The ending features Tova missing Erik and Marcellus and then getting back with the others to play a Scrabble game. The last chapter's title - "After all" itself denotes a reset. Rather than a simplistic "happy ending," Van Pelt offers this new beginning in which the characters are joyful and participate in social circles again.

Conclusion:

Remarkably Bright Creatures presents to the readers a relatable view of all that makes living beings, living - their loneliness and sadness. The roots of these are losses, which lead to needing connection, and this connection becomes the pathway for healing and improving. The novel does not show erasure of past wounds or deny the grief, but shows that life exists beyond all the pain and offers



opportunities for new relationships, realizations, purposes, and hopes.

Finally, the novel depicts shared existence among the humans and animals, emotional resilience and its importance and how relationships should be safe spaces. It proves there is power to connection and shows that though pain is a part and parcel of life, one can still make space for happiness and new beginnings.

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