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In Rockland — Chrysalis: Early Paintings by Neil Welliver

by Christopher Crosman
Neil Welliver (1929–2005) would likely forgive viewers of a recent exhibition of his work (Neil Welliver: Chrysalis, 1954–1964) at Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland if they do not recognize these paintings — of family members, academic colleagues and acquaintances.

WELLIVER continues page 4



"Tuba Player," ca. 1950s–early 1960s
COURTESY OF DOWLING WALSH GALLERY,
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BOOK REVIEWS

REMARKABLY BRIGHT CREATURES

BY SHELBY VAN PELT

Reviewed by Alexix Burling, special to *The Washington Post*
Humans love a good, old-fashioned morality tale told from the perspective of an animal. *Watership Down*, *Animal Farm*, *The One and Only Ivan*: These beloved books, and so many others like them, take life's toughest challenges — death, belonging, fear, loneliness — and make them a little easier to swallow.

Joining the menagerie is Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, an ultimately feel-good but deceptively sensitive debut about what it feels like to have love taken from you, only to find it again in the most unexpected places. The best part? It's narrated by Marcellus McSquiddles, a giant Pacific octopus who cannot only think and feel as humans do but also pick locks, squeeze out of his tank at the aquarium to go on late-night snack runs and serve as the town's secret matchmaker.

Remarkably Bright is framed as a mystery, relayed in two storylines that eventually converge. The first stars set-inher-ways Tova Sullivan who, at 70 and recently widowed, likes things just so. When she's not lunching and gossiping with three longtime girlfriends who affectionally call themselves the Knit-Wits, she's volunteering as a night janitor at Puget Sound's Sowell Bay Aquarium and conversing with Marcellus as she putters about cleaning.

For Tova, staying busy is the key to a content life and a quiet mind — a respite after too many years spent obsessing over what happened to her 18-year-old golden-boy son, Erik, who was found at the bottom of a lake nearly 30 years ago and whose death she believes was wrongly ruled a suicide.

The second narrative involves down-on-his-luck Cameron, a 30-year-old garage rocker and odd-jobber whose deadbeat mother left him with his aunt in a California trailer park when he was 9 and never returned. After too many failed relationships and lost jobs, he's headed up to Sowell Bay on a whim to search for his long-lost father and shake him down for overdue child support.

Astute readers might catch a whiff of where this is going. But that won't detract from the story's impact. Instead, putting the plot aside frees readers to focus on some of the book's more compelling elements — mainly, its characters.

Cameron's journey — his reunion with the man he thinks is his father; his burgeoning romance with Avery, a hot-mama surf-shop owner in Sowell Bay; and his bumbling efforts to man-up to adulthood after getting a gig at the aquarium — while engaging to read, is nothing special.

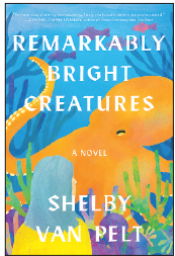
What makes the book so memorable and tender is Van Pelt's depiction of Tova and her insistence on aging like a responsible person should. Much like Kent Haruf's practically minded Addie Moore in *Our Souls at Night* or a much less insufferable version of Elizabeth Strout's straight-shooting Olive Kitteridge, Tova won't have anyone fussing over her — especially jolly old Ethan, the Shop-Way grocery store owner who's been sweet on her for ages.

Instead, Tova is set on getting rid of her belongings, selling the house her father built and checking herself into a nursing home, despite everyone's objections: "I am not like you and Mary Ann and Barbara," she says to the Knit-Wits in a particularly moving scene. "I don't have children who will come stay with me when I've had a fall. I don't have grandchildren who will stop over to unclog my drain or make sure I'm taking my pills. And I won't put that burden on my friends and neighbors." (Van Pelt writes in the acknowledgments that Tova is based very loosely on her Grandma Anna; her affection for this "unruffled" and "stoic Swede" shines through on every page.)

Then, of course, there's the matter of mischievous Marcellus, whom Van Pelt deftly uses to tie the book's threads together while throwing in a few octopus facts for good measure. On day 1,349 of his captivity, for example, Marcellus shares a sentiment even the most curmudgeonly of humans can rally behind: "As a general rule, I like holes. A hole at the top of my tank gives me freedom. But I do not like the hole in her heart. She only has one, not three, like me. Tova's heart. I will do everything I can to help her fill it."

Remarkably Bright Creatures could be described as corny by some or far-fetched by others. But to those people I say: pish posh. After all, octopuses adapt to their environment by changing the color and texture of their skin. They can open jars and fit inside beer bottles. Some can even recognize and choose to befriend individuals outside their species, including humans. Why shouldn't an especially wily one crack a decades-old cold case and bring people together while he's at it?

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WELLIVER CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

skeletons frolicking in a sylvan pool, a tuba player from a marching band (the artist tooting his own horn?), a disembodied head jostling with and alongside sheep, and chubby infants masquerading as Renaissance putti amongst Raphael-riffing compositions — as by the artist whose paintings of the Maine woods art critic Robert Hughes once proclaimed, "are among the strongest images in modern American art."

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s Welliver was studying with, and assisting, German Bauhaus master and abstract painter Josef Albers at Yale University. As a young man emerging from small-town, rural Pennsylvania, Welliver suddenly found himself on the doorstep of the most fertile hothouses of Euro-American modernist art and theory, both in New York and at Yale. Even so, there is the unmistakable whiff of self-deprecating humor in these early works. Did Welliver wish his tie-clad colleagues to just "loosen-up" a bit within an academic setting where post-War prosperity and White middle-class privilege were raising uncomfortable questions: the birth of a youth culture demanding less Sinatra and more Elvis, the literary wanderlust of the Beat poets, and the rise of *sui generis* American painting in the work of Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler and Willem de Kooning. It was an era of radical transition and transformation, a decade that began in hopeful social progress and that ended in the death of civic innocence.

The blunt material physicality of these early paintings by Welliver — the skidding brush marks and the near abolition of line and edge, the more or less faceless portraits and distorted bodies, their awkward placement in uncertain settings — celebrated both their making and a rejection of the oratorical rule books. Energetic young artists like Welliver were having a go at coloring outside the lines of their avant-garde elders including Albers and de Kooning. And, having the time of their young lives.

Welliver applied Albers' lessons intuitively, naturally, finding vibrant greens and complementary yellows to hold his canvases in a state of exuberant tension. In the Italian Renaissance — inspired tondo (circular) compositions, visually grating yellow framing strips (pointedly mimicking gold leaf and tradition?) lightly grip their crowded interiors in a kind of Petri dish of suspended animation. There, untethered limbs and featureless faces inhabit otherworldly spaces, suggesting floating figures from some cluttered Baroque church ceiling, spinning above the artist's encyclopedic, voracious eye.

Languorous skeletons surprised by their own reflections in the tree-shaded pools relax and mingle beside a rushing stream. They will morph into sun-dappled ripples and mimic the tangled, twisting forest understory on a muddy bank



"Skeletons Party," ca. 1950s–early 1960s

COURTESY DOWLING WALSH GALLERY, © ESTATE OF NEIL WELLIVER

in Welliver's later paintings. Dead things and others, dying, seedlings emerging; the ongoing, accidental uncertainties of what lives and what dies have always been Welliver's latent, just-beneath-the-surface subject. The skeletons refer to the long-standing tradition in art of *momenti mori*, reminders of mortality and the fleeting nature of nature, especially life itself. They would come to foreshadow heart-breaking personal tragedy striking his family in coming decades. In 1976 a daughter died in infancy and her mother, his second wife, died from complications following a minor injury. In 1991 a son, Eli, died of disease, and another son, Silas, was murdered while traveling in Southeast Asia. But here, the unlikely skeletons seem to anticipate the death of abstraction in his own painting and a full-throated acceptance that art could accommodate a multiplicity of styles and approaches — from the messiness of youthful irreverence and crotchety contrarianism to the sublime serenity of his late landscapes.

Artists often look back to their earliest finished artworks for reassurance and continuity. Welliver didn't have that option, having lost much of his work up to that time in a 1975 fire. In a way, the fire literally cleansed his palette for the new focus and concentrated intensity of his late paintings. These few hardy survivors from before the fire, featured in the recent exhibition, are, nevertheless, telling. Here we encounter Welliver thinking through nature as subject matter, as the place where paint can assume and retain its own autonomy while working to make recognizable images speak to realms of the spirit and imagination. Nudes below a plunging waterfall are becoming incidental, unnecessary. Elsewhere, strange butterflies emerge as nude art school models — the university art department as chrysalis. The early paintings mark the transformative, if not to say slow, awakening of Welliver's own work. The ravenous, raucous, uncontained early works ricochet between abstraction and realism. In the late landscapes, for which he is best known, the seeming slapdash urgency of these early paintings dissipates into something new, vital, and central to the artist's being. In Welliver's mature, monumental paintings of Maine's northern forests and streams we see a new kind of painting where surface handling, painterly gesture, and subject — unruly nature — seamlessly merge and quietly coalesce. The fading memory of those manicured lawns of suburban academia — Manet-like picnics on the grass with fellow faculty accompanied by nude models, dogs, sheep, and general dissonance — eventually yield to the randomness of nature for its own sake on its own terms. Those early collisions of fantasy and reality — butterflies and friends, sheep and tubas — finally resolve into Welliver's full, final embrace of plangent nature, as source and solace.

Neil Welliver: *Chrysalis* (1954–1964) is on view at Dowling Walsh Gallery, 365 Main Street, Rockland, through May 28.



Waterfall, ca. 1950s to early 1960s COURTESY DOWLING WALSH GALLERY, © ESTATE OF NEIL WELLIVER