



The eight-legged confidant: Narrativizing octopuses and non-human aging[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article follows an increased interest in the octopus in both popular science and fiction. Octopuses have long held fascination and are commonly tied to processes of aging: Even though their life expectancy tends to be lower than that of humans, they are often framed as "old", not only by appearing as mythical creatures from an unknown past but also by appearing wise and intelligent. Whereas the octopus has been framed as Other, prominently by inspiring the aesthetics of alien life forms, recent examples have underlined the possibility of interspecies contact and communication. This article traces these moments of contact and investigates the role of aging in such fictional encounters. By focusing on two recent examples, Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022) and Gina Chung's *Sea Change* (2023), it illustrates the ways that contemporary fiction narratively links the octopus to older age and discusses forms of non-human aging.

Octopuses, aging, fiction

Aging studies have emphasized the cultural dimension of aging processes, with Margaret Morganroth Gullette famously arguing that we are *Aged by Culture* (2005). Clearly, such readings of age in terms of cultural specificity revolve around human society. In other words, whereas chronological age might inform the behavior of groups of animals, the construction of aging tends to only be applied to humankind, given that the "culture" present in Gullette's title appears to intrinsically relate to humans. How, then, can aging as a cultural and social process be applied to animals and octopuses specifically?

The last years have been successful for octopuses,¹ at least in terms of literary representation, as numerous works of fiction and popular science have engaged with cephalopods. Katherine Harmon Courage observes that octopuses have long held fascination as "[t]librohe octopus has been beguiling humans for as long as we have been catching it" (Courage, 2013b, p. 8). This interest, however, seems to have intensified in popular fiction, and sites such as *Libro Maniacs* (Guttery, 2023) or goodreads.com (Octopus Book Lists, 2023) have curated lists featuring

the most prominent contributions to a canon of works dedicated to octopuses. Fittingly, Al Woodworth titles an article for the *Amazon Book Review*: "On trend: Octopus continue to have their moment...and not just in the water" (Woodworth, 2023). These engagements have taken different forms; in the realm of popular science, the role of consciousness has been underlined, for instance, in *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* by Peter Godfrey-Smith (2016), or in Sy Montgomery's *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness* (2015) (Montgomery, 2015) and the Netflix documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). In the realm of fiction, which I want to focus on, recent contributions have featured octopuses in different genres, ranging from science fiction, such as Ray Nayler's *The Mountain in the Sea* (Nayler, 2023) to pandemic literature, for instance Claire Fuller's *The Memory of Animals* (2023) (Fuller, 2023). This increased engagement also resonates with a long-standing interest of science fiction in cephalopods. Cyrus Martin muses that "when Hollywood needs inspiration for an alien lifeform, a cephalopod is usually its muse" (Martin, 2023, p. R1067). The correlation between the octopus and the alien – thus presenting, as Simon Conway Morris explains, "the

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¹ Octopuses belong to the group of cephalopods, they are distinguished within this group by Roger Hanlon, Mike Vecchione and Louise Allcock as follows: "Octopuses have eight long, well-developed arms lined with suckers. Some have no large rigid internal structures and so their bodies have maximum flexibility to enable them to exploit crevices and other tight spots in the bottom habitats in which they live worldwide" (Hanlon et al., 2018, p. 10).

‘other’” (Conway Morris, 2011) – is fascinating and has impacted many narrative engagements.²

Recent years, however, have also renegotiated the octopus as a monstrous Other. Contemporary works of fiction, I suggest in this article, position the octopus in a reciprocal relationship with humans and reframe the octopus as a participant in communication and as an agent that both receives and grants empathy. They become, as Woodworth calls it, “eight-legged confidants” (Woodworth, 2023). It is this juxtaposition that I am investigating in this paper, namely the simultaneous portrayal of the octopus as an ultimate Other, they are eight-legged, after all – and as a confidant. In this mode of connecting with the octopus, I want to investigate the role of aging and focus on whether the aging process of the octopus is presented in human or non-human terms.

Yet, before engaging with the literary representation of aging and the octopus, it first appears vital to address the most basic question to this undertaking: Why is it worthwhile to consider octopuses with regard to aging in the first place? Compared to humans, octopuses have shorter life spans; the giant Pacific octopus, fictionalized in the two works I focus on in this article, usually only lives about four years (Giant Pacific octopus). Yet, although human life expectancy supersedes octopuses', they tend to be related to the (often mythicized) past. Accordingly, Rachel Nuwer writes for *The Smithsonian Magazine* that “[o]ctopuses are waaay old” and explains that octopus fossils have been dated back some 296 million years (Nuwer, 2023). Similarly, *OctoNation*, a nonprofit offering education about octopuses, explains on their homepage that “[o]ctopus ruled the oceans before dinosaurs” (“Our story”, 2020). As these examples from popular science suggest, octopuses are deemed “old”: By comparing them to dinosaurs, they pertain to a realm before humans existed and, in effect, appear “older” than the reader's species. It is vital to consider that species membership – qualifying as belonging to the “old” species of octopuses – appears more critical than a comparatively shorter individual life span.

From a perspective of aging studies, octopuses thus present a fruitful field of study as they illustrate how readings of “old” age are based on cultural construction and knowledge – the awareness that the species has existed for a long time makes octopuses collectively “old”. At the same time, however, octopuses and aging are related explicitly because the aging process of octopuses is cause for debate. In fact, it is difficult to precisely estimate an octopus' chronological age, which may offer important information about their population. In squids which, like octopuses, are cephalopods, age has been estimated based on the rings on their statoliths (Hanlon et al., 2018, p.121), a process reminiscent of counting the rings in tree trunks. No similar technique can be used with octopuses since, as Courage remarks for *Scientific American*, “[o]ctopuses, however, have no such bone” (Courage, 2013a). Facing such difficulties, research has suggested measuring specific parts of the hard structure of the *octopus maya* to estimate age (Rodríguez-Domínguez et al., 2013). Clearly, it is not my aim to evaluate these studies on estimating age in octopuses; instead, I want to point to the difficulties surrounding the estimation of age in the first place. Concerning age, octopuses remain opaque not only to laypersons but also confound scholars. These difficulties may also frame the octopus as existing beyond the definable realm of chronological age. For this reason, the octopus may simply appear ageless to the observer.

As a last aspect concerning aging and the octopus, I want to draw attention to octopuses' intelligence. Octopuses belong to the group of cephalopods, which “are an evolutionary oddity, having developed the largest and most complex brains among invertebrate animals” (Hanlon et al., 2018, p. 6). This “oddity”, namely the complexity of the brain in an invertebrate animal, is noteworthy because it may present, as Roger

² Renditions and reimaginings of the octopus as alien life forms occur in various narratives, for instance, the heptapods in Ted Chiang's “Story of your Life” (1998) (Chiang, 2016), General Akbar in the *Star Wars* franchise (Return of the Jedi, 1983), or Cthulhu in tales by H.P. Lovecraft (Lovecraft, 2023).

Hanlon explains in a TED Talk, “a different evolutionary pathway to create intelligence on planet earth” (TED, 2019, 08:20). In a nutshell, humans, as vertebrates, would be part of one evolutionary pathway to intelligence, while octopuses, as invertebrates, would present another. Thus, the octopus presents ample ground for research, and its intelligence, in particular, continues to startle, surprise, and entertain, for instance, when Inky the octopus escapes confinement.³ Given their “odd” intelligence, octopuses are commonly read as wise, while at the same time, they may appear uncanny. Prominently, Peter Godfrey-Smith explains in an opinion piece for *The New York Times* regarding the possibility of octopuses living longer: “[I]t's hard to see them making it to our 115 years – and when one contemplates the thought of a century-old octopus, perhaps that's just as well” (Godfrey-Smith, 2016). Godfrey-Smith suggests that the prospect of an octopus growing older, specifically older than humans, is terrifying. Here, the speculative potential of the octopus comes to the fore: It appears as an alternative – and in effect unknowable – pathway to intelligence. The appreciation of this intelligence, Godfrey-Smith's comment suggests, is tied to chronological age as growing older would turn them into an uncanny and unknowable presence.⁴ Approaches to the octopus thus oscillate between difference and sameness: They may be intelligent, but the possibility of their living “too” long – read longer than humans – turns them into a frightening Other.

So far, I have correlated octopuses to the concept of aging, concerning both their chronological age and the construction of their being “old”. Drawing from these relations, I want to specifically engage with the increased interest in narrativizing contact between humans and octopuses in recent examples of U.S. American fiction that has not found critical attention so far. Focusing on *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt (2022) and *Sea Change* by Gina Chung (2023), I want to trace how configurations of non-human aging are navigated in these inter-species encounters. Van Pelt's novel links the experiences of the 70-year-old widow Tova Sullivan, who is of Swedish descent, with Marcellus, the giant Pacific octopus who becomes an interim first-person narrator and who is aware of his quickly fading life span. In the novel, the aging process of Tova, who is about to sell her house and move into a retirement community, is linked with that of Marcellus, who muses about his mortality in confinement. A shared sense of grief bonds human and animal: Tova has lost her son, and Marcellus has lost his home. As Tova sets Marcellus free and decides against her move to the retirement home, their journeys are paralleled, and Marcellus becomes Tova's confidant, a partner in crime, and in shared lived experience. Gina Chung's debut novel *Sea Change*, too, is invested in matters of aging, however, it opts for a Korean American narrator who, at thirty, is struggling to overcome the loss of her father and who muses about “graduating to some next level of adulthood” (Chung, 2023, p. 45), thus positioning processes of aging and age appropriate behavior⁵ at its

³ In 2016, Inky the octopus made headlines after escaping an aquarium in New Zealand and leaving for the ocean. *The Guardian* titled: “The great escape: Inky the octopus legs it to freedom from aquarium” (Roy, 2016), *The New York Times* reported that “[i]t was an audacious nighttime escape” achieved by a “nimble contortionist” and thus narratively framed Inky's escape as a heist with the octopus as its mastermind (Bilefsky, 2016).

⁴ The discussion of intelligent octopuses also resonates with Ray Nayler's *The Mountain in the Sea*, a work of science fiction in which the development of a distinct and complex octopus culture is presented as a source of both fascination but also of uncanniness.

⁵ The concept of age-appropriate behavior has already been discussed by Wood (1971), Julia Velten adds that “[t]he roles people play age-wise are thus not only determined by the way they feel but, to a large extent, by the way they are treated by others” (Velten, 2022, p. 43). These distinctions and roles, however, are not clear-cut, as Anita Wohlmann has shown in *Aged Young Adults* (2014), in which she explains that “we are dealing with a spectrum of meanings, within which age functions like a flexible slider that moves between different registers of functions and meanings” (Wohlmann, 2014, p. 252).

center. To the narrator Ro, the octopus Dolores, whose sheer size confounds expectations about her species, presents a link to her missing father, who discovered the octopus in the Bering Vortex. As she faces the possible sale of Dolores, Ro's sense of loss reveals the intricate ties between the octopus as her confidant and the loss of her father. In my discussion, I focus on the contact between octopus and human and navigate the construction of both chronological and relative age. By tracing how aging is presented as a shared inter-species experience, I also discuss the ways that the octopus is anthropomorphized in these texts and wonder in which contexts non-human aging occurs.

Shelby Van Pelt: *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (Van Pelt, 2022)

According to a *New York Times* article, Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, first published in 2022, brought many customers to bookshops asking for "that octopus book" (Alter, 2023). The phrasing reveals that the giant Pacific octopus Marcellus, as a character and even interim narrator, presents the bestseller's⁶ unique selling point. Yet even though an octopus takes on the role of narrator, the novel is not primarily interested in animals, as Van Pelt further explains: "It started out being a story about an octopus, but really it's a story about humans. The octopus gives us this lens with which we can look at ourselves with a bit more distance and a bit more clarity" (Neilson, 2022). Even though Van Pelt's book may unofficially be titled "that octopus book", it primarily employs the perspective of an animal to contribute to a deeper understanding of human behavior. While the octopus allows for a shift in perspective, it also appears human in return, a notion that is specifically relevant for a discussion of non-human aging. Prominently, the octopus Marcellus is not free of stereotypical readings of older age commonly assigned to humans, and Van Pelt remarks on the "Today" show: "I feel like he [Marcellus] is your, you know, grumpy uncle or grandpa who is kinda just sitting in his recliner and just has opinions about everything" (TODAY with Hoda and Jenna, 2022, 03:54). Rather than referring to Marcellus as a giant Pacific octopus, Van Pelt refers to a human cliché, namely the stereotypical reading of the "grumpy old man."⁷ This comparison anthropomorphizes the octopus' experience concerning gender and age; at the same time, it somewhat distances the experience of older people from being a human one. The distance created by the aquarium becomes the distance created by a recliner: Grandpa and octopus are observers who "have opinions about everything" but tend to be overlooked rather than actively engaged with. Simultaneously, Van Pelt's explanation ties into a reading of octopuses being "old" as a group: Even though the comparatively short life span of four years is repeatedly addressed in the novel, Marcellus appears as a grandfather, someone whose role is defined by generational difference and by being "older than".

Human assessments of age prominently inform how Marcellus' aging is narrativized. At first glance, it may appear that Marcellus' narrative voice is deliberately distanced from the human experience; for instance, he showcases his superior intelligence when addressing the reader and stating that "[y]ou are only human, after all" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 2). Despite this insistence on differences in species, Marcellus is already introduced as an active participant in communication, a conversation partner who, unfortunately, is othered and confined by his surroundings. When he claims: "Yes, I can read. I can do many things you would not expect" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 1), Marcellus not only reveals

⁶ *Remarkably Bright Creatures*' success appears undeniable, with a movie being developed and more than 1.4 million copies sold by December 2023 (Alter, 2023).

⁷ The "grumpy old man" has served as a well-known stereotype in portrayals of older people, for instance in the film *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) featuring Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, since then it has been discussed in many forms, for instance in *Vice* (Taylor, 2016) and has been called "a myth" in *Psychology Today* (Ready, 2016).

the intelligence assigned to his species, but he is also presented as wise, knowledgeable, and as capable of human communication. Even though Marcellus is supposed to appear non-human – he is an octopus, after all – the narrative strategy of addressing the audience invites identification with the animal struggling in the confinement of the aquarium. Here, the novel shifts perspectives: Rather than standing outside the tank looking in, remarking on "that guy" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 2, *emphasis in original*), the supposedly human readership is invited to follow Marcellus's life inside the tank. A reference to other forms of non-human narration as discussed by Lars Bernaerts et al. appears helpful here:

Non-human narrators prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (in other words, readers "empathize" and "naturalize"); at the same time, readers have to acknowledge the otherness of non-human narrators, who may question (defamiliarize) some of readers' assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness. (Bernaerts et al., 2014, p. 69)

This interplay of identification and alienation strongly resonates with the narrative of Marcellus, who may be mocking his human audience but may also deliberately remind them of a stereotypical grandfather.

The link between readings of human aging and the octopus, then, is not solely suggested in the author's comment; it is also intradiegetically expressed when Marcellus conceptualizes his life in terms of human expectations of chronological time. Almost every chapter Marcellus narrates opens with a reference to the days he has lived in captivity and with an estimation on how long he has left to live. The significance of time passed and time left and its framing in terms of human calculation is emphasized in the novel's first pages. Here, Marcellus explains that he has lived in captivity for 1299 days now and muses about his impending death:

The plaque states one additional piece of information: the average life span of a giant Pacific octopus. Four years.

My life span: four years – 1,460 days.

I was brought here as a juvenile. I shall die here, in this tank. At the very most, one hundred and sixty days remain until my sentence is complete. (Van Pelt, 2022, p.2)

In these opening pages, Marcellus introduces the aging process in measurable and even predictable terms: He is aware of the average number of days giant Pacific octopuses live and deducts what he knows of his time in captivity. The awareness of his death and aging are tied to information offered from a world beyond his confines; in other words, Marcellus is taught about his life span and age – he becomes "old" because he can read the plaque. At the same time, this clear presentation of age counteracts difficulties to establish the chronological age of octopuses: chronological age becomes an absolute fact. The octopus is thus framed as "old" along two axes. Firstly, he is aware of his own death and muses about death in the foreseeable future, a reading that resonates with Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow's assessment of older age as "something like 'a waiting room' in which people bide their time until they die" (Hartung and Kunow, 2011, p. 18). Secondly, the reader cannot help but follow Marcellus's line of thought and, based on the number of days he has lived and the number still left after his calculations, assume that he is chronologically older. This reading of Marcellus as "old" strongly resonates with Van Pelt linking him to grandfatherhood and with his characterization as wise. By framing Marcellus as "old" in terms of the relative life span of an octopus, he is turned into a wise old creature who can bond with- and even advise the widow Tova, in effect, becoming a similarly aged confidant.

While what is framed as a friendship between the human protagonist Tova Sullivan and octopus Marcellus develops in the course of the novel, their similarities are immediately presented. Comparable to Marcellus, whose chronological age is addressed within the first two pages of the

novel, Tova is immediately characterized by how long she has lived. After “her back pops” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 3) in an attempt to clean away gum in the aquarium in which she works and which is Marcellus's place of confinement, the narrator explains that at seventy, “Tova is Sowell Bay Aquarium's oldest employee” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 4). Even though Tova works, she is immediately presented as an oddity within the workforce, and her age sets her apart from the other employees. Moreover, it can be derived that her being older is also linked to difficulties in performing her tasks, as her “back pop[ping]” illustrates. Similar to Marcellus introducing himself with reference to his supposed life span, Tova is framed in terms of her chronological age. Clearly, her chronological age impacts how she is read in society, a society that also appears to include Marcellus, who calls Tova “[t]he elderly female who mops the floors” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 67), in effect mirroring the reading of her being “the oldest employee.” As the octopus explains, Tova and himself “converse” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 67), and this conversation also entails a dimension of age: As a conversation partner, Marcellus understands Tova as “elderly” and thus underlines a reading of age as tied to social relations. As Kunow notes, “[i]t always takes two to age, one person at a certain stage of his/her life course and (at least) one other person interacting with him/her in ways determined by the first person's age, real or presumed” (Kunow, 2011, p. 24, emphasis in original). Unsurprisingly, the ways that Marcellus and Tova interact are also shaped by their difference in species, and markers mentioned by Kunow – such as gestures or spoken address (Kunow, 2011, p. 24) – do not apply in this case. However, the framing of Marcellus as an active listener and his assumption of Tova being “elderly” underline the role that the category of age plays in their encounter and, I want to suggest, in the relationship that develops between them.

In their shared movement through time, Marcellus develops into a conversation partner, an “eight-legged confidant”, as Woodworth calls it. The novel can be read as circling around the relationship between Tova and the octopus, a notion that is already suggested on its cover, which calls it: “A charming, witty, and compulsively readable exploration of friendship, reckoning, and hope that traces a widow's unlikely connection with a giant Pacific octopus” (Van Pelt, 2022, cover). The connection between Tova and Marcellus is deemed “unlikely”, unique enough to become part of the novel's marketing. This connection and the role of Marcellus as a confidant are developed in the course of the narrative. While Tova speaks politely to all of the aquarium's inhabitants (“‘Hello, dears,’ she says to the angelfish on her way to the supply closet” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 106)), Marcellus becomes a conversation partner. Prominently, she reaches into the aquarium and reads the octopus' reactions as a response: “The octopus tightens his grip, but in a genteel manner Tova interprets as a pleasantry. The equivalent of *Very well, thanks for asking*” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 107, emphasis in original). Tova “interprets” the octopus and understands the answer to how he is doing in terms of well-known human phrases. Despite lacking a shared language, Tova begins to speak to Marcellus and to confide in him. At this moment, Marcellus's role is revealed to be that of a confidant; however, a confidant that remains decidedly different and non-human. The narrator remarks: “What is she doing here, telling her life story to this strange creature?” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 107). Notwithstanding this difference, the novel suggests their connection is reciprocal, specifically because Marcellus leads Tova to a grandson she was unaware of. As the octopus brings Tova to her family, he inscribes himself into her life narrative and is narratively linked to her family. In the end, however, it is clear that Marcellus and Tova have to part; the difference in species surpasses their “unlikely connection”, and Tova explains: “We must say goodbye, friend” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 333). The “eight-legged confidant” is thus released to the wild just as Tova finds a lost relative and a reason not to move into the retirement home.

Given that Tova's and Marcellus's aging are parallelized and influence each other, it is only fitting that as the octopus reads Tova as “elderly”, she, too, assesses him in relation to age. As I have pointed out, octopuses tend to be approached as “old” given their species'

evolutionary development, and Tova follows this reading when remarking that Marcellus moves in “his slow, almost prehistoric way” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 62). To the seventy-year-old Tova, the probably almost four-year-old Marcellus appears “prehistoric.” It is interesting to note that despite her connection with the octopus, Tova still reads him as a representative of a species rather than as an individual. Here, the relativity of age becomes apparent: It is not the years lived that make Marcellus's movements “prehistoric”; it is his belonging to a specific species. On a related note, Tova comments on the octopus' eye “gleaming like some otherworldly marble” (Van Pelt, 2022), a comparison that resonates with the ties between octopuses and the aesthetic presentation of alien life forms. In these instances, Marcellus is read as “old” but also decisively as Other: His being an octopus turns him prehistoric, with eyes like fossilized marble.

While Marcellus may appear otherworldly in these instances, Tova also assesses him in terms of human aging, and it is interesting to note that these framings do not necessarily characterize Marcellus as being of older age. For instance, when Tova finds the octopus hiding, she compares his attempt to “a child's hide-and-seek misstep” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 5) and, at times, “his strange eye glints playfully, like a naughty child's” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 9). Marcellus is anthropomorphized⁸ because his behavior is likened to that of a human child. However, these references to age-related behavior most prominently link Marcellus to stereotypical readings of older age. For instance, mirroring Marcellus' addressing of the reader, Tova speaks to the animals in confinement. Finally, she addresses Marcellus: “Well, sir, what have you been up to today?” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 5) thus approaching him with clearly gendered terms of the advanced seniority of older age. Here, the octopus is addressed as an older man might be, reminiscent of Van Pelt's remark on Marcellus appearing as an uncle or a grandfather (TODAY with Hoda and Jenna, 2022, 03:54). In her addressing the octopus, then, Tova also mirrors stereotypical approaches to older people that she herself is subjected to: As Marcellus is labeled “sir”, he becomes stereotypically “old”, and his species-membership becomes decisive for mode of address and behavior towards him. Read in a wider framework of aging studies, the text also comments on age as a possibly de-individualizing category, in which older people run the risk of being perceived as “old” rather than as individuals.

Yet being framed as a “sir” not only grants Marcellus seniority, it might also mark him as expendable. This notion is prominently introduced when Tova and Cameron find the octopus beyond the confines of his tank, and Tova expresses the fear that Marcellus might be put down for his behavior because “Marcellus is old, Cameron, and a loose octopus is a liability” (Van Pelt, 2022, p.176). It may be Marcellus's behavior, his escaping the tank, that turns him into a liability. Yet, it is his supposed age that makes him expendable, specifically given that the aquarium already has a replacement. This reasoning is based on age and the presumed closeness of Marcellus's death as the aquarium's manager underlines: “Feisty old man, though, isn't he? Determined to outrun his life span. But Dr. Santiago and I aren't sure how much longer he has left. He was in such bad shape this morning, he might only have weeks or days left” (Van Pelt, 2022, p.313). Again, Marcellus is anthropomorphized in terms of gendered human stereotypes; this time, he is imaged as a “feisty old man” in his defiance of his expected life span. As the animal is granted a specific individual will, he is also assigned human qualities – especially those stereotypically associated with older men. At the same time, it becomes apparent that in moments of crises, moments in which Marcellus's frailty and possible death are addressed, his chronological age is granted specific attention. Accordingly, after he is found outside his tank, Marcellus is described as “the old octopus” (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 329). In his state of crisis, the octopus is no longer conceptualized as “a

⁸ The process of anthropomorphizing non-human objects or animals has been discussed by Bernaerts et al. in their discussion of non-human narrators, they explain that “we – humans – have the cognitive habit of animating the inanimate and anthropomorphizing animals” (Bernaerts, 2014, p. 70).

naughty child”; now, older age and frailty are linked and are assessed in clearly anthropomorphized terms.

This discussion of Tova and Marcellus in *Remarkably Bright Creatures* underlines that age is performed and negotiated by various agents: Marcellus describes himself in terms of older age because he can read the information about his supposed life span, whereas Tova is introduced as the oldest of any employee working in the aquarium. Age is thus presented with reference to the temporal experience of human life; at the same time, it is performed in the way Tova addresses Marcellus or understands his behavior as a member of his species. Tova and Marcellus are depicted as both: conversation partners and “old”. In the case of both the octopus and human protagonist, then, growing older – and in Marcellus’s case, a supposed certainty of his impending death – is introduced as a vital characteristic of their lived experience. With this, the process of growing older is presented as a shared experience that surpasses boundaries between species and that is negotiated in inter-species contact. At the same time, different forms of expendability are assigned to both octopus and human: Marcellus may be replaced, and Tova struggles with deciding whether to leave the community of Sowell Bay for a retirement home. Significantly, both the octopus and the widow are thus bound to a predetermined life path: Marcellus estimates how long he has left to live and is sure to die within the aquarium; Tova lives alone and follows a path already trodden by her brother that will lead to her living in a retirement home.

In the end, however, the novel opts for a break from these well-established paths as Marcellus returns to the ocean and Tova lives with her new-found grandson rather than in a retirement community. Hereby, they are both presented as breaking away from confinement: Marcellus escapes in the literal sense and begins to count his days afresh once he is free in the ocean. His escape functions as a symbolic rendering of Tova’s escape from the retirement community by assembling a family with her new-found grandson Cameron. Here, the novel also opts for a reading that aligns the retirement home with a sense of confinement, in which the concept of “home” gains significance. Anna Wanka further underlines the interrelatedness of space and the performative nature of aging and calls for an emphasis on the aspect of “doing”:

Concretely, a relational ‘doing’ perspective that understands age (ing) and place(s) as co-constitutive requires us to ‘blur the boundaries’ between research phenomena that gerontology understands as given, pre-existing and strictly demarcated entities: individuals *and* (their) environments, life-course transitions *and* the spaces they take place in, images of ageing *and* imaginations of space. (Wanka, 2023, p. 77, emphasis in original)

While with regard to Marcellus, the intersection between the octopus and his confined space appears obvious, Tova, too, is presented in specific relation to her surroundings and the place she might make for herself in society. It is interesting to note that the retirement home becomes a place of confinement here, a place of confinement that can only be escaped by the care of her family. Her grandson, in effect, liberates Tova just as Tova lets Marcellus be free. In this mirroring, *Remarkably Bright Creatures* also adheres to well-known tropes of older age: Life in the retirement home is equaled with loneliness and confinement, life outside it is linked to inter-generational connection and a meaningful role in the family.

Thus, Tova and Marcellus both escape different forms of confinement: the spatial confinement of the aquarium, the supposedly social confinement of the retirement home, and the internal confinement of grief. Given Marcellus’s capacity to narrate his experiences to a human audience, he becomes a source of identification, and the processes of his aging appear surprisingly human.

Gina Chung: *Sea Change* (Chung, 2023)

Gina Chung’s debut, *Sea Change*, also portrays a female protagonist who upholds a close relationship with the giant Pacific octopus she

cares for. The novel focuses on the thirty-year-old Aurora, usually called Ro, who is Korean American like the author herself. *Sea Change* did not receive equal media attention as Van Pelt’s work; however, it was chosen by *The New York Times* for “22 Works of Fiction to Read This Spring” in 2023 (Dwyer, 2023). Similar to *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, *Sea Change* is invested in the passing of time and the overcoming of loss: In fact, Ro has to come to terms with her boyfriend recently leaving Earth for a mission to Mars, while still coping with her father’s disappearance during a research trip to the Bering Vortex fifteen years prior. The inclusion of the fictionalized version of the Bering Strait indicates the speculative potential of Chung’s work: The author herself explains that the novel is set “about five minutes or so in the future” (Advocate Channel). Chung’s Bering Vortex is a version of the Bering Strait that has been profoundly altered by pollution and in which “[t]he creatures that have managed to survive, mutate, and breed there, passing on their irrevocably altered genetic material over the last few decades, are biblical in size and shape and hard to see or catch” (Chung, 2023, p.7). Among these mysterious creatures is Dolores, the giant Pacific octopus caught during a research trip by Ro’s since-disappeared father. The octopus serves as an imagined confidant that is intrinsically tied to Ro’s father and is thereby already linked to the past. At the same time, however, Dolores has aged beyond what is commonly expected from a giant Pacific octopus and actively confounds any expectations of her species’ supposed life span. Hereby, the creature relates both to the past and the future and challenges pre-existing readings of the life course.

Before engaging with Dolores’s existence as a form of non-human aging, however, it is vital to first consider Ro in relation to aging processes. Ro is of an age that is not commonly perceived as “old”: she is thirty. Nevertheless, her first-person narrative prominently engages with age appropriate behavior, and Ro, who still works in a mall aquarium, perceives her lifestyle to be at odds with her chronological age. Specifically, she understands her married cousin’s life to be more “adult” than her own: “I was in awe of the fact that her life seemed to be all figured out. It wasn’t the getting married part of it that I wanted so much as the sense that her life was starting to fit into recognizable patterns of adulthood” (Chung, 2023, p. 205). These patterns illustrate the social dimension of aging: there are clearly “recognizable” elements of being an adult that need to be met. Ro’s drinking habits (Chung, 2023, p. 62), messy apartment (Chung, 2023, p. 46), and using body lotion on her face (Chung, 2023, p. 63), on the other hand, are examples of her not acting age appropriately and lead to her best friend explaining that “[i]t’s time to, like, get serious about our lives” (Chung, 2023, p. 11). Therefore, Ro’s story can also be approached as a coming-of-age narrative – as Chung suggests in an interview (Chan, 2023). In this context, Jennifer Ho’s assessment of Asian American coming-of-age narratives appears helpful. She explains:

[I]n Asian American bildungsromane, Asian-ethnic American protagonists must not only negotiate their individual selves against the larger Euro American society, but also against the society of their families – often defined by an Asian-ethnic ancestry in conflict with the hegemonic values of the dominant order. (Ho, 2013, p. 9)

Such tensions are also prominently discussed in *Sea Change*, even though at thirty, Ro’s chronological age is slightly higher than what is typically expected from coming-of-age narratives.⁹ According to this frame, the novel focuses on the relationships that shape Ro’s family and

⁹ As Kenneth Millard explains, “[f]ormative experiences can occur at any age, but in terms of literary genre the expression ‘coming of age’ is conventionally used of adolescence” (Millard, 2007, p. 4). It is also vital to consider that these narratives are intricately tied to aging and to age appropriate behavior, a notion that is commonly overlooked as Anita Wohlmann emphasizes: “As a consequence, since young adults have young bodies, it is assumed that they do not have age experiences” (Wohlmann, 2014, p. 23).

discusses them in conversation with gendered, ethnic, and age-related notions of appropriate behavior.

Feeling these pressures of appropriate behavior, Ro turns to the giant Pacific octopus Dolores. Whereas *Remarkably Bright Creatures* prominently positions octopus Marcellus's inner monologues in the narrative, *Sea Change* does not fully commit to Dolores's perspective in a similar fashion. Yet even though she does not become a narrator, Dolores is still presented as a confidant for Ro. Prominently, Ro shares details about her life with the octopus. When Tae ends their relationship because he will join a mission to Mars, Ro explains: "I told Dolores about it the next day at work. ... I told her about Tae and cried. Once she'd finished eating, she slowly turned maroon, which I decided to take as a sign that she was trying to be supportive" (Chung, 2023, p. 10). As Ro cries in front of the octopus, she also confides in her: Dolores does not have the role of an Other but of a communication partner with whom Ro shares her emotions. Her crying is decisive because it also presents a break from habit, she later reveals about Tae: "Throughout our entire relationship he'd seen me cry only a handful of times, maybe if we'd had a bad fight or something" (Chung, 2023, p. 75). It becomes apparent that Ro is not known to share her emotions openly or to cry publicly, and while her doing so in front of Dolores frames the octopus as a communication partner, it still presents her as a communication partner whose reactions are interpretable according to Ro's will. As she remarks that she "decide [s]" to read Dolores's color as a sign of her support, she already illustrates that the octopus' response is always and necessarily filtered by a human lens.

Hereby, the octopus reveals her ultimately unknowable quality. While in an interview, Chung explains that Dolores changing colors is a "way of communicating" (Barnes&Noble), said communication does not fully adhere to human modes of passing on information. Hereby, Dolores, as a conversation partner, remains necessarily and deliberately opaque: There is no direct access to human-like monologues; instead, the octopus is continuously translated by the narrator Ro. As is revealed in the course of the novel, Ro is deeply biased, especially because Dolores is closely tied to her father. Therefore, the octopus, her inner landscape and her relationship to Ro are subject to the narrator's possibly unreliable reading of the animal. Ultimately, then, it remains uncertain whether the inter-species relationship is based on a shared understanding of the world. This notion is underlined when Ro and Dolores part and Ro suggests that the octopus does not lend herself to anthropomorphism: "And while I know that logically, no matter how smart she is, there's no way she can understand what I'm saying, it's enough to feel her silvery narrowed eyes on mine, to see them regard me, for one last time" (Chung, 2023, p. 240). In this instance of inter-species contact, difference is upheld alongside mutual recognition: It is not only Dolores regarding Ro; it is Ro's awareness that she is seen by the octopus that allows for a moment of empathy that seems to surpass the boundaries between species. As Ro is letting go of Dolores, she is also attempting to let go of the past and the trauma caused by her father's disappearance. Dolores's perspective, however, remains unknown. The octopus, it can already be derived, becomes a confidant for Ro; nevertheless, this role is inseparably tied to Ro's human assessment of the animal.

Then, Dolores's role is bound to human interpretation, while her existence and aging processes confound human expectations. Comparable to Marcellus, Dolores's aging is addressed early on, yet in contrast to *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, her chronological age cannot be grasped in terms of expected life span. Rather, given that Dolores is a mutated version of a giant Pacific octopus, she is both physically bigger and chronologically older than the species familiar to the reader. The author explains that she "wanted to make Dolores the giant Pacific octopus to be larger than life, and even more fantastical" (Chan, 2023). The comment on her being "even more fantastical" already suggests a reading of octopuses as fantastical in the first place, a reading that also corresponds with their framing as alien. At the same time, Dolores is "larger than life" and thereby confounds what might be expected of the domesticized form of nature commonly presented in aquariums.

Fittingly, when Ro first visits Dolores as a child, she asks her father whether they are about to see "The Kraken" and relates the octopus to the mythical realm. As A.S. Packard writes about the Kraken in 1872: "There is and has been, for centuries, a common belief among sailors that the largest animal in existence is a kind of squid" (Packard, 1872, p. 78). Yet, it is not only her size that ties Dolores to the Kraken, it is also her longevity. In Alfred Tennyson's "The Kraken" (1830), the mythical creature is already portrayed as dreaming in "ancient" sleep: "There hath he lain for ages, and will lie / Battering upon huge sea worms in his sleep" (Tennyson, 2024). As the Kraken "ha[s] lain for ages", his existence surpasses any expectation about life spans, herein, the mythical creature aligns with Chung's Dolores, whose longevity confounds human expectation. Ro asking about the Kraken ties Dolores into these narrative frames and turns her into an unknowable Other, into the source of legends and fears. Hereby, Dolores is no longer part of a knowable, well-studied group of cephalopods: she has left the boundaries of species and the realm of human understanding. This notion is underlined when her father answers Ro's question of "What is it?" with "This is Dolores" (Chung, 2023, p. 27). Instead of assessing her in terms of her species, Ro's father frames the octopus as an individual. Dolores, then, may be a giant Pacific octopus, but she is introduced not only as different because of her relation to the shared past with Ro's father but also for deviating from expectations of animals more familiar to the reader.

Dolores's deviance from known species, then, also prominently involves the aging process and her chronological age surpasses what would commonly be expected from octopuses. In fact, Ro's father explains that "[i]t was miraculous she'd even survived for this long" (Chung, 2023, p. 190). Her status as a miracle might explain that being chronologically older does not make her expendable in the way that Marcellus's older age makes him; instead, it turns her into a commodity that is supposed to be sold to an interested buyer (Chung, 2023, p. 18). Rather than presenting obsolescence, her older age presents a source of fascination. At the same time, Dolores's age and how it confounds researchers resonates with problems to estimate the age of octopuses in current research. In other words: There is no plaque (as there is next to Marcellus's tank) proclaiming how long Dolores is expected to live – her age already marks her as unique. Here, Dolores's aging resonates not only with older age but with longevity, a desirable quality "which is independent of the biological aging process" (McDonald and Ruhe, 2011, p. 275). Contrasting Marcellus, who is a "[f]eisty old man" (Van Pelt, 2022, p. 313) for surviving longer than his estimated life span, Dolores, for the same reason, appears "miraculous." As "[s]he's probably one of the oldest giant Pacific octopuses in the world" (Chung, 2023, p. 4)(4), her chronological age distinguishes her from the rest of her species. This age distinction, Ro emphasizes, is relative and relates to other animals rather than to humans: "Dolores is somewhere between eighteen and twenty-five years old, so technically, she's younger than me. But by sea creature standards, she's practically nonagenarian" (Chung, 2023, p. 6). Even though Ro focuses on chronological age, age is introduced as a relative category. By human standards, Dolores may be read as "young" – she is younger than Ro – however, read in relation to her peers – other sea creatures – she becomes "a nonagenarian" and thus ancient. Hereby, readings of "old" and "young" begin to intermingle, and age ceases to have absolute meaning. This notion is further underlined when Ro reveals a personal relationship to Dolores in terms of age relations: She immediately links her own age to the octopus' and suggests, by the inclusion of "technically younger", that she perceives of Dolores as older than herself and, one might assume, as a wiser confidant.

This reading of Dolores as "old" is repeatedly underlined in the novel and is further established by references to stereotypical framings of human processes of aging. Here, it becomes apparent that, similar to Marcellus, the grumpy old man, Dolores is read in relation to both age and gender. Accordingly, Ro explains: "She can be cranky, like any old lady, but she loves seeing me come in with a bucket full of shrimp and fish for her. I could swear that sometimes she waves at me" (Chung,

2023, p. 3). Dolores's age is imagined in relation to gendered human roles and by turning the octopus into "any old lady," Ro's work at the aquarium resonates with other forms of care work. Bringing food to her protegee, their relationship is presented as reciprocal: Dolores is anthropomorphized as she is not simply hungry and waiting for food but "loves" to see Ro. Even more, Dolores, the old lady, supposedly waves at Ro, and the octopus becomes part of an imagined conversation. It is vital to note that the octopus' age informs Ro's understanding of Dolores: Reading her as "old" makes her demeanor understandable in human terms; she is simply behaving how one might expect from "any old lady." Hereby, age-related human stereotypes also inform Ro's approach and might even present an attempt by the narrator to grant meaning to the inter-species contact she participates in.

In conclusion, rather than imagining an octopus as a similarly aged confidant, *Sea Change* presents the miraculously old Dolores as a conversation partner to whom Ro reveals her struggles to come to terms with what might be expected of her at thirty. The likeness between octopus and human is strongly suggested, for instance, in Ro calling Dolores "Lo" (Chung, 2023, p. 4). Yet even though they may be Ro and Lo, the octopus is already framed as Other by her unexpected chronological age. Dolores, then, remains opaque to both Ro and the reader and can only be interpreted in human terms but can never be fully understood. As Ro explains: "I'm just projecting, mapping my own preoccupations and concerns onto her, the way humans have been doing to animals for eons" (Chung, 2023, p. 148). Herein lies a pivotal difference to *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, as *Sea Change* deliberately embraces the octopus' unknowable nature and its denial to fit into any given category and of "doing age"¹⁰ according to human expectations. Dolores's chronological age, her living beyond what might be expected, prominently contributes to this reading and presents the octopus' life beyond human models of understanding. While Marcellus deducts how long he has left to live, Dolores may be approached as a "cranky old lady", yet ultimately, she remains beyond human frames of meaning-making. Here, the octopus begins to present a form of non-human aging, namely one that cannot be approached or processed by human standards, one that is perceived as "miraculous" and does not yield to a digit on a plaque. In the end, Dolores lets go of Ro and Ro is able to do the same. As the octopus "sinks back into the water, as bright and burnished as a falling star" (Chung, 2023, p. 272), Dolores has become ultimately distanced and ageless, like a star that can only be seen once it has burned out.

Are octopuses changing or are humans?

This article has attempted to draw attention to the ongoing moment the octopus has in popular fiction and popular science and has discussed the ways that the category of age informs inter-species contact in the two examples of *Remarkably Bright Creatures* and *Sea Change*. Now, which conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of the narrative representation of aging, octopuses and the women who take care of them?

The narrativization of octopuses strongly resonates with a conceptualization of them as "old" both with regard to their belonging to a larger group of octopuses – considering, for instance, Marcellus's "pre-historic eyes" – as well as in relation to their individual chronological age. In both texts, giant Pacific octopuses significantly exceed their expected life span. At the same time, both protagonists face transitions¹¹ tied to their specific age, with Tova wondering whether she can live alone in the big house that she has shared with her family and Ro being

"stuck" at thirty (Chung, 2023, cover). In these transitory moments, both share a meaningful relationship with a giant Pacific octopus. Nevertheless, the reciprocity of said relationship deviates in both examples and underlines the relational nature of aging. Whereas Van Pelt focuses on the octopus' aging in human terms – he understands his age as chronological age, he is referred to as a "feisty old man" – *Sea Change* indicates the ultimately unknowable nature of aging beyond the human realm. Given that Dolores confounds expectations of aging and does not become a narrator in the novel, she remains cause for continuous and ongoing speculation. The aging of both Marcellus and Dolores, then, is framed by the humans that encounter them and who not only age them but also present their aging as a gendered experience. The octopus, commonly distanced from the human, unknowable specifically in relation to its age, becomes understandable within the framework of these stereotypes – or rather: it is made understandable in human terms.

Yet herein lies a key concern of my reading of octopuses in contemporary fiction: Can their aging be narrativized as non-human, or is it simply an extension, a foil on which human readings of bodies through time are projected? The discussed novels illustrate different approaches to the presentation of their animal protagonist that are also shaped by narrative form: While *Remarkably Bright Creatures* presents Marcellus as a narrator, and a narrator who follows clear human reasoning for that matter, *Sea Change* opts to leave Dolores unknowable, translated only by Ro whose difficult relationship to the octopus is repeatedly underlined. Despite this difference, both protagonists return to gendered stereotypes of older age in their attempts to make meaning of octopuses. As Marcellus becomes a "grumpy old man," and Dolores an "old lady", the pervasiveness of stereotypes of older age is revealed beyond the novels' pages. At the same time, this tendency indicates the difficulties to truly imagine aging beyond the confines of human meaning-making. It is interesting to consider that the unfamiliar, the alien octopus becomes approachable because they have been likened to well-known stereotypes of gendered aging. Read against the grain, then, these novels also suggest the pervasiveness of gendered stereotypes and offer the opportunity to dismantle their significance in human contexts, too.

Finally, as opposed to other animals more commonly associated with human interaction, the octopus reveals a certain tie between alienation and aging. In other words, it is no coincidence that these works focus on octopuses, but they also focus on aging and the construction of difference. Prominently, both Ro's and Tova's parents migrated to the U.S. and Ro's account, in particular, shows that she is at times still perceived as a foreigner despite being born in the U.S., for instance when being asked: "Are you Chinese?" in a bar (Chung, 2023, p. 184). In these instances, the novels navigate the construction of sameness and difference, a discussion that is further developed with regard to the octopus who is commonly read as the ultimate alien but becomes a confidant, nevertheless. Aging is introduced as another category that may create difference and that is mirrored and negotiated in the narrativized octopus. Hereby, it may be derived that older age is associated with the alienness that lingers in narratives of the octopus and that is supposedly overcome by inter-species contact. One might be reminded of David Ferry's poem "Soul", in which the lyrical subject muses: "What am I doing in this old man's body? / I feel like I'm the insides of a lobster" (Ferry, 2012, p. 7). As Ferry uses the underwater creature of the lobster to underline a sense of distance and alienation, the novels and their "eight-legged confidants", too, connect the octopus to older age. This link between highly intelligent but non-human cephalopods and older humans may appear troubling and may cater to readings of aging as an alienating experience. At the same time, however, by focusing on non-human aging, these novels invite a change in perspective and underline the flexible and negotiable nature of aging. Thus, they embrace their uncommon and possibly even unknowing confidants and openly invite readers to overcome barriers and to happily plunge their arms (or tentacles) into the aquarium.

¹⁰ "Doing age" relates to aging as a "social practice" (Schroeter, 2012, p. 160) and Klaus R. Schroeter summarizes: "From a social constructivist perspective, we present to each other our 'real' or 'supposed' age through significant symbols" (Schroeter, 2012, p. 160, my translation). Such symbols may include, looks, style or behavior.

¹¹ In relation to aging, transitions can be understood as "processes assembled by social practices" (Wanka, 2023, p. 63).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ruth Gehrman: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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