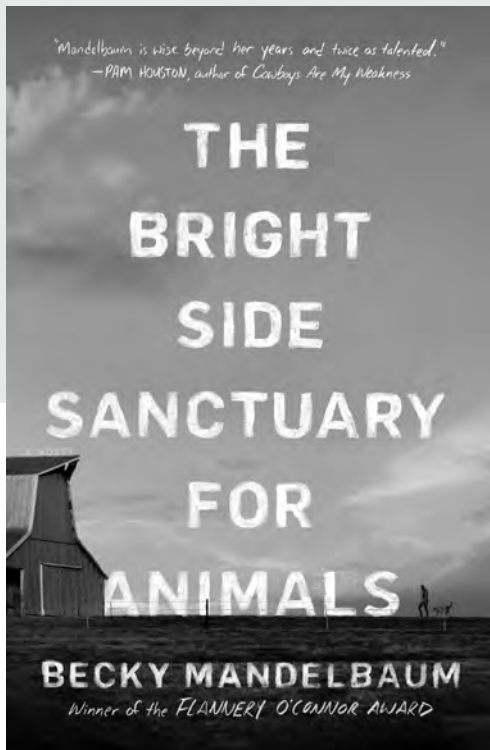

ONE TO WATCH

What we're watching: literary events for writers, books by former contributors, and interviews with the authors of debut works the *Carve* community is excited to read.

The Bright Side Sanctuary for Animals by Becky Mandelbaum

SEJAL H. PATEL



I GREW UP TERRIFIED OF ANIMALS AND, FOR THE MOST PART, AVOIDED THEM. I WAS EVEN AFRAID OF MY FRIEND Joanne’s chihuahua, threateningly named “Dinky.” When my baby brother was in high school, my parents gave in to his lifelong request for a dog. I was in college by then, and my parents called to inform me that they had adopted a Golden Labrador Retriever. My brother named him “Rocky.” I was furious with my family and terrified of coming home. My brother and sister immediately took to Rocky in a way that I didn’t—finding in him loyalty and compassion that was unparalleled to any human relationship they had. Within weeks of being with him that first summer, I came around.

Rocky ended up being the first in our family to eat my mom’s Indian food every night, and we all smiled when we heard his collar jingle as he bounded down the hall to us. When he left us after fourteen good years with our family, we came home from the veterinarian and went into our own rooms for the entire day, unable to talk to or look at each other as we each processed our own grief. If anyone had told me in my youth that the loss of a pet could be that devastating, I would not have believed them. And yet, I miss him—still.

When I received Becky Mandelbaum’s novel, *The Bright Side Sanctuary for Animals*, I wondered how I might relate to the story. I did grow to love my dog, but I still would not call myself an animal lover. But I found myself so immersed in the plot and relating to the story both in my own experience with my pet but also in my family’s experience with raising animals in rural India a generation ago. If the best of fiction is meant to plunge us into worlds both foreign and familiar, Mandelbaum’s book did just that for me. Beyond the idea of loving animals, the story is about love of family, romantic love, and ultimately, how that all relates to love of self. Mandelbaum comes to *Carve* a celebrated writer already—the winner of the 2016 Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction and the 2018 High Plains Book Award for First Book, and a humorist, essayist, and fiction writer for *The Sun*, *McSweeney’s*, *The Rumpus*, and other journals. Her short story “Other People’s Bodies” was featured in *Carve*’s Winter 2019 issue.

It is such a joy to interview you for *Carve*, Becky! First things first, I research my authors and read beyond just the book I’m reviewing. I read your gorgeous story in *The Sun* that takes place in Sugar Land, Texas. I grew up in Houston, and my in-laws live in Sugar Land. I could feel myself in the piece—especially in that glorious Texas summer 113-degree heat—as I was reading it. In the story, you talk about when the main character’s father left the family, and she and her mom moved to Kansas. You say that the Sugar Land house and the Sugar Land life had been the father’s taste. *The Bright Side Sanctuary for Animals* is very beautifully set in Kansas. The book provokes these themes of where the characters do and don’t belong. Can you start by telling us about how you thought about the main character Ariel’s sense of belonging in this story?

First, thank you, Sejal, for taking the time to read my book and for crafting such smart and thoughtful questions. You’re right that belonging and place are two themes I obsess over in my work, likely because I’ve moved so many times in my life. I was born in Kansas but my father moved my family around

several times when I was really young—we lived in Kansas, Arizona, Texas, and Minnesota all before I turned seven. Although I hated moving as a kid (what kid doesn’t?), I found myself recreating this pattern in my twenties. I went to college in Kansas but have since lived, for varying amounts of time, in Wyoming, California, Colorado, and Washington. Through all this, I’ve never stopped missing Kansas. I feel in my body that it’s my true home—the place where I belong—but I’m not yet ready to go back, and may never be.

All this to say, I’m used to feeling new and awkward in a space. I think many writers become writers because they have felt or still feel a sense of non-belonging, and this non-belonging affords us the opportunity to observe with heightened attention. Writers are, before anything else, people-watchers, and I think it’s easier to watch people when you feel like you don’t belong among them.

In *The Bright Side*, Ariel is torn between different modes of belonging and not-belonging. She feels at home among the animals, at her mother's sanctuary, but eventually realizes that, so long as she exists in the world of animals (her mother's world), she will never be able to fully inhabit the world of humans. Unfortunately, she feels like she must choose between one or the other, and she ends up choosing the latter—at least until she returns home. The book explores this conflict—how we grapple with who we once were versus who we want to be, how we gel our pasts with our futures, how we hold onto our origins without sacrificing the growth available to us beyond our roots.

The novel begins just as Trump is elected to office. Kansas is, of course, a red state. Ariel and Mona are decidedly “blue” characters. Why did you decide to choose the 2016 presidential election and its outcome as so central to the story?

I first started this book when I was twenty years old and an undergraduate at the University of Kansas. I never managed to finish the whole thing, but promised my mom I would return to it one day when I had more time. Five years later, in 2016, I moved to a ranch in rural Colorado. The ranch belongs to the writer Pam Houston, who was my mentor in graduate school and became a good friend. When she asked me to caretake her ranch, I decided it would be the perfect place to finish the novel. I would have eight months of writing time and would be taking care of animals—it just seemed like, if I was ever going to finish this book (which I had to—I'd promised my mom!), then now was the time.

So there I was, in rural Colorado during the 2016 election, delving into a story about an animal sanctuary in western Kansas. Politics just seemed inescapable. Everyone remembers what that time was like—the election was everywhere, it was all anyone talked about. As I was rewriting the book, I couldn't help but include what was going on in the world around me—the world just inserted itself into the book and onto the characters. Once I got started, I realized there were so many rich connections between what was going on politically and what was going on at the Bright Side. The work

of caring for animals operates as a metaphor for so many things—I think the parallels became even more pronounced during revision.

After Colorado, I moved to rural Washington. That's where I was when the book sold and I began revisions. Even then, during the revision process, the political climate continued to insert itself. Throughout all of this—in Kansas, Colorado, and then Washington—I was a “blue” person living in a “red” community. The “red” characters in the book are loosely based on real people from these communities, as are the “blue” ones.

Mona, Ariel's mother, runs an animal sanctuary, which is the title of the novel. The word “sanctuary” means both “a sacred or holy place” and “a place that provides safety and protection.” To Mona, the Bright Side Sanctuary for Animals is both. Of course, the word “sanctuary” is also now ubiquitous because of the fierce political debate over how to treat undocumented immigrants. Those concepts converge when we see Mona's property harmed because of a hate crime. Can you tell us why you settled on the word “sanctuary” and what it meant to you?

I started this book after volunteering at an animal sanctuary, so the word *sanctuary* was always there. I do like that it holds multiple meanings in the book, raising questions about what it means to create or seek sanctuary. The Bright Side is both a literal animal sanctuary and a metaphor for other forms of sanctuary, whether it's the refuge of a loved one, the spiritual asylum of a church/mosque/synagogue, or the protection of a country/city/community. The Bright Side, and Mona's dedication to the animals, can stand in for a variety of forms of sacrifice and commitment to service.

All sanctuaries begin with good intentions—to provide safety and relief to those who need it—and yet many fall short of their promise due to things like poor or corrupt leadership, lack of resources, or waning energy. Every person has the capacity to serve as a sanctuary of some kind, but that doesn't mean all succeed. Sometimes, even if we want to offer sanctuary, we just can't.

Writing this book, I thought a lot about the distinction between intention and outcome. Is it enough to *want* to help people, or is actually helping

people all that really matters? What happens when our sanctuaries fail—do we give up? Do we try harder, even if it does more harm than good in the long run?

There are many descriptions of the Bright Side and Mona being dirty and the shame Ariel felt about that. Anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote about the concepts of purity and pollution in different societies, and these themes really seemed present in your story. I am thinking of the “terrible smell” of the dogs Ariel notes, the “terrible smell” of the house, the litterboxes in the home “like a fetid scarf wrapped around her face,” the flea that sat on Ariel’s ankle, the dog Daisy with the bladder issues, the Humpty-Dumpty cookie jar with cookies green with mold, and many other such references. And then Mona’s property is defaced with the words, “Dirty Jews,” which you note is plural and not just a reference to Mona. What do “purity” and “pollution” mean to you as social phenomena in your book given that Mona doesn’t care about any of this and does not change her behavior a whit, but Ariel is so obviously bothered by it?

I’ve always found our culture’s obsession with cleanliness strange. We’re so afraid of our bodies—we mask our body odor, wash the natural oils from our hair, spray weird perfume into the toilet so we can pretend like our poop doesn’t smell. What is this? We love, as a species, to pretend we’re not animals. I adore dogs, in part, because they are absolutely themselves. They smell their own farts because they’re curious, and they’ll smell yours, too, without judgment. They’ll eat their own vomit because why waste the undigested nutrients? Mona is absolutely aware that she is no different from the animals she cares for. There’s a moment in the book where Mona almost drives her truck off the road to avoid hitting a baby raccoon, and she tells Ariel it would be the same if a human baby were crawling across the road. To her, a life is a life is a life. Since leaving home, Ariel has outgrown this worldview, choosing to prioritize the world of humans. I think there’s a balance to strike somewhere in the middle, but it should probably start with recognizing that we are nothing but fancy apes.

One of my favorite cognitive exercises is to look around and try to really *see* everyone as apes—the way mothers carry their babies, the way we bring

food to our mouths, the way we laugh and urinate and have sex. We’re just animals, and our attempts at hygiene and civility are ways to distract from this reality. It’s also a way to separate ourselves from the world of animals so that we may cast some groups of people—to return to your question about the “dirty Jews” graffiti—as less-than-human. Historically, when we speak of people as dirty or compare them to animals, it’s a way of reducing their humanity.

I think, at its core, all of this stems from our unwillingness to accept that we die the same death as animals. We’re okay killing a spider or eating a hamburger because we’ve convinced ourselves the life of an animal is less important or sacred than the life of a human. But the truth—at least the way I see it—is that the life of every living thing is equal, and so are our deaths. (Does this mean we as a species could ever live or structure our civilizations according to this truth? Probably not—but we could certainly come closer than we do now.)

To bring it back to your question, I think Ariel is bothered by the sanctuary’s dirtiness because she doesn’t want to return to the reality that says every living thing is equal, end-stop. She’s been in the world of people, a world that cares about cleanliness and purity, and is reluctant to leave it because to leave it is to suggest that her life is no more important than the life of a dog, sheep, or pig. Her mother, however, has no problem with this outlook. She abandoned the world of people and social norms long ago, in exchange for the world of animals—it’s just part of the rift between her and Ariel.

Dex, Ariel’s fiancé, makes Ariel feel like “someone.” Is being “someone” about a sense of belonging or empowerment or a feeling that it is okay to just be who you are? What does it mean for a person to not feel like they are a “someone”?

I rewrote this novel while living mostly alone in an isolated area of Colorado. During the months I was there, my sense of identity began to grow fuzzy at the edges. I learned that most of who I was—or who I *thought* I was—had been created by the people and communities around me.

We know who we are, in large part, because people tell us or reflect versions of ourselves back to

us. We know we're funny because we make people laugh, we know we're shy because we have extroverted people to compare ourselves to. A lot of this book is about what happens when we *don't* have that mirror of community, when we feel like we're alone or on the outside looking in and must decide who we are based on nothing but our own perception of ourselves. Ariel feels this sense of alienation when she's growing up, but only when she's trying to move through circles at school; at home, among the animals, she feels perfectly at home in herself. When she moves to Lawrence and meets her partner Dex, her sense of identity begins to shift dramatically. She realizes how big the world is, and that, if she positions herself near Dex, she can become part of this larger world—she can become “someone.”

To Mona, feeling like “someone” means feeling like she's doing good in the world—she's caring for animals and dedicating her life to a cause larger than herself. To Ariel, feeling like “someone” means gaining social recognition from others and participating in a larger community. Ariel realizes, after leaving the sanctuary, that she needs people to feel like her life is important. Mona is the opposite—she wants little to do with people, and has staked her identity on her work. I think both perspectives are valid, and serve as opposing points on a larger spectrum of how we shape our identity.

You very beautifully describe Ariel's father as someone who “had slipped away.” You relate this to how Ariel herself slipped away from her mother and her first love, Gideon, by leaving home to go to college and losing contact with them for years. She is a character who both felt abandoned and then abandoned loved ones herself, which she feels extreme guilt over. What in Ariel prevented her from contacting her mother for all those years? And had the Bright Side not suffered from the fire, do you think she would ever have contacted her mom?

A lot of my writing deals with themes of leaving and return. My father left when I was little, for reasons I still don't exactly understand, so I think this book—and much of my other work—is an exploration of that early mystery: Why do some people leave and others return? I think Ariel and her father both leave for valid reasons—they're smothered by

the sanctuary and want to know what life would be like without the obligations, responsibilities, and sacrifices required of Mona's commitment to the animals. They both feel like they entered a lifestyle they didn't sign on to. I think both Ariel and her father regret leaving—neither feels good about it and both carry the shame and remorse of abandoning Mona—but the difference is that Ariel decides to confront this shame in order to get her mother back. Maybe her father's shame is too substantial, since he left not only his wife, but his daughter as well. Maybe he's too cowardly to face it. That said, I'm not sure if Ariel would have returned home if not for the fire—I like to think she would have, eventually. But by then it might have been too late.

Let's consider the concept of touch in this book. Mona will sleep with, embrace, and care for animals in the book, but she does not touch her daughter with the same tenderness or care until they embrace at the very end. You write that Ariel, “... hadn't realized how much it mattered, this act of touching.” Tell us why the affection, the touch, did matter so much to Ariel in the end.

I think this relates back to our obsession with cleanliness, and how we've adopted certain norms as a way to distance ourselves from the animal world. Touch is such an important part of human connection, but it's often taboo to talk about because we associate it so much with sex. The truth is that, for most people, touch is essential—according to research, it can reduce stress, boost the immune system, and even help with chronic pain. Unfortunately, there are many people who go without touch—they're single or live alone; they have nobody to safely touch them. I love the recent rise of professional cuddlers—people you can hire, as a kind of therapist, to platonically hold you, pet your head, or rub your back. I think it's also a sign of how lonely we've become as a society, that we've had to commodify something as natural as touch.

This is one reason pets are so important—we even call them pets, because that's a big part of our relationship to them. When you think about the animals you love, a significant part of that relationship is touch—the petting, the cuddling, the

licking (hopefully them licking you and not vice versa). I think we love our pets in large part because we can touch them without the fear of rejection or the confusion of language—they're a reliable outlet for touch.

Ariel subconsciously seeks touch from her mother because it's a sign that her mother is still family. When Ariel returns home, she has to watch her mother cuddle, pet, and care for the animals, knowing she has not earned this same level of connection and trust. Ariel and Mona have plenty of conversations (many of which go awry and make matters worse), but what finally brings them together is touch—a language incapable of irony or deception. It's easy to say you're sorry (and not mean it), but forgiving with the body is harder to fake.

You list some very sweet “friends” in your acknowledgments—Romeo, Pongo, Bunny, Wooster, Olivia, William, the ranch sheepies, Isaac, Deseo, Roany, the Birchwood chickens, Peach, Luca/Carlos, Onyx, Esme, Pup Howdy, and Freya. I think our readers would love to know a story or two about any one of these friends, if you would be so good to share with us.

One story: when I was caretaking Pam Houston's ranch, I was lucky enough to be there during lambing season. I was pretty lonely and blue all winter—this was the election year, I had just split with a boyfriend, and had no idea what I was doing with my life—and so when Pam told me the sheep might be pregnant, I decided not to get my hopes up. I was tired of waiting for good news and then feeling disappointed.

So I'm in this completely dour mood when one day I wake up and see something small bopping around the sheep pen. I race outside and find a little black and white lamb, her wool still damp from birth. Her mom is making this special high-pitched bleat—the ovine version of baby talk. Meanwhile, the chickens are pecking away at the placenta like it's a birthday cake. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I named the baby Hillary.

A few months after I left the ranch, something horrible happened—a black bear broke into the sheep pen and attacked a majority of the sheep. I

can't stand to think of what it must have been like for the sheep or the humans who were around when it happened. The political parallels are also so grim—the bear breaking into the formerly secure pen, killing innocent lambs just for fun, instilling fear in everyone.

All that said, I like to remember Hillary as she was before I left—a small innocent spark of life bursting with joy. She would race from one end of the pen and then jump up, click her little heels together. Sometimes she would put a piece of hay in her mouth and chew it for minutes at a time, miming the other adult sheep even though she was still drinking her mama's milk—*Yeah, I'm a sheep and this is what sheep do, we eat hay, no big deal*. She was curious and spunky and perfect. I loved her, and I think, during her short span of time on Earth, she had a pretty good time.

Mona relates Bright Side to heaven—“beautiful, safe, and filled with love.” I love the idea that, if we are lucky, we each can feel like we have a heaven-like space on earth. For me, it's a dance studio. Why did you choose that space to be an animal sanctuary?

I think animal sanctuaries embody the best of what humanity can be. Here is a place where, even in a capitalist society, people take in creatures that have little to no monetary value and dedicate their time, energy, and resources into caring for them. That, to me, is the epitome of sanctuary—a place that exists solely because of love and greater moral purpose.

I think it's important, at least to the book, that the Bright Side is somewhat run-down and ugly, because sometimes our institutions of love and sanctuary feel run-down and ugly. Sanctuary is not about beauty and perfection, but rather about the emotional and energetic forces at work. In some ways, it works as a metaphor for writing, too. A lot of times our writing is less than we imagined—I think every writer has been there. We have an idea that looks promising in our head, but then, in the process of putting it down on the page, something is lost.

My writing practice is definitely one of my sanctuaries—a sacred place where I can practice

empathy, exercise my imagination, and create joy. Does that mean everything I write is brilliant or even good? Of course not—and that’s part of the beauty. Failure, and the continued possibility of failure, is a critical element to any sanctuary. It reminds us that sanctuaries require care, and sometimes, as humans, we fall short as caretakers.

If you were to offer some advice to a fellow writer, what would you say to the person who has half-finished three novels but feels like they will never reach the finish line?

My advice would be to pick whichever project interests you most and finish it. The unfortunate truth is that writing is hard work, and the only way to complete a project is to put your butt in the chair and write, write, write. Even if you think it’s terrible, even if doubt is pouring from your ears every second of the way. Even if it hurts and everyone is telling you to move on or give up, you just have to keep working through it. I wish there was a magic trick or fairytale shortcut, but like any other worthwhile endeavor, books require a tremendous amount of care, energy, patience, and, perhaps most importantly, hope.

First love: Can you tell us about the first piece you published and what that meant to you?

The first story I ever published was in *Midwestern Gothic*. I was a senior in college, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two, and it was the greatest feeling in the world—like finally receiving my letter from Hogwarts. As a young writer, all I wanted was an invitation to the castle of Real Writers, and my first publication seemed at least like a ticket inside the castle walls. Of course, I now know that this castle doesn’t exist—there’s no such thing as a Real Writer, only a person who writes.

Looking back, I feel really proud of that story and the version of me who wrote it. It was about a young girl whose mother begins to date her rabbi while she’s training for her bat mitzvah. It’s a bleak story, and ends with the rabbi convincing the young girl to engage in a sexual act with him, simultaneously dismantling her faith in men and God. It was titled “Snowmen,” and there was all this snow symbolism I thought was really clever. I wish I could

crawl back into the brain that wrote that story and see what it felt like. I hope it felt the way it does now, like the hardest thing and the most fun thing all at once. 