

## The Shift: A Work of Fiction with a Sprinkling of Evolutionary Science

**Carolyn Buffington**

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*In the wake of a pandemic, fear shapes human existence and beliefs in the speculative, theory-heavy novel The Shift.*

In Carolyn Buffington's musing science fiction novel *The Shift*, the question of how much is known about humans and their DNA is centered.

In 2019, before the emergence of COVID-19 in the US, forty-year-old Beth discovers that she is pregnant following attempts at conception through a sperm bank. Anticipating single motherhood, Beth documents her experiences and thoughts in a journal addressed to her future daughter. Its pages span the pandemic and the year after her child's birth.

In 2145, Catherine, an anthropology professor in Canada, starts teaching a course centered on human evolution in North America. Her lectures cover pivotal scientific occurrences, encompassing the rise and fall of *Homo neanderthalensis* and the profound impact of historical pandemics and natural events, including the 1918 flu pandemic and the Dust Bowl.

The women's stories are woven together to reveal the intricate connections between events and their long effects—and a theory of dormant DNA awakening and instigating an evolutionary leap in human beings. The book notes that of the many different components that make up the human body, DNA is the most mysterious; it asserts that 98 percent of DNA is silent or seems to have no purpose. It becomes heavy with theory, as when it contemplates how environmental stressors like pandemics affect genetic expression; it intimates that almost every aspect of human development is a reaction to another. As it continues, it transforms evolutionary ideas into thought-provoking theories. And secondary themes also play into the book's progression, as with reminders of the dangers of misinformation, which can create panic within civilizations.

Indeed, the women's stories become a vehicle for exploring such themes and scientific unknowns. Their journal entries and recorded classroom lectures wind in to flesh out their emotions and connect their stories to the science of the book. Still, despite the book's opening claims of putting the story first and just "sprinkling" the science in, the narrative portions of the story are less attended to than its scientific and historical aspects. It includes some overcomplicated explanations of ideas, and it rushes through pivotal moments in the women's lives. Its informative elements are prolonged; in the process, critical plot points are underexplored. The conclusion is also abrupt, leaving lingering questions unanswered.

In the speculative science fiction novel *The Shift*, women living through different time periods become case studies in human evolution.

DANICA MORRIS (April 24, 2024)

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