



Contents May Have Shifted

Pam Houston

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Stuck in a dead-end relationship, this fearless narrator leaves her metaphorical baggage behind and finds a comfort zone in the air, “feeling safest with one plane ticket in her hand and another in her underwear drawer.” She flies around the world, finding reasons to love life in dozens of far-flung places from Alaska to Bhutan. Along the way she weathers unplanned losses of altitude, air pressure, and landing gear. With the help of a squad of loyal, funny, wise friends and massage therapists, she learns to sort truth from self-deception, self-involvement from self-possession.

At last, having found a new partner “who loves Don DeLillo and the NHL” and a daughter “who needs you to teach her to dive and to laugh at herself”—not to mention two dogs and two horses—“staying home becomes more of an option. Maybe.”

Contents May Have Shifted Details

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From Reader Review Contents May Have Shifted for online ebook

Paula says

I wanted to like this book, but I couldn't. Normally I love things written in short, sweet snippets like this, and I was and am intrigued by the style. But in this book I felt as if there was no "there" there. I wanted to either be shown more about the interior underbelly of the narrator, and discover what this was all about for her and how the travels were affecting her, and/or I wanted more about the fabulous out-of-the-way places she has traveled. Instead I got neither. I felt like this was a bragbook of all the interesting places she's traveled, with no real sense of what affect these journeys had on her. At times I was able to go with the flow, but ultimately I had no sense by the end that Pam had evolved in any way, nor did I have anywhere near enough rich travel and sense-of-place details I would have loved to read. I got tired of the whining about men, and annoyed that the self-absorbed navel gazing didn't go anywhere. Parts of the book are brilliant, and this would have worked for me if I had any sense of change in the narrator, but alas. The narrator was far too self-absorbed in ways that didn't fit with her adventurous nature, and the constant obsessing over men irritated me immensely.

Chris says

Very good story about a middle-aged creative writing instructor and outdoorswoman leading her life. The story unfolds in a series of vignettes - I thought that would annoy me, but it actually worked really well. Make sure you have a copy with the reading group guide in the back, so you can read "The Author on Her Work" after reading the book - it satisfyingly answered my questions about the story. :)

Sharon says

Reading Pam Houston gives me courage. I studied with her the second semester of my MFA and count her as a big influence. I will never be adventurous in the outdoors sense, the way she is. But I do aspire to her fearlessness in writing.

It's not just the structure (144 short chapters, conceived as 144 reasons not to commit suicide). It's not just the sleight of hand that makes the intimate-funny-smart voice of the narrator Pam sound just like but even better than the author's own voice. It's not just the sense that at any moment our heroine could fall out of the sky as her plane nose-dives or that our lives are all hanging on a wisp of cumulous cloud.

It's the language: e.g. "the handsome-in-a-rangy, greyhoundesque-way flight attendant"). It's the one-sentence spot-on portrait of adolescence: ("Kara, fifteen, put about a milliliter of [pasta sauce] on the tip of her tongue and shrugged, said, "It's not your best work.") It's that this Pam, the narrator of the book, pulls people's secret stories out of them, the way I hope to be able to do someday. How does she get her (male) ophthalmologist to tell her this: "I want to say this in a way that makes you think I am a normal person. My daughter Penelope still sleeps with me. She's twelve." Reading this book is like reading people's minds. The tone is so personal and confessional sounding, she makes us believe it is all true, even though it is fiction, one of Houston's signature tricks.

Craig says

Whenever I am asked what my favorite novel is, *Written on the Body* immediately springs to mind. Seconds later, I start arguing with myself - throwing *The Virgin Suicides* into the mix. And so I reply with both.

I believe that there is now a third book that will join that fight. I may have to rattle off three titles whenever I am asked what my favorite novel is.

I have long been a fan of Pam Houston, loved her syncopation and her straightforward stabs at the real meanings behind our gender differences and differences in general. This book, though, takes her to a whole new level in my opinion. It is a thing of beauty, pure and heartwrenchingly real. A treatise on suicide and the reasons not to take that path, it never strays into the realm of the cliché, staying always honest to itself.

One small complaint: I think she is clinging a little too hard to the "romantic gender war" that made her such a popular writer. The men in this book, particularly in the early chapters, often seem like caricatures rather than actual men. It does change, though, as you get into the book further, but it is off-putting. What would normally be a large complaint for me, really pales next to the accomplishment that the book truly is.

A favorite quote:

"I'm beginning to understand that when we want to kill ourselves, it is not because we are lonely, but because we are trying to break up with the world before the world breaks up with us."

Like the rest of the novel, it is simple. But it gets to the heart of the matter succinctly. This book hit me pretty hard, got to me. It impressed me with how well it was written, but beyond that - it hit home.

Another quote said to the author that gets to the heart of the book and what it most likely is about (in my opinion) to the author herself:

"I don't think it is so much about the story anymore. I think it's about what kinds of possibilities are out there when you can finally stop telling the story."

I selfishly hope that Pam never stops telling the story. I want to listen to her rhythms and reasons for a long time to come.

A.K. Turner says

I had such high expectations for this and was so disappointed. I could deal with the format - disjointed, choppy, confusing. I could deal with the main character of the "novel" being a woman named Pam who teaches writing. I could even deal with the whiny unlikable boyfriends, which in turn make it difficult to like the narrator. But I could not deal with all three. It was just too much to accept from an author who I believe to be incredibly talented. I've read essays by Houston that have left me shocked and elated with her clarity and the beauty of her prose. I was hoping for that here.

I'm still glad that she wrote the book. She's reaching for something new and unique and I think that's always a good thing. Even in this book (which I cannot honestly recommend), she shows off her talent (in my opinion, especially in regard to place). Unfortunately, the other aspects of the novel are too much of a detriment for it to pull through.

Sarah says

Oh, Pam, how you've let me down. I've loved Pam Houston for years, after discovering her "Cowboys are My Weakness" story collection. Her newest "novel" is really anything but. It's a hodge-podge of travel/love/adventure vignettes, loosely tied together and blurry in their direction. Pam is a thrill seeker, traveling the globe with assorted misfits and spiritual soul searchers. Her bohemian charisma is attractive, and I admire her stamina dealing with difficult people, and stubborn men. Certain 'stories' recall horrific plane rides, resulting in jilted passengers and new outlooks on life. Others recall extreme weather conditions, beauty in foreign countries and the intricacies of mixed families. I tried to love this book. The writing is certainly Pam, but I worry her brain has lost some of its previous focus. I am envious of how much healing she's done while participating in luxurious spa treatments. Loosely recommended, but I still eagerly await her next release.

Linda says

This seems to be one of those books you are supposed to like, but I really did not. Though categorized as a novel, it is not. It is apparent that Ms. Houston is a very talented writer who has led an extremely interesting life. I just did not enjoy the tiny chapters, the sort of hipster references, and the overall vibe of the book. I had to force myself to finish it.

Guess I am just not as cool as the other people who have read this.

Patricia says

I quickly learned that I needed to take sips of "Contents May Have Shifted" with my morning coffee when my mind was alert and better able to catch the nuances in Houston's writing. It didn't work to read it at bedtime. A friend who also read the book said, "Houston asks a lot of the reader." Yes, this is true, and I think that readers who are willing to give the book the kind of attention it requires will be rewarded. Perhaps it was the power of suggestion in the title, but as I read further into the book, my sensibility shifted. I fell into Houston's rhythm, the cadence of her sentences, the thwack of the mini chapters, the lyricism of the description which was slippery with metaphor. She is witty and her parody and irony are ferocious. When I finished this book, I wanted to get copies to a bunch of women I thought would enjoy it as much as I did--this coming from someone who rarely buys books for others because I generally feel that choosing a book is a very personal thing. But darn it, I want to share this delicious read and hope my favorite reading friends will find it.

Kim Messier says

I have loved Pam Houston since *Cowboys Are My Weakness*, and had high expectations for *Contents May Have Shifted*. I really wanted to love this book, bought a hardcover because I expected to keep it. Instead I am disappointed in the self-indulgent narrator and stream-of-consciousness writing style. I loved the format of each chapter taking place in a different location of the world, and when I read the jacket copy that it was originally conceived as "144 reasons not to commit suicide" I understood the disjointed nature of it better. But I didn't feel I learned much about the narrator's story arc, lots of whining about boyfriends and their girl friends or ex-wives, and what feels like boasting about her world travels and the exclusive places she has been. I almost felt like the narrator was looking down her nose at a poor slob like me who only goes to work every day, makes a good wage at a good job, but must live such a boring sheltered life. There were some shining moments, like when the Laotian guide explains why he is so nice to the Americans, "when you do something nice for somebody, it is just like walking around a temple. it is like saying a prayer." And the book finished strong, but it was basically a chore to get through. And that is very disappointing.

Sonja says

After reading 108 pages, I realized I wasn't learning anything new from this book, unless it was that the author either had a very interesting job that enabled her to travel a lot or she had a trust fund and was just going where the wind blew her. I did enjoy the descriptions of places that I have not been but, other than that, there just isn't much that makes me want to read more. Part of it may be her jumping around from place to year to whatever and back again. I think this is a book that maybe her family would enjoy more than strangers. I really hate to give up on a book but there are so many really good books "out there" that I want to read and I'm getting older day by day so I need to make wise choices.

Erin says

I went to hear Pam Houston read in Berkeley on February 20. It was delightful, and I appreciated when she said that we are a culture so interested in categorizing--novel, prose poetry, fiction, non-fiction.

I liked this book a lot, perhaps more than any book besides "Cowboys." But "Cowboys" maybe only because of where I was in my life when I read it. However, I think this is a book that might require multiple readings, and could in fact become my favorite book. However, I probably should not have read all the interchapters about plane failure.

Some gorgeous lines:

"Maybe the real reason I haven't wanted a child all these years is because when you hurt for them when they are hurting it is the hardest hurting of all."

"If one more fifty-year-old man tells me he would like to disappear into South America for a while with nothing in his truck but a whole lot of blank paper I think I will kill myself."

"She wasn't ready and then I wasn't ready and then we were finally both ready on the same day."--in

response to the dying of her wolfhound.

"Anyone who has no monkey probably has a rat."

"I might be able to suck up all of my hurt feelings, if it meant I didn't have to listen to yours."

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Alan says

Maybe I'm just not as familiar as I should be with the type of mimetic fiction presented here—I'm perfectly prepared to believe that—but... I picked this book up on a whim (my wife had checked it out of the library for herself, and it was close to hand when nothing else was), and was immediately captivated by the page I'd opened to at random. That doesn't happen to me very often these days. I read another few pages, then realized that yes, I was going to start over at the beginning and read the whole thing... and *that* happens to me even less often. Houston has an amazing gift for capturing essentials in tiny slices of prose, and that's a good thing for a reader to encounter, whatever the genre.

I am given to understand that this book is a work of fiction; if so, though, it still has the immediacy of an autobiography, or a journal, written dramatically and unfolding in the moment. Less a novel than a series of intense vignettes, *Contents May Have Shifted* changes locales with dizzying rapidity, eventually building up a coherent portrait of its narrator through a kind of literary pointillism. Each two- or three-page chapter could stand on its own, but each contributes to a growing understanding of its (fictional—some parts obviously more fictional than others) Pam Houston's being.

I think it's the eerie, jewellike specificity of Houston's writing that brings on the feeling—illusory though it may be—that we are coming to know this person so deeply. Each snapshot Houston shows us is sharply focused on the details of her protagonist's surroundings, companions, foods tasted and monuments visited, but each gives us a glimpse into "Houston" and her inner life as well. Travel is redemptive, even when (especially when?) it's life-threatening—that is the theme that binds them together. Indeed, sometimes the book feels like a scattered travelogue, like *Eat Pray Love* (but more acerbic, cerebral and self-aware)—or so I believe, anyway. I haven't actually read that one, but when I described this book to a coworker, Elizabeth Gilbert's book is what she immediately thought of too.

It's not a perfect narrative, of course—what is, in this imperfect world? From small flaws (such as the use of "flare" instead of "flair" on p.33; a reference to "Orleans Parrish" on p.44; a funny-in-context mention of "unexploded ordinances" on p.71) to larger issues (it's hard to shake off *all* the vestiges of First World privilege—see Houston's cure for depression, for example, from p.52: "Remember this and get on an airplane, a small one if possible, because it always works"), this book can occasionally seem smug, the chronicles of the woman who does *everything* more perfectly than you.

But those quibbles are so minor I hesitate even to introduce them. Let me give you an example of the kind of mini-story Houston writes, the sort of thing that grabbed me, the sort of thing I envy. This is the second in a "short list, in chronological order, of suicides I have known" (from pp.46-47):

The girl in the first writing class I ever taught whose boyfriend left her in a campground in the desert. She walked for fifteen miles to the nearest highway, hitched to Grand Junction,

borrowed the cash for a bus ticket to Denver, walked ten blocks from the bus station to their apartment, turned the key in the lock, and hung herself from the rafters. Following her death, I heard that the boy who really loved her, who had been watching her canaries for her while she went to the desert with the other boy, wrapped the small birds in cellophane and shot them with a BB gun so he would not have to hear the flapping of their wings.

If that's the kind of flashbulb moment for which you read fiction... rest assured that Houston packs a lot of such moments into 306 pages.

"Love is supposed to feel good," Nora always tells me, "at least fifty-one percent of the time" (p.171). This novel feels good to read, substantially more than 50% of the time. And while it may be true that, however tightly packed, its Contents May Have Shifted, you can also rest assured that everything Houston intended to deliver should still arrive intact.

Vicki says

The word that you probably cannot read in the little heart-shaped cloud on the book cover is "novel." I point this out because this book reads like the most funky and creative memoir ever. Adding to this misinterpretation is that the narrator of the book is also named Pam, also is a Creative Writing teacher in California, and also owns a ranch in Colorado. But the cloud on the back of the book says "fiction," so there ya go. Apparently not every word included here is true, but it would be an amazing memoir if it were!

The structure of the book took some getting used to for me. There are well over 100 short vignettes that are used to tell Pam's story, but the reader has to do some work to figure out what makes Pam the unique person she is. We find out early on that she loves to travel, as many of the vignettes carry as a chapter title the flight number of a particular plane. What they have in common is that something goes awry either mechanically or meteorologically on seemingly every plane trip she takes, but her desire to travel trumps the fear factor every time.

There does not appear to be a lot to connect one vignette to the next as the time and place and people included are likely to be totally different in succeeding chapters (which look for all the world like journal entries, i.e., short, and with the assumption that the reader is already connected to whatever came before). After awhile though, the reader begins to pick up a theme or two and start to recognize that some of the players are repeats; therefore worth paying more attention to. Pam is a woman searching for love, for adventure, for validation, for a spiritual dimension to her life.

She connects with some very interesting and exotic people along the way and picks up bits of wisdom in some very out of the way places. She finally sheds the guy that she thinks might be the one, except that he keeps a photo of his own great love (not Pam) in his glove box. After several hilariously described blind dates, she meets a Texan that she really clicks with. The only thing is that he still is the emotional property of his ex and his 6 year old daughter. Pam and Rick, the Texan, invest an enormous amount of time and travel miles in building a relationship with ample depth and trust. This also includes a surprisingly deep love and affection that Pam feels for Rick's daughter Madison.

Author Pam Houston has a great ear for dialog and a sense of humor to match. The working title of this book was "144 Reasons Not to Commit Suicide," but the title, Contents May Have Shifted embraces both the travel aspect and the emotional journey that Pam makes very effectively, I think.

Larry H says

Pam, the narrator of this absolutely fantastic book, can't seem to stay in one place. An author and writing instructor with little luck on the romantic front, the one thing she seems to have inherited from her dysfunctional parents is a sincere love of travel and a restlessness to explore.

Contents May Have Shifted follows Pam all over the world, from ranches and spas, to monasteries, religious shrines, hotels, and landmarks, in locations as diverse as the American Southwest, Alaska, Bhutan, Tibet, Laos, Spain, Scotland, Newfoundland, and Australia. Sometimes she travels with friends, sometimes colleagues, sometimes lovers (or ex-lovers), and sometimes she is trying to escape it all. And she has no shortage of flying-related complications, whether on a jet plane or a small turbo prop! Pam's (and Pam Houston's) tremendous appreciation for wherever she is and whomever she is with, no matter the circumstances, is both heartwarming and, at times, heartbreaking, but moving all the same.

While this book hooked me from start to finish, especially since the sphere of my personal travel experiences is so narrow, I give you one warning: this book is not told in a linear way, so as it jumps from place to place, it jumps from time to time. Sometimes she's with one partner, sometimes another, and sometimes she's simply dealing with friends and their issues. I think it's a true testament to Houston's skills as a writer that she's able to present such a full story through short snippets told out of temporal order. If you can suspend your need for order and just give in to this book about the joy of travel and relationships, you will love it as much as I did. And if you want more Pam Houston, I highly recommend her short story collections *Cowboys* and *My Weakness and Waltzing the Cat*.

A. says

Pam Houston is a magnificent writer. Her prose is beautiful and her ability to surprise the reader with a turn of phrase or a pithy comment is extraordinary. Those gifts are on full display in her new book.

Contents May Have Shifted is composed of 144 short pieces. All but 12 of the pieces are labelled with places. Many are exotic or at least intriguing like Tibet, Istanbul, Mallorca. Others are the territory that Pam Houston, the fictional narrator, and Pam Houston the writer inhabit like Crede, Denver and Boulder Colorado along with Davis, California. The other 12 pieces are named for flights UA#368 opens the book. To call this a novel is a bit out on a limb. These pieces largely work as short shorts. Many don't quite connect, especially in the beginning of the book, with the pieces that come before or after.

As Pam jumps from place to place in a never ending tour that would rival Bob Dylan's odyssey of the last 20 years, we are left trying to figure out an underlying plot and a purpose. It's clear that Houston is trying to find connections in all these places and it is also clear that she must be running away. The relationships come into better focus in the second half of the book and we see Pam trying to come to terms with a committed relationship.

What makes this book special are the individual pieces. They are beautiful. They glimmer, as Houston would say. She writes about place concisely and infuses her tales with great humor. I think to call this book a novel is a bit of a misnomer and forces the reader to think of it in a way that isn't in line with the book's strengths. I

was reaching too hard for cohesion when it was better to just let the pieces wash over me. When I finally gave in and enjoyed meandering from place to place for the sake of it, the plot kicks in in a much more overt way and almost seems to get in the way of the travelling.

Pam Houston has always inhabited that world between fiction and nonfiction. Her stories are autobiographical and her essays sometimes read like tall tales. I think I would have liked a little more ambiguity in this book. I don't quite believe it's a novel even if I know that it isn't quite the truth.
