

Local author Agell takes 'long walk in the toxic wilderness' with 'Shift'

By Beth Brogan

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BRUNSWICK – Five years after "the Disaster," 16-year-old Adrian Havoc dodges HomeState helicopters and tries to avoid radioactive food in Atro City, part of the United Christian States. Each day, "telejectors" beam three-dimensional holograms of "the midday Rapture" into his living room, although it's only required viewing once a day.

What is left of the world awaits the "Shift" – a geological phenomenon that takes on new meaning in the latest novel by Brunswick author Charlotte Agell.

Agell will sign and read from her latest novel, "Shift," Sunday afternoon at Gulf of Maine Books. The novel, published by Henry Holt and Co., hit bookstore shelves on Sept. 30.

Her novel, for young adults, is a drastic departure for the author known for writing and illustrating what she describes as "very jolly" children's books. In a marked departure from Agell's earlier "jolly" period, "Shift" features overtones of Orwell's "1984," Stephen King's "The Stand" and even Cormac McCarthy's "The Road."

Describing "Shift" as "a cautionary tale," Agell sees the novel as "my long walk in the toxic wilderness." She said the inspiration for her latest novel came from a long-ago walk through woods at Wolfe's Neck State Park in Freeport.

"I was thinking about people who live in the woods, people who were a part of some resistance," said Agell, who teaches part time at Harrison Middle School in Yarmouth. "It's like I tell my kids at school, it's the asking, 'What if?'"

What if, she asks through Adrian, "all the bombs blew, all the radiation drifted north ... there was this huge flash up the coast. Then the ground shook like hell and the sky filled with smoke. Millions of people died and ... the whole country went insane."

Reviews have both thrilled Agell – one, from Kirkus described the novel as "thought-provoking and readable" – and caused what she described as an "'Oh no!' reaction."

"I had one review on the Internet from a woman who said it was Christian-bashing," she said. Yet Agell points to a central character in the novel who looks toward a better time when "we can pray to God in any way we want ... or not, although that would be a grand shame."

"God wants us to think," Agell said this week, quoting another character in the book. "What is faith if you're being told to think it?" Instead of bashing Christianity, she said, "If anything, I would want this book to make anybody's faith stronger."

Raised in Sweden, Canada and Hong Kong, Agell attended a Lutheran mission school in Hong Kong that was affiliated with an "open-minded" ecumenical church. After Agell became an American citizen during the 1990s, she said, "I was just mightily offended that this was my country bombing its way to peace. We have gone down an indefensible road."

"There's a saying by Mahatma Ghandi – 'God has no religion,'" Agell said. "It speaks to me. I'm not pretending to know the answers. I would never want to sneer at anybody's faith."

What disturbs me is people policing other people's faith. To presume you can direct someone's spiritual path is disturbing to me and lacks integrity. Back to the bumper sticker idea – 'Who would Jesus kill?' ... In the translation, something was lost."

The title of the novel stems from the concept of a "polar shift," in which some believe the Earth's crust will suddenly shift. Some say it will cause an apocalypse, or "end of days." Although Agell began "Shift" five years ago, the timeliness of the topic is not lost on the author, given the focus on religion during this year's presidential election.

Agell said she would love to chat with vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who has stated in the past that she believes in The Rapture, or End of Days.

"I would ask her, 'Do you believe in the right of people to worship in the way of their own choosing – in basic freedom of religion?'" Agell said. "I do believe in the separation of church and state. It's one of the bottom lines of this book. I would be afraid we would ban wonder. I'm really pro-people's right to ask questions and to think their own thoughts."

With a teenage boy as a protagonist, Agell said she hoped to remind adults of that sense of wonder.

"I think I remember as a teen a sense of awe, unfiltered, a sense of being connected," she said. "It's still fresh (when you're a teen). I think being told what to think is just so antithetical to true faith. That's not to say there can't be psalms, stories, hymns ... but to be forced to believe anything is just an oxymoron."

Another oxymoron is Adrian's sister, Shriek – a character Agell is particularly proud of.

"She is one of my more happy creations," Agell said of the character, whose given name is Melody. "She's the conscience of the book."

The 240-page novel is aimed at an audience of readers age 12 and older. Agell, who teaches language arts to students in the gifted-and-talented program, said her students – some "very critical and passionate readers" – have field-tested selected excerpts. Her easy, but not obvious, use of teenage-like language developed in part, she said, because her son and daughter – now 17 and 21 – would hang out with friends at home.

Yes, the book has "swearing," and Agell acknowledges that it would be "an awkward choice as a class read." In fact, she said she hopes "Shift" is placed on the banned books list, adding, "that's a glib way of saying I wish more than anything to provoke thought. Most (banned books) are not banned because of offensive language, but because of questioning authority."

Agell will sign and read from "Shift" beginning at 4:30 p.m. Sunday at Gulf of Maine Books, 134 Maine St. Refreshments will be served.