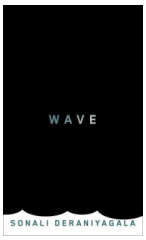
Tsunami Trauma



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In college, I often dreamed of tsunamis. The waves were enormously high and transported me far inland but were amazingly gentle behemoths that if I did not fight against, eventually landed me upon the shore without any damage. The tsunami that struck Sir Lanka the day after Christmas 2004 was nothing like these, but was instead brutal, fierce, and deadly.

Imagine losing your husband, two sons, and both parents on the same day. This unbelievable tragedy happened to this British economist. The memoir starts quietly with her description of a typical morning at a beach resort in Southern Sri Lanka that her family had been visiting since her childhood. Sonali knew all the hotel staff and park rangers; the place meant home to her and her family. Ironically, the family was packing to go home later that day.

As her children are dressing, she speaks to a close friend who has accompanied them on their holiday outing. Suddenly, both women notice an unusual wave in the far distance. Sonali calls to her husband in the bathroom, but

he takes his time coming out. Soon, the friend and family are racing out of the hotel. Someone directs them toward a Jeep and they all pile in--a child on each of their laps. A moment later, they are struck by a huge force, so powerful that Sonali doesn't suspect that it's a wave. Her boy is ripped out of her arms.

Thus begins *Wave*, Deraniyagala's memoir of her journey into grief: the drinking, the pills, the haunting of her family's former home in Colombo. For years, Sonali refuses to tell any stranger what happened to her, or why she no longer has a husband.

Sonali's tale is tense and powerful. It reads more like a novel than a memoir yet in it, Sonali's message is clear: live in the moment, enjoy what happiness you have because it can be fleeting.

For a book about another tsunami by one of my favorite nonfiction and nature writers, try Gretel Ehrlich's *Facing the Wave : a Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami*, a poignant account of life in Japan after the 2011 tsunami. Ehrlich brings her familiarity with Japanese culture and an eye for nature into her writing.

Posted by Dory L. on April 9, 2013

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