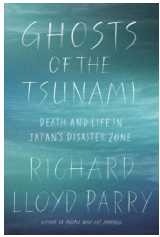


# Ghosts of the Tsunami: Death and Life in Japan's Disaster Zone



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Did you ever dream of being in a tsunami? As a college freshman I did, repeatedly over a course of a couple of months. Luckily, I lived in the mountains then, a few hundred miles from the sea.

Richard Lloyd Parry, an English journalist, who spent over a decade in Japan, did six years of research for this excellent book. In one chapter, he recounts Teruo Konno's experience being swept and tossed for hours in the great tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011. Konno's tale reads like a thriller.

As a city employee, Teruo opened the doors to evacuees at a city hall branch office next to the Kitakami River, fifteen feet above sea level and inland from the ocean. Everyone in the building survived the severe shaking, but the building lost power. No one knew that officials had revised the tsunami warning to 120 feet.

The building flooded immediately in the next giant wave, but held structurally. Evacuees and staff moved to higher levels. After several more waves, Teruo watched out one window as a massive hill of water swept his co-worker out another. The current pushed Teruo toward the sea, and his co-worker, still wearing his glasses, toward the hills. Teruo thought: lucky guy, he will probably survive.

Repeated waves and towering black masses of water rammed Teruo into the sea and back up the Kitakami River at great speeds for hours. At times, he lost consciousness, but eventually pulled himself onto part of a floating roof. Although he suffered greatly from hypothermia, he survived when a wave tossed him to the bank and he climbed up to an old friend's house a mere block from where he started. His friend from work survived the wave?but like many, died that night from exposure.

The 2011 tsunami killed 18,000?the largest loss of life in Japan since the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Parry does not just skim the surface of this grave disaster. He shows how the tsunami broke apart families. He also provides a strong sense of its cultural context, as when he notes that some fathers-in-law refused to let the mothers of missing children search for them. One father-in-law went himself the day of the tsunami and, falling into a churning river, almost did not come back.

Another moving story Parry details is the tragedy of the deaths of nearly seventy children at Okawa Elementary School in the village of Kamaya, two miles from the sea. Despite the fact that more than an hour after the earthquake hit?and even after officials repeatedly broadcast tsunami warnings?the school's principal and his assistant did not move the children to higher ground; they drowned in the tsunami. Two boys, disobeying orders, climbed the nearest hill, allowing them to survive. Several parents came for their children and took them home; they too lived.

The book profiles the aftermath for several of these schoolchildren's? parents, especially that of Sayomi, who lost her oldest daughter. Sayomi spent months searching for her daughter's remains, even taking a course in driving earth-moving machinery and becoming one of only a handful of women licensed in Japan to operate these big machines. To find her daughter, Sayomi borrowed equipment and spent day after day moving mounds of mud. And although she never found her own daughter, she did find the remains of other children, bringing closure to their parents.

What do the ghosts of the title represent? Like Sayomi, many Japanese believe the spirits of relatives live after death, especially following violence. Many people from the area affected by the tsunami visited a priest who worked with them to release the spirits trapped within the wreckage there.

This compelling account shares the aftermath of one of the modern world's largest tragedies. You will not forget this book.

Posted by Dory L. on April 3, 2018

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