Humanity rises from devastation

A memoir and a novel both focus on the personal element of natural disasters – the people left standing, the souls gone missing

Wave, by Sonali Deraniyagala (McClelland & Stewart, 246 pages, $27)
A Tale for the Time Being, by Ruth Ozeki (Viking Canada, 422 pages, $30)

Saturday, March 16, 2013
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Natural disasters not only wreak havoc, they concentrate the mind. In an instant, a familiar world is swept away, people are injured, people die, and those who survive face the task of remembering. Be it hurricane or earthquake, snowstorm or volcano or flood, what precipitates a human crisis is also what, ultimately, can bring people together in the long act of healing.

I recently listened, rapt, with an audience of 2,500 at Carnegie Hall to The Blizzard Voices, a book of poems by former U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser set to music by composer Paul Moravec and performed by the Oratorio Society of New York. It told of a freak storm on a Midwest prairie in the winter of 1888 that killed 235 people, most of them schoolchildren.

"Do not stand at my grave and weep," a ghostly tenor voice sang. "I am not there. I do not sleep."

Somewhere in New York City that night, I imagined Sonali Deraniyagala was awake, listening. The British-Sri Lankan economist moved to Manhattan several years ago, ostensibly to do research in post-disaster economic recovery at Columbia University, but also to recover from a disaster of her own: She lost her entire family to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

I had emailed Deraniyagala asking for an interview, but never heard back. All I had was her book, a slim hardback called Wave, in which she recounts what happened.

It's such an achingly personal story, I already felt I knew her.

Deraniyagala's husband, their two sons, ages 5 and 7, her parents, a close friend – all died in the so-called Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004, which killed almost a quarter of a million people in Indonesia, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka. It was the largest death toll ever from a tsunami and one of the worst natural disasters ever. Of her immediate family, only Deraniyagala survived.

Now, after years of psychotherapy, comes her memoir.

The double meaning of the title – a wave can be a movement of water or a salutation – recalls English poet Stevie Smith's famous lines: "I was much further out than you thought / And not waving but drowning."

The cover is dual, too: pitch black in the U.S. and U.K. editions, with the title letters in blue and white in the centre and the author's name across the bottom on a wavy strip of white. In Canada, the jacket is pale blue-green and made to look water-stained. In the top half, floating squarely above the title, is a quote that telegraphs the opening lines of the book.

"I thought nothing of it at first. The ocean looked a little closer to our hotel than usual. That was all," Deraniyagala begins, recalling that fateful morning the day after Christmas. "It was our friend Orlantha who alerted me. A short while before, she'd knocked on our door to ask if we were ready to leave. We almost were."

Describing what happened next – the wave, the panic, the attempt at escape, sudden separation, a head-over-heels spin through the surging sea, a lunge for a tree branch and, finally, rescue from the mud – takes all of 15 pages, beginning and ending in a beach resort in Yala National Park, on Sri Lanka's southeast coast, where the family was vacationing.

The chapter ends, and the haunting begins.

For 230 more pages, Deraniyagala dips in and out of her family's tragic story, recounting not just her own post-traumatic grief and anger, her suicidal thoughts and bouts with pills and alcohol, but also the "shame" that comes with survival and the need to keep her story secret from colleagues and acquaintances so as not to live it all over, again and again.

Gradually, however, the memories seep back in. Returning to her parents' empty house in Colombo, then back to Yala, then to her own empty house in north London, she lets the reader into the life she had before she became a victim, "this wild statistical outlier." From a wealthy family, Cambridge-educated, wife of a successful financial consultant, she had it all.

Immersing herself in family memories in the second half of the book, Deraniyagala succeeds in putting a human face – hers and her family's – on history, as if to say, "This is what we were, too." Husband: great cook. Elder son: mad about cricket and wild birds. Younger son: theatrical, loved costumes. Mother: sociable, but a bit of a gossip. Father: lawyer, kept to himself, huge library.

The author's grief is diluted by these passages, and the book is better for it. Rather than risk adding to the tsunami fatigue of YouTube survivor videos and disaster movies like The Impossible, Deraniyagala has opted for a more interior approach that probes not only her psyche but the essence of what a family is. The truth is in the details, emerging like flotsam after a storm.

Helped by her "extraordinary therapist," Mark Epstein (whom she lists first in her acknowledgments at the back of the book), and by her Sri Lankan-born countryman, the Canadian author Michael Ondaatje (to whom she submitted some early drafts, on Epstein's prompting), Deraniyagala has crafted a riveting book now ranked as one of the Top 10 best of the month on Amazon.

By the end, she widens her perspective and sees that her story is but a drop in the ocean of human suffering. In March 2011, she goes whale-watching off Sri Lanka's Mirissa coast, just five days after an earthquake and resultant tsunami in Japan killed 19,000 people. The horrific images were on every TV channel.

"So this is what got us, I thought, when I saw waves leaping over seawalls in Japan. This is what I was churning in," Deraniyagala recalls. "I never saw the scale of it then. This same ocean. Staring at me now all blue and innocent. How it turned."

It turns, too, in another marvellous new book, A Tale for the Time Being, by Ruth Ozeki. A dual Canadian-U.S. citizen who lives part of the year on remote Cortes Island in British Columbia, Ozeki had already written the novel, her third, and was about to send it to her publisher when the 2011 Japan tsunami struck.

It changed everything. Ozeki rewrote the book to incorporate the disaster into her semi-autobiographical story, making it central to the mystery of the plot: The diary and family heirlooms of a suicidal Tokyo teenager wash up in a Hello Kitty lunch box on a beach in B.C., where they're found by a novelist named Ruth. She vows to find

out who the girl and her family were. Did the tsunami send the mementoes Ruth's way? With her husband, Oliver (his name in real life, too), she dives ever deeper into the story and explores a widening gyre of issues ranging from bullying to kamikaze pilots to quantum physics.

Ozeki, whose previous two novels were New York Times Notable Books, received a lot of advance praise for this new one. Chosen last year by The Atlantic (how appropriately oceanic) as one of 15 books to look forward to in 2013, it has been published simultaneously in the U.S., Canada and 10 other countries.

And as if in answer to Deraniyagala's book, Ozeki gets to the bottom of what a wave is, exactly. "A wave is born from deep conditions of the ocean," a Zen Buddhist nun (like Ozeki herself) explains midway through to the troubled teen named Nao, her great-granddaughter.

"A person is born from deep conditions of the world. A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again.

"Up, down. Person, wave." That's life, she says, and Nao knows she's not much longer for this earth.

"I was thinking about what she said about waves, and it made me sad because I knew that her little wave was not going to last and soon she would join that sea again, and even though I know you can't hold on to water, still I gripped her fingers a little more tightly to keep her from leaking away."