**Wave** by Sonali Deraniyagala

After losing her entire family in the 2004 tsunami, this mother finds her future by tenderly piecing together the past

**Reviewer:** Marcia Kaye

It's almost inconceivable that a memoir of such exquisite beauty could arise from an event as tragically horrific as the Asian tsunami of 2004. But Sonali Deraniyagala has created exactly that.

In her starkly titled true story *Wave*, she describes losing her entire family — her husband, their two young sons and her parents, who all vanished under the water within a few terrible seconds. But slowly, agonizingly, she has put her life back together, chiefly through piecing together memories of her lost family members. She has brought them vividly to life for us, producing a fiercely moving tribute to them and a life-affirming testament to the strength of anyone — and all those — who have ever survived tragic loss. In a tribute on the book's cover, Michael Ondaatje, the Sri Lankan-born Canadian author (*The English Patient*) calls *Wave* “the most powerful and haunting book I've read in years.”

Deraniyagala, who was teaching economics at the University of London, was on a family holiday that fateful Christmas in the country of her birth, staying at a seaside resort on Sri Lanka's southern coast. Since we know the tsunami's toll from the outset (230,000), Deraniyagala's opening is ominous. “I thought nothing of it at first,” she begins. “The ocean looked a little closer than usual. That is all.” Within moments she and her husband, Steve, grabbed Vikram, almost eight, and Malli, five, and jumped into a jeep that tried unsuccessfully to outrun the churning water. Deraniyagala survived by clinging to a branch. The other five members of her family vanished. She never saw them again.

How does one cope after such a loss? As Deraniyagala tells it, one doesn't. In shock and with a raging infection from having consumed so much filthy water, she can't accept her family is gone. “They are my world. How do I make them dead? My mind toppled.”

She takes us through the months-long bedlam of her grief. Cared for by relatives in Colombo, she initially refuses to drink anything alcoholic to help her sleep. But before long she's polishing off half a bottle of vodka by late afternoon. Her relatives ration sleeping pills, but she easily buys hallucinogens from the corner pharmacy without a prescription. She doesn't smoke but she stubs out lit cigarettes on her skin. Her relatives hide all the knives. She's torn: she needs to remember; she needs to forget.

After six months Deraniyagala steals herself to revisit the site of the resort, accompanied by her father-in-law. Remarkably, they find vestiges of her family in that now-stark landscape: the laminated back cover of her husband's research paper; a half-buried piece of Vikram's green shirt; blue satin fabric from one of Malli's dress-up costumes entangled on the branch of a dead tree.

It's almost two years before she's able to return to London, and another two before she can set foot in her house. As she sees her boys' shoes
by the bedroom door and an onion peel in a clay pot from the last beef curry Steve made, she's able to start putting together fragments of the lives of her loved ones. This enables us to know them too, as she remembers Vik's obsession with cricket, Malli's theatrics, Steve's culinary skills, her mother's love of gossip, her father's law library.

Deraniyagala explores both the predictable aspects of her grief, such as feelings of being completely bereft, as well as the unexpected ones; for instance, blame and shame. “I lost my dignity when I lost them,” she writes. Her identity now escapes her. Is she still a mother? A daughter? She feels laid bare, her “story” too awful to divulge whenever a new acquaintance asks if she's married or has children. Yet in not revealing the truth she feels deceitful. “I stun myself each time I retell the truth to myself, let alone someone else.” She's horrified that by mourning her sons first, then her husband, then her parents, there may be a pecking order to her grief.

But in discovering, or perhaps creating, a new identity — she is now a visiting research scholar at Columbia University in New York, working on issues of economic development, including post-disaster recovery — she doesn't discard the old identity. Wave is somehow both jaggedly raw and beautifully crafted at the same time. Above all, it speaks to the power of the human spirit to survive, to love, to remember. It reminds us that these often mundane lives of ours and our families’ must be cherished, because we never know when an extraordinary event may come along to change it all.

Marcia Kaye is an author and journalist who spent time in Sri Lanka before the tsunami.