



# **Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami**

*Gretel Ehrlich*

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A passionate student of Japanese poetry, theater, and art for much of her life, Gretel Ehrlich felt compelled to return to the earthquake-and-tsunami-devastated Tohoku coast to bear witness, listen to survivors, and experience their terror and exhilaration in villages and towns where all shelter and hope seemed lost. In an eloquent narrative that blends strong reportage, poetic observation, and deeply felt reflection, she takes us into the upside-down world of northeastern Japan, where nothing is certain and where the boundaries between living and dying have been erased by water.

The stories of rice farmers, monks, and wanderers; of fishermen who drove their boats up the steep wall of the wave; and of an eighty-four-year-old geisha who survived the tsunami to hand down a song that only she still remembered are both harrowing and inspirational. Facing death, facing life, and coming to terms with impermanence are equally compelling in a landscape of surreal desolation, as the ghostly specter of Fukushima Daiichi, the nuclear power complex, spews radiation into the ocean and air. *Facing the Wave* is a testament to the buoyancy, spirit, humor, and strong-mindedness of those who must find their way in a suddenly shattered world.

## Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami Details

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Author : Gretel Ehrlich

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# From Reader Review Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami for online ebook

## Patricia says

Horrific images from the news still haunt me, so I wasn't sure if I could read this. But as well as revisiting grief and loss with compassion, this is a hopeful and lyrical book about how to keep living.

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## Karen says

FACING THE WAVE describes the recent Japanese earthquake, Tsunami, and tropical storm. Although I appreciate Ehrlich's effort to document these terrible disasters, I am disappointed by this book. I love some of Ehrlich's writing, and this book made the long list for the National Book Awards in nonfiction. But for me, the style was too choppy; FACING THE WAVE is largely a catalog of brief encounters with people or descriptions of events that Ehrlich experienced while on two trips to Japan after the Tsunami. There were many Japanese words and names—difficult to keep track of—and many quotes from Buddhism from obscure authors, at least to me. FACING THE WAVE functions as testimony to what happened with a personal point of view; it feels like a huge catalog of destruction, and I look at it more as historical documentation than a work of art or a careful literary creation. I wanted more flow to the writing, occasional beauty to the prose to balance the starkness of the subject. One thing I did like was the use of a fisherman's blog--Ehrlich returned to it several times--and I was interested in what the blog author had to say and how his reactions to the disasters developed over time. I listened to the book on my iPod, and the oral reader was poor in my opinion; I wonder if Ehrlich has heard the oral form of her book and likes it. FACING THE WAVE seems somewhat like the reportorial style of John Hersey's HIROSHIMA, but HIROSHIMA has a command, a power, a coherence, maybe because it follows the same set of a handful of characters, so readers can track what is going on and stay interested when a character reappears.

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## Lecy says

Gretel Ehrlich visits to the Tohoku coast to document personal accounts after the great earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011 and how it changed lives. The stories are tragic and heartbreaking but what is overwhelmingly apparent is how resilient the survivors are.

The book is wonderful but the audiobook narrator's monotonous voice didn't convey the power of the events shared within, so perhaps stick with the physical/ebook if you should read.

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## Ariel says

The writing style was almost more poetic than anything else, but still did a good job of conveying the horror and sorrow of the tsunami and how it affected the people.

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## **Chrissie says**

Too episodic for my tastes. The author travels in Japan after the earthquake / tsunami / and nuclear power melt down in 2011. Each chapter is a short little episode, many quite varied in character. There are blog entries, scientific facts about the melt down, criticism of government policies and travel notes. The best parts are poetically written; they relate how particular individuals experienced the waves, the fear, the typhoon.

Sumalee Montano, with her Japanese accent, gave a delightful rendering of the lines. Very good narration in fact.

But the writing was too splotchy.

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## **Eric says**

I was never quite sure of what might have been the author's organizing principle behind writing the book, although even as almost segmented parts it was a powerful agglomeration of those segments - I suppose mostly held together by the descriptions of destruction. One hears bits and pieces of the radiation damage and levels, but no tie-in to what that may have done, or is still doing to the fishing trade, for example. I suspect historians will view Ehrlich's work with favor should they ever dig deep into all of what happened. This is clearly a good place to start.

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## **Joshua Buhs says**

Doesn't quite cohere.

In so many ways, this book is pitched at me. It is told in a fragmented, impressionistic style, with unexpected jumps. The author has a poetic voice. She starts from a single events and meditates on big questions.

The subject is close to me. It is about the tsunami that hit northern Japan in 2011, the one that melted down the nuclear reactor that still leaks radioactive water into the Pacific Ocean. I lived in northern Japan for three years, from 2003-2006.

So, I really wanted to like it. But it just swerves out of that sweet spot. The book never quite comes together.

The book is told after the events of that day in March. The author, an American from Wyoming with connections to Japan dating back to the late 1960s and an interest in Japanese Buddhism, goes to visit the afflicted region in June and September of that year.

But her investigation seems not just random, but ad hoc to such an extreme that neither the day nor the after effects ever become really clear. Indeed, many of the various people she meets never seem fully limned.

There are a couple of intense and interesting stories--stories she hunts down because of news reports, one about a fisherman, another about the last Geisha in one region. Even so, these always seem like stories.

The language, rather than illuminating, feels affected. It distances and makes understanding difficult.

No one expects a book to answer the question of Theodicy, but ruminations on such horrific events should lead to something. Instead, it feels as though Ehrlich asks (obvious) questions, but doesn't really do anything with them. There are hints about the fatalism inherent in Buddhism but this is at odds with the extreme emotions experienced by those who suffered and continue to suffer.

Similarly, she plays around--linguistically--with the spreading radiation, trying to make the scientific language into something more pointed, but the repeated references to the radiation don't really add up to much; she never fully develops the comparison she tries to draw with those effected by the dropping of the atomic bombs in World War II, just leaving the suggestion dangling.

I really wish I liked this more.

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### **John Benson says**

Gretel Ehrlich is an excellent writer about different places, especially the Arctic. In this book, she visits the area of Japan that was hardest hit by the Tsunami in March 2011 three and nine months after the event. She goes up and down the coastline talking to people as they learn to survive in the tsunami's aftermath. One gets to know these people well and how they learn to deal with their new lives. Her style is quite poetic and sad.

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### **Cindy says**

Powerful, overlapping vignettes of life (and death) in Japan following the earthquake and its subsequent tsunami and nuclear disaster. Stories of those who move away and those who stay to rebuild; those who search tirelessly for the dead and those who tire of the struggle and take their own lives. A new perspective on sharing local traditions from an affected town's last Geisha. Some things I had forgotten (the contaminated baby formula deemed safe by the government) or never knew (the animals left to die, the wholesale slaughter of those that didn't, and the animal rescue groups' attempts to intervene).

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### **Michael says**

Japan is the only country in the world to have felt the wrath of a nuclear weapon. Within the space of three days, it experienced this twice. Sixty-six years later, Japan suffered an earthquake and tsunami that, combined, was 8,000 times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped in 1945. With the waters of the Pacific Ocean still soaking Japanese soil contaminated by radiation, Gretel Ehrlich writes of the people who survived.

There's a romanticism we tend to associate with the Japanese. Perhaps it's because of their long history, borne of honor and battle. Ehrlich (described as "a passionate student of Japanese poetry, theater and art" in the blurb) dives into this headfirst, hauntingly describing the ravaged Sendai landscape and Japanese mentality, stripped bare by the triple punch of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.

Sometimes that poetry borders on the surreal, and maybe there's no better way to talk about the tsunami. Livelihoods literally washed away. Families literally torn apart. Ancestral homes literally broken into pieces.

Sometimes, however, the dreamy nature of Ehrlich's observations is difficult to follow. Perhaps we become numb to the seemingly endless tales of loss, death and survival. Each is a good story, to be sure, but there's only so much we can take before one account of the earthquake and tsunami blends into another.

But there's so much more to *\*Facing the Wave\** than a simple list of interviews with people who watched everything they knew destroyed. There are stories of hope and frustration; stories of people who had to learn to start living again, stories of people who didn't want to live anymore. There are stories of people who were never found, and stories of people who will probably never stop looking.

*\*Facing the Wave\** isn't a point-by-point story of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake; but it's a fascinating and thought-provoking, if occasionally (and perhaps intentionally) unfocused, look at a uniquely Japanese series of reactions to what might be a uniquely Japanese disaster.

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### **Judy says**

I can't imagine trying to understand the Japanese earthquake/tsunami disaster of 3/11/11 without reading this book. The short, episodic chapters recount the author's visit to the area after the disaster and her encounters with survivors and their stories. She narrates her growing understanding of how the larger picture of radiation contamination and the ecological disaster continues to affect the people, the land and the future. It was a very sobering, personal look at an event I can't even begin to imagine facing.

The theme of fear, and facing fear, is a strong line of thought throughout the book. I was struck by her emphasis on talking to the fishermen who survived the tsunami wave by running to their boats as soon as the earthquake happened, getting into their boats and rushing *\*into\** the oncoming wave. By facing that wave, that fearsome wall of deadly water, their boats were carried over the crest and behind the wall of water that slammed into the coast, destroying everything familiar about their lives on land. I found it an apt metaphor on facing fear in life and how meeting fear head on is almost always the way through it.

I was easily fascinated by many of the Japanese art, history and cultural references that the author included. Buddhist tradition and Shinto religious practice were incorporated into the narrative of disaster recovery and radiation exposure, and 17th-century haiku and other Japanese poetry became relevant to the present day survivors and historians. It is a rich source of further reading and research about Japan.

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### **Laurie Neighbors says**

Excellent observational reporting, but I was expecting more substantive reflection from Gretal Ehrlich. The account is largely oral history -- which is valuable, but still needs a more substantive scaffolding in order to feel coherent. The chapters that were solely reflective were the briefest, but also the ones I that satisfied the most.

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### **Linda Lipko says**

This is a series of stories regarding some of those impacted by the March 2011 triple devastation in Japan. First the 9.0 earth quake, following by a 35-30 ft. tsunami, which then led to the devastation of the

Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

The author is a journalist who interviewed those who survived and lost family members, fishermen whose livelihood was wiped out, never to be restored. In addition, the author focused on the spirituality of the nation and interviewed monks and those who had the gift of helping "ghosts" pass on to the new life.

There were so many stories of devastation that after reading more and more tales, it grew to be depressing. Yet, how can a nation help but be depressed when so much occurred. There are many stories of those still seeking their loved ones whose bodies were smashed against the mountain or any structure that happened to be in the way.

I was very bothered by the fact that those in charge of the nuclear power plant, did the same thing that happened at Chernobyl in the Ukraine -- they lied and covered up the fact that there were many problems with the plant before the tsunami hit, including the fact that the ruptured pipes were reported two years before as being vastly unstable. It was all too easy for authorities to blame the earthquake and tsunami for all of the problems. When the reactor core overheated, nuclear debris floated out to ocean, and also contaminated many. Seven years later and still it is difficult to know how many will develop cancer as a result.

There were 54 nuclear power plants in Japan at the time of the disaster. It is difficult to understand that a country experiencing daily earthquakes decided to build power plants, some, such as the Fukushima Daiichi plant, were close to epicenters.

The writing style was difficult to follow. Like the areas she visited, there was simply too much to describe. I would have liked a more cohesive story.

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### **Kasey Jueds says**

I've been a fan of Gretel Ehrlich for such a long time. Her deep sense of ethics. Her courage, both intellectual (she is unafraid to swerve away from straight narrative, from facts, and so all of her books are a--to me--magical blend of the reportorial, the descriptive, and the lyric) and physical (she spent months researching this particular book in Japan, where she was exposed to high levels of radiation, continuing earthquakes, a typhoon). Her tremendous and palpable passion for the natural world. Her very Buddhist desire to question and probe and explore. So I loved this book, which taught me more (intellectually and heartfully) about the tsunami and its aftermath than anything else I've read.

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### **Heathers says**

Such a story of devastation & loss...immediate and gradual. The tsunami following the earthquake took so many lives and broke others. The take-away from the book was how so many live with both grief and happiness...woven together and cradled gently by loving yet scarred hands. The Buddhist concept of suffering was painted onto each page by those who lost everything but travelled miles to plant flowers on their former home sites, to cite one example. So many souls leaving their lands permanently for the first time in generations....It reminds us of the beauty in suffering as it offers us the glimpse of hope through embracing the will and determination to live.

