

SURVIVING THE TSUNAMI

As a deadly tsunami speeds toward Japan's coast, a group of kids race to save themselves—and hundreds of others

By Lauren Tarshis
With reporting from Japan by
Setsuko Kamiya of *The Japan Times*

On the afternoon of March 11, 2011, the students of Kamaishi East Junior High School, in Kamaishi, Japan, were getting ready for after-school activities. Fourteen-year-old Aki Kawasaki was excited about basketball practice. Kana Sasaki was getting dressed for tennis. Fumiya Akasaka, captain of the boys' judo team, was heading for the gym. Shin Saito, English teacher and badminton coach, was tying his shoes. It was a typical Friday afternoon—until 2:46 p.m., when a massive earthquake began to rumble 20 miles below the floor of the Pacific Ocean.

Author's Craft Authors of fiction and nonfiction often use the same writing tools to describe exciting events. As you read the article, pay attention to vivid adjectives, similes, and personification.



LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 9 WORDS IN BOLD

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AN AMAZING
VIDEO!
ON THE
SCIENCE OF
TSUNAMIS**

The quake, about 40 miles off the northeastern shore of Japan, was 1,000 times more powerful than the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. It sent shockwaves hundreds of miles in every direction. In Tokyo, office buildings swayed like blades of grass. Subways stopped underground. In Kamaishi, a town on Japan's beautiful northeastern coast, buildings shook violently. Gaping holes opened in the streets.

The students and teachers of Kamaishi East rushed for cover. Computers, books, and furniture crashed to the floor around them. People screamed, but their cries couldn't be heard over the quake's **monstrous** roar.

Most earthquakes last for just a few seconds, unleashing quick bursts of destruction. This quake was different. It went on and on, like an endless nightmare. It continued for nearly six minutes—the shaking, the roaring, the crashing, the terror. When it finally stopped, there was a moment of eerie quiet. The Kamaishi East building, built to withstand quakes, was still standing. Miraculously, none of the students and teachers was seriously injured.

But there was no feeling of relief for Aki, Kana, Fumiya, or any of the other students at Kamaishi East. They knew that the disaster was just beginning.

Destroyed Twice

The quake under the ocean floor had triggered a tsunami, a series of **massive** waves, hundreds of miles wide. It was now racing across the ocean at jet speeds. Just a few yards high at first, it would grow stronger and bigger—in some places as high as 133 feet—as it approached the shore. It would hit Japan's northeastern coast with such incredible force that anything in its way would be **obliterated**.

Twice before, Kamaishi had been destroyed

by tsunamis—in 1896 and 1933. Stories of these disasters have been passed down through the generations. But four years ago, school leaders in Kamaishi decided they should do more than simply tell their children the stories. Kamaishi's students needed to be experts. Scientists predicted that another deadly quake and tsunami could strike Japan's coast at any time. The more students knew, school leaders believed, the more likely they would be to survive.

So at Kamaishi East and other middle schools, tsunami education became a part of every class. In social studies, students researched the 1933 and other tsunamis and their effects on the city. In science, they learned how tsunamis form. In language arts, they wrote essays about the 1896 tsunami. They drew **hazard** maps showing the likely path of the waves and even learned to cook soup for people in disaster shelters.

They also underwent tsunami drills. Students were taught to gather outside the school and wait for teachers to take attendance. Once everyone was accounted for, the group

would evacuate to a parking lot half a mile away.

But when the quake struck, most students immediately realized that they had no time to stand and wait. They understood that this quake was far more powerful than any before. They



Scenes of destruction in Kamaishi

didn't doubt that a wave was heading right for them. It was a life-or-death race, with not a minute to spare.

"Before I realized I was running, my feet were moving," Kana would later say.

With panicked shouts, students urged their teachers to follow them as they rushed for higher ground. Teachers at the neighboring elementary school had planned to keep their young students on their building's third floor. The sight of the older students rushing away changed their minds. Soon hundreds of students and teachers were in a frantic dash for safety.

"I thought the tsunami would come," says Aki. "I was desperately trying to escape."

They reached the evacuation site but decided to go even higher. The older students helped the younger ones, grabbing their hands, pushing them along.

They continued on, finally coming to rest in a parking lot on a hill. Terrified and out of breath, they had a sweeping view of the horrific scene unfolding in their town just below.

A Black Raging River

The ocean had begun its attack. Just 30 minutes after the earthquake, a black wave swept into the streets, rising so quickly that cars, trucks, homes, and people were swallowed in seconds.

The water—now a black raging river filled with debris, boats, and wrecked homes, rushed deeper into the city and up into the hills. The students watched in shock as their school was **engulfed**. At the elementary school, a car

WRITE TO THE STUDENTS OF KAMAISHI!

The students of Kamaishi East want to hear from you. Write a letter telling them what you think of their story. We will send the letters to Mr. Saito, who will share them with his class. We will also make a donation in the name of *Storyworks* readers to the school. Mail or e-mail letters to *Storyworks* "Japan Letters" by March 15th. See page 2 for details.

crashed into the building's third floor, exactly where the teachers had planned to wait with the children after the quake. If they had stayed, they would have been killed.

Similar scenes were unfolding up and down Japan's coast. In a matter of minutes, hundreds of places—small cities, bustling towns, **quaint** fishing villages, and quiet farming communities—were completely **submerged**. And then, like a monster returning to its lair, the water was sucked back into the Pacific Ocean. Thousands of people who had survived the quake were swept out to sea.

In the hours after the quake and the tsunami, Aki, Kana, and Fumiya stood amid a group of hundreds of stunned students and teachers, shivering in the cold, terrified for their families. They eventually made their way to one of the city's surviving school buildings, where they found no food, water, or lights.

They went to another school the next day. Only then were they **reunited** with their families. Fourteen students lost one or both parents. Aki, Kana, and Fumiya were among the lucky. Their families were safe.

Hope and Strength

It is difficult to grasp the full picture of destruction unleashed by this disaster. It was the fifth-most-powerful earthquake ever recorded. Nearly 20,000 people died. In some areas, entire towns were simply erased by the raging waters. These had been lively towns, centuries old. Today nothing remains of these communities but toxic mud littered with the shreds of people's lives—twisted bits of metal and wood, tattered clothes,

ruined books and photo albums.

Kamaishi was devastated. Out of a population of 37,000 people, 850 were killed. Thousands lost their homes, including Kana and Fumiya, and most of the other students at Kamaishi East. A year later, only a few shops have reopened. Several thousand tons of debris have been cleaned from the streets. The reconstruction of Kamaishi East has not yet begun. The students are sharing a school building with another junior high in the city.

But amid the ruin and hopelessness, the story of the students of Kamaishi East continues to inspire the people of this city. All of the children and teachers survived the tsunami. The teachers insist that it was Kamaishi East students—their quick action in a moment of terror—who made the difference.

"If it weren't for them," says their English teacher Saito, "I don't think I would be alive."

Mr. Saito speaks proudly of Aki, Kana, Fumiya, and the other students, who are working to rebuild their lives.

"Things are very tough, and the students face many difficulties moving forward," Mr. Saito says. "But the fact is, it's the students who are giving us hope and the strength to move on." 🌊

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Standing tall: Kamaishi East Junior High School students Kana Sasaki (left), Fumiya Akasaka (center), and Aki Kawasaki

Settsuko Kamiya/The Japan Times

Art Resource, New York

Storyworks Across Genres

Tsunami in Fiction

In a classic book from 1948, Pearl S. Buck, a famous author, writes of an ancient Japanese village destroyed by a tsunami, as a man, his son, Kino, and Kino's friend Jiya watch in horror.

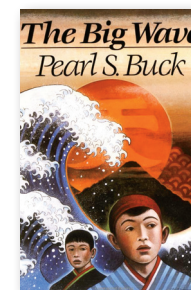


The Big Wave By Pearl S. Buck

... In a few seconds, before their eyes the wave had grown and come nearer and nearer, higher and higher. The air was filled with its roar and shout. It rushed over the flat still waters of the ocean and before Jiya could scream again it reached the village and covered it fathoms deep in swirling wild water, green laced with fierce white foam. The wave ran up the mountainside ... all who were still climbing the path were swept away—black, tossing scraps in the wicked waters. The wave ran up the mountain until Kino and Jiya saw the wavelets curl at the terrace walls upon which they stood. Then with a great sucking sigh, the wave swept back again, ebbing into the ocean, dragging everything with it, trees and stones and houses. They stood, the man and the two boys, utterly silent, clinging together, facing the wave as it went away. It swept back over the village and returned slowly again to the ocean, subsiding, sinking into a great stillness.

From *The Big Wave*, by Pearl S. Buck. Copyright 1948, by Pearl S. Buck. Reprinted by permission of the estate of Pearl S. Buck.

WRITE TO WIN



What is similar about the descriptions of a tsunami in the nonfiction and fiction pieces here? What tools does each author use? Write your answer in a well-organized paragraph. Send your entries to "Tsunami Contest" by March 15th. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *The Big Wave*. See page 2 for details.

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