

Death and Destruction

But dignity as well

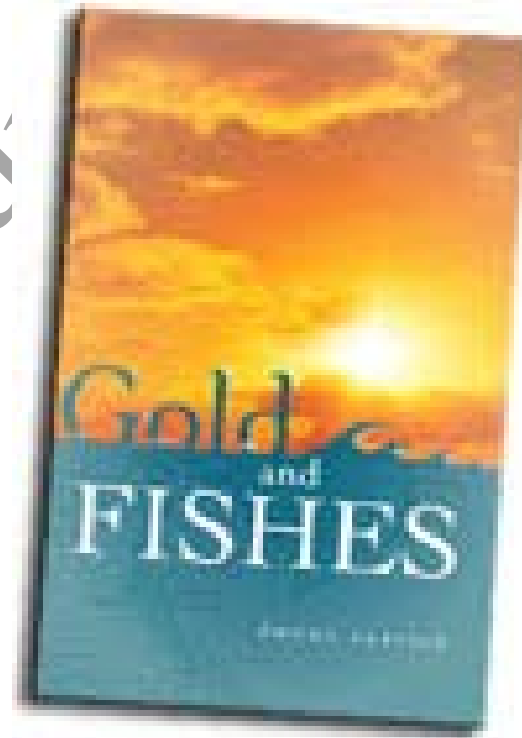
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

In the developed world we are accustomed to experiencing disasters in small numbers. A forest fire might claim a few lives, typically far less than a dozen; a ship sinking perhaps twice or even three times as many; even the appalling tragedy at the World Trade Center in September of 2001 resulted in less than 3,000 lives being lost. But each of these events pale in comparison to truly global calamities. On December 26th, 2004, an earthquake measuring 8.9 on the Richter scale occurred 160 kilometers off the coast of Indonesia. It triggered a huge tidal wave — a *tsunami* — that ultimately reached the shores of eleven nations in Southeast Asia and claimed almost 250,000 victims. A quarter of a million lives; the sheer scale of such a loss is impossible to comprehend. Entire villages were scourged from the face of the earth. Not only was every last inhabitant killed or missing — in many cases the villages themselves were obliterated. Where generations of entire families had lived out their lives, not a single trace remained. In many cases children were wrenched from their parents and swept out to sea, while in others, parents were taken, leaving their children behind. Husbands, wives, brothers, sisters — it was almost an act of mercy if an entire family was lost, and no one was left to mourn. Nor was the rest of the world spared. Europeans and yes, Canadians, vacationing at resorts throughout the region were caught up in the maelstrom,

and wandered the beaches and searched makeshift morgues for news of their loved ones.

Canadian author Donna Carrick pens an original mystery saga against the background of this epochal event, and in so doing paints us a vivid and heart-wrenching account of those who were taken, and others, hardly more fortunate, who were left behind.



Donna Carrick

Donna Carrick was born on Canada's East Coast. Familiar with the landscape of Southeast Asia, she traveled to Nanning, China in 2003 to adopt their

youngest child. Donna and her husband Alex and their three children make their home in Toronto, where she has set her most recent novel, *The Noon God*. Constantly struggling with her command of Mandarin, Carrick is currently working on her third novel, which is set in China.

Gold and Fishes
(BookSurge, 2006)

Ayla Harris is at home in Canada, preparing to join an aid mission to Aceh Province, the region of Indonesia hardest hit by the tsunami, when her twin sister Zonnie calls. Her husband, Robert Trasque, was traveling in Thailand at the time of the disaster, and has gone missing. Not a man to inspire confidence, Ayla wonders if he had been off on another of his get-rich-quick schemes in the gold mining industry, or worse, perhaps exploiting the sexual slaves for which the region is infamous. Most benignly, perhaps he is simply one more victim in the carnage left in the wake of the tsunami. But sisters are sisters. Ayla agrees to use what time and resources she can muster to search for Robert, unaware that she will be putting her own life on the line. Banda Aceh is a different world, and Ayla's life will be transformed as she battles death and disease, swindlers and smugglers, government troops and insurgent rebels, while balancing respect for local traditions against the emotional needs of a small boy orphaned by the wave.

A story of heartbreak and hope

Meticulously researched, *Gold and Fishes* contains not one, but three carefully-interwoven story lines: there is the compelling account of the almost incomprehensible devastation caused by the tsunami on Boxing Day of 2004; this

forms the background for Carrick's depiction of the massive relief effort, both on an international level and on a personal level, involving nurse Ayla Harris; finally, there is the story of the disappearance of Ayla's furtive brother-in-law, Robert Trasque, and her search to find out what happened to him.

The writing is poignant and evocative. In one scene a member of the Canadian aid team recounts to Ayla the story of Rashida, a teacher who serves as translator for the group. Rashida has lost her children to the wave:

Clearly she was struggling with what she had to say. "There were two children, a boy and a girl."

"What?"

"That's right. Aged ten and eight. The girl was the oldest. Rashida took them for a day at the beach. They were playing on the sand. They found it strange that the water seemed so far back. They saw the fishes floundering where the receding tide had left them to bake in the sun. They ran to grab the fishes..."

"And the wave swallowed them." I finished the sentence for her.

The Grim Reaper will have his way. He sets the bait and we are caught. Some of us are lured by gold, as Robert had been, chasing his lost money halfway around the world. And some of us are lured by fishes. Either way the story ends as we expect. The Reaper has his way.

Readers in search of a traditional puzzle mystery, replete with clues and a satisfying *denouement*, may come away disappointed: the space given to the disappearance of Robert Trasque makes up only a small portion (perhaps one seventh) of the book as a whole. The strength of *Gold and Fishes* lies rather in

the gripping account of a global disaster, and in the efforts of dedicated and resourceful aid workers to cope with human suffering on an almost unimaginable scale. It is a compelling story of loss, heartbreak, and hope. In a world turned upside down, Carrick reveals the dignity and optimism that sustains the human race.

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