



## Personal Memory as a Psychological Anchor: Resilience, Familial Bond and Survival in *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami 2011*

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18405255

### Abstract

*Lauren Tarshis, an American author, is widely known for her I Survived series, which blends historical fact with fictionalised narratives of children's experience of actual disasters. This paper analyses I Survived the Japanese Tsunami, 2011 (2013), the eighth book in the series, through a qualitative textual analysis. It highlights how personal memory acts as a guiding force in moments of crisis, particularly how the memories of the protagonist's (Ben) father help him to survive the catastrophic Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Additionally, it also focuses on the intertwined themes of survival, resilience, and the importance of family. The findings of the study reveal that personal memory acts as an anchor for psychological stability, which helps Ben to tackle the tsunami and Tohoku earthquake.*

**Keywords:** Memory, Trauma, Resilience, Tsunami, Earthquake, Family.

### Introduction

“The crowd cheered. As usual, Dad's voice rose up above the rest. You can do it, Ben.”

- Lauren Tarshis

The *I Survived* series is classified as historical fiction. As a genre, historical fiction intertwines real-life events from the past with fictional elements to engage younger readers. The *I Survived* series contains 23 books and recounts actual disasters through the perspective of child protagonists. The eighth book of the series, *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami, 2011* (2013), fictionalises the 2011 triple disasters in Japan (the earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear accident) and also talks about how the memory of the protagonist's father navigates him in tough times like the earthquake and tsunami. In addition to the personal memory, the themes of resilience and the role of family also play an important part. The triple disasters profoundly tested the resilience of the Japanese people, yet recovery became possible through the community support, perseverance, and collective rebuilding efforts. While the novel reveals only a fragment of the bigger story and illustrates how individuals rebuild their lives after disasters. This paper, therefore, examines how personal memories of Ben's father guide him through the disasters, and it also analyses the theme of resilience and the significance of family.

### Objective of the Paper

1. To explore how the personal memories of the protagonist's (Ben) father serve as a guiding force during the disasters in *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami, 2011* (2013).
2. To examine themes such as trauma, the importance of family and resilience in the novel.



## Literature Review

Kino et al. (2021), in their research paper, “Long-Term Trends in Mental Health Disorders after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami”, employ a cohort study to analyse the long-term effects of triple disasters, such as post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS) and depression in older adults. The article of Kino provides an overview of the long-term effects of triple disasters, whereas the article titled “Relationship Analysis between Children Interests & Their Positive Emotions for Mobile Libraries’ Community Development in a Tsunami Area” by Hamada et al. (2021) analyses the relationship between Children’s interest (books, manga, music, and communication) and their positive emotions in post-disaster contexts. Through a mixed-method approach, the results indicate that mobile libraries can function as emotional anchors. The study of “Tsunami awareness and preparedness in Aotearoa New Zealand: The evolution of Community Understanding” by Dhellemmas et al. (2021) identifies an increase in awareness between 2003 and 2015. The results through quantitative analysis indicate that, in 2003 only 20% of the people knew about the tsunami, but in 2015, around 71% of the people knew about the tsunami and its consequences. The author also finds that people understand the risk, but they fail to act. While these studies offer valuable perspectives on trauma and recovery through quantitative analysis, the exploration of personal memory, the importance of family, and resilience through qualitative textual analysis remains unexamined. This paper, therefore, seeks to fill this gap, which focuses on the significance of personal memory, the centrality of family, and resilience in the aftermath of disasters.

## Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative textual analysis to depict how memory, trauma, resilience, and the importance of family are portrayed in the novel *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami 2011* (2013). Through a close reading approach, this paper talks about how the memories of his father help Ben during the disasters and the important themes that shape the novel. This paper assigns an extra weightage to the role of personal memory, which saves Ben from the calamities. Beyond personal memory, the analysis explores themes such as the importance of family, resilience, and trauma.

## Theoretical Framework

This paper uses the concept of personal memory, which was drawn from the book *Memory* (1971) by Don Locke, as a theoretical framework for this paper. The central framework of personal memory is defined as the recollection of places, people, and events encountered by an individual. In this memoir, the personal memory of his father provides a psychological anchor to Ben. In addition to the lens of personal memory, this paper also gives importance to the significance of family and the resilience of people.

## Discussion

Personal memory is one of the three forms of memory that is mentioned in the book *Memory* (1971) by Don Locke. It refers to the memories of places, people, things, events, and situations personally encountered by an individual. In Lauren Tarshis' novel, *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami, 2011* (2013), personal memory becomes central to the narrative, which shapes the protagonist's (Ben) journey from loss to strength, uncertainty to resilience, and adversity to overcoming the adversity. The memories of his father serve as a catalyst for Ben, which guides him through moments of fear and uncertainty during the disasters (earthquake and tsunami). As Assman observes, “Memory is an emerging genre in cultural studies. A revival of memoirs, testimonies, historical-themed films, and monuments expresses a growing concern with the past” (210). Similarly, the novel presents memory not



only as a recollection of events from the past but also as a survival instinct and emotional anchor. Debus defined the recollection of an event as follows:

**The recollective relation to the past object as one that supervenes on other complex relations that the remembered holds with the past event emphasizes its temporal, spatial, and causal dimensions: the event must have happened before its being remembered; there must be a continuous path through space traced by the subject from the time he experienced the event and the time he remembers it; the neurophysiological events that occur when the subject remembers the event must be ultimately caused by the very event now remembered. (Debus 22)**

Debus's idea highlights the importance of the relationship between an individual and the past; likewise, in the novel *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami 2011* (2013), it is demonstrated how the memories of the father (past) help the present in the moment of crisis, which suggests that memory sustains continuity across generations. The personal memory of the protagonist's (Ben) father emerges as a key component that protects him during calamities such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and even the Fukushima nuclear attack. This connection is echoed in the phrases of Schacter, "The human mind can detach itself from the present moment and mentally travel to the past or imagine the future," in which he argues for the ability of the mind to travel from present to past, or present to future. This psychological ability is shown in Lauren Tarshis portrayal of the protagonist, Ben, where his mental return to his father indicates past action as guidance in the present. From the outset, the author sets the tone for how the death of his father profoundly affects Ben: "He had been dreaming about Dad every night, thinking about him all the time" (Tarshis 16). These lines indicate the trauma of Ben; after the death of his father, he suffers from emotional isolation and recurring nightmares, which manifest in his well-being as grief, sadness, social withdrawal, and sleep disturbances. When his brother Harry asks about the recurring dreams, Ben insists the dream about dad was never a bad dream, which reveals how memory functions simultaneously as a source of pain and a form of comfort.

Fathers play a vital role in the development of the child. Their values, guidance, and emotional support shape an individual's growth and stability. Fathers' involvement represents a package of physical availability, emotional investment, and behavioural interaction, and these dimensions cannot be separated (Harris et al., 2021). The perspective of Harris resonates with *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami 2011* (2013). In the novel, the absence of his father creates an emotional void in Ben. Therefore, he relies on the lessons taught by his father as parental guidance for his survival during the disasters. His grief is captured in the following lines: "He sat straight up in bed, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. After a few moments, he remembered that he wasn't at home in California. Instead, he was at his uncle's house in the small village of Shongahama, Japan." (Tarshis 5). The trauma of the loss of loved ones (his father) deeply disturbs Ben emotionally, yet the memories of his father become the foundation for his survival during the disasters.

When Ben experiences the first disaster in Shongahama, an earthquake, he initially feels overwhelmed and shocked. Uncertain of his next step, Ben remembers his father's experience with a parachute that failed to open. Instead of panicking, Ben's father stayed calm, thought clearly, and found solutions. This memory offers insights into the power of being composed in a tough situation. As Tarshis quotes, "The fear is always there. Dad had told Ben to bounce the ball and line up at the free-throw line. But you can't let it take over. He'd eyed the basket and taken a shot. You must make a decision: to survive or to perish. "If you succumb to panic, your journey is over" (26-27). Ben learned to take decisive actions in



the midst of a crisis. Then, Ben grabbed Harry and Nya, and they managed to crawl under the bed to save themselves. The above lines provide a glimpse of how memory serves as a driving force for Ben.

The trauma intensifies during the second disaster tsunami, when Ben witnesses the loss of his brother Harry, his uncle, and his mom. Ben was nervous and did not know what to do next. When he was struggling with the sea level rise, he remembered the story of his dad's pilot training, in which he used to stay calm and follow the instructors' advice, which was the only way to survive in a spiralling plane. Inspired by this, Ben resists panic and recalls the incident narrated by his father, about how pilots turned their hands into eyes to escape from the suction of a plane. "When the plane is in free fall, the pressure from the water seals the doors shut. To escape, pilots must either break the windows or find alternative methods to open them." (Tarshis 44). The story of his father helps him to think deeply and act cleverly during the crisis, which reflects how memory acts as a vital tool.

Memories are vital because they shape our identity, relationships, sense of duty, and personal experiences (Assmann 212). The interpersonal relationships associated with personal memory are shared moments together, emotional connections, and the influence individuals have on one another. In this novel, the emotional impact of his father is clearly evident. Yet alongside personal memory, the novel also highlights the devastating impact of losing our family in disasters. Ross Gittell and Avis Vidal (1998) identify three types of social networks, namely bonding, bridging, and linking. Among these, the bonding networks represent the close and intimate relationships that provide emotional and psychological support. In *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami 2011*, Ben experiences a rupture in this bonding network after the tsunami, which leaves him isolated and emotionally adrift. The profound loneliness after the tsunami is expressed in the lines, "Ben hadn't felt this lonely even in the first weeks after Dad's accident" (Tarshis 49). Previously, when Ben lost his father, his family was there for him. The family offers emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a safe place to lean on. But after the tsunami, the support system collapsed, which made Ben feel isolated. This emotional rupture not only talks about the psychological pain but also deepens his realisation of the absence of his loved ones.

After a fierce struggle, Ben thinks he finally escaped from the wave. But the wave is moving again. This time, he is not alone; his brother's cat, Nya, has found him. Though powerless and fearful, Ben recalls his father's surfing lessons: "Dad and Ben bodysurfed for hours, riding giant waves to shore. When the waves weakened, they would force the water back out to sea. The current was so powerful that Dad had to hold Ben so he didn't get swept away" (Tarshis 53). From these lessons, Ben had learned to position his body and move with the wave rather than resist it. The father's advice during the second wave is to allow himself to stay loose and let the wave carry him, which helps Ben to reduce the injury and keep him above water. Ben searched for something to hold, and he climbed onto the floating mattress, then leapt to a tree for safety. Exhausted and alone, he feels a deep sense of darkness, which is blacker than the wave.

At this point, the novel shifts its perspective to resilience as a central theme, which shows resilience is not the absence of fear or pain, but the determination to move forward despite everything. Resilience is often defined as a key basis for recovery after disasters, whether it is considered an attribute of individuals and communities/collectives, or whether it is envisaged as a process or set of actions and interactions. (Du Plessis et al.,155) The theme of resilience is vividly illustrated in this novel through the aftermath of the earthquake and the tsunami, which severely damaged a nuclear power station in Fukushima and also released



radioactive particles. It is very dangerous for everyone, especially children. After this incident, too, the community responds with hope and determination. Ojisan, Ben's uncle, is one such example of resilience. Ojisan witnesses the destruction of his land, and he remains committed to rising up after the catastrophic events. This is clearly demonstrated in the following lines: "We will clean up. He had said. We will build new houses. Already there was talk about Shongahama. We will work together. And we will go on" (Tarshis 82). His words reflect the collective will to rebuild in the face of disasters.

### Conclusion

Lauren Tarshis, *I Survived the Japanese Tsunami 2011* show trauma, spirit and survival are all tied to human memory in the context of disaster. Ben uses his memories as an emotional anchor and a guide to stay alive in the disaster. In moments of doubt and fear, the memories of his father push Ben to stay calm, regulate his anxiety and remind him to act with courage. Thus, personal memory becomes a quiet companion in solitude, which rekindles his inner strength to tackle the disasters. The novel also talks about the importance of family and the resilience of the people. The anguish of Ben over the loss of his loved ones emphasises the emotional turmoil left by disasters, yet his journey towards resilience highlights the strength of the familial bonds and memories associated with it. In the same way, the commitment of Ojisan showcases how important it is to be resilient during the crisis. The trait is not only an individual one, but it is also based on hope, cooperation and solidarity. In conclusion, this paper talks about how the personal memory of the father serves as a force that uplifts Ben during a time of crisis. The novel also shows how children's literature engages young readers to cultivate empathy, awareness, and emotional preparedness. Overall, this paper stresses the importance of personal memory, family, and resilience amidst disasters.

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**Author (s) Contribution Statement:** Nil

**Author (s) Acknowledgement:** Nil

**Author (s) Declaration:** I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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