

In 1811, New Madrid, Missouri was shattered by a series of massive earthquakes. For weeks, the shocked citizens coped with a world gone mad. They all changed, fell apart, and endured. This is a fictionalized account of the true story of a family and a town who faced the terror and hardship of unthinkable, prolonged natural violence with courage, love, and even humor.

THE ANGRY EARTH

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THE ANGRY EARTH

by

Sally Watson

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ISBN 978-1-60145-999-2

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Printed in the United States of America.

This is a work of historical fiction. The historical events and characters are painstakingly researched and as accurate as the author could manage. Where history failed, the author has fictionalized.

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2009

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CHAPTER TWELVE

TECUMSEH STAMPS

Indeed, malaise had struck most of New Madrid: folks, critters, and even the weather. It was--*énervant*. Much too warm for mid-December! Jeanne even hesitated over going to the Sunday night dance, with Edmond cranky, Charles-Auguste in one of his lofty moods, and Tassie all a-twitter again. Her husband said it was she who was being unreasonable, and gave Charles-Auguste a lecture on Responsibility which, she suspected, did not help matters at all.

Monique was uneasy about the onset of winter, which was not yet cold but surely would be. Had she made enough warm clothing? The flimsy gowns from Marseille would be useless. Already, the fireplace between sitting room and kitchen needed to be kept alight always. She also dreaded long and lonely months without friends--and she did not know how to remedy things with the neighbor women even had her stubborn pride permitted. Might they, after all, attend the Saturday dance this week? If the whole family went--

Impulsively, she made the suggestion to Matteo after they had made love that night. He seemed more amiable than he had been since Jean-Claud left--and to her surprise, he agreed.

Naturally, Monique at once began wondering if it was, after all, a good idea. Would people be friendly? What would she say to them? What should she and Caro wear? Nor did the next day restore her spirits. There was a family argument when the goats and hens failed to produce milk or eggs, everyone blaming some one else. Fleur (who was particularly impossible since last week when she had run off for half a day and returned in a foul temper) at once descended into another one, growling that *some one* had been upsetting Delilah, Jezebel and the hens. Moreover, she added darkly, glaring at Rudolph, she had a very good idea who it was.

Rudolph was outraged enough to be innocent, and his parents believed him. Caro accused Fleur of doing witchcraft on them, herself, which just made Fleur worse than ever. All morning and into the afternoon. Who would have guessed such a temper had been buried in her?

“Why are you so much wicked?” demanded the enraged Monique, applying a cold cloth to the shape of Fleur’s hand etched in scarlet on Caro’s cheek. She glanced over her own lean shoulder at Fleur’s shamed but mutinous face. Fleur shrugged sullenly. She knew quite well that she was in an evil temper. She had also known quite well when she had typhoid, but knowing it was not curing it. Besides, Caro had deliberately goaded her.

“I hate her,” Caro mumbled around her swollen cheek.

“*Non, ma petite*, you shall forgive her as God wishes,” soothed her mother with profound insincerity, and proceeded to punish all of them. “But I think it is not possible to go to the party tonight leaving such an *enfant méchante* here, so we all stay home, and Fleur shall go early to bed. On a pallet in my room,” she added, punishing herself as well.

She ignored the wails from her distraught children and shot a look at her erring servant that was calculated to make Fleur feel resentful as well as guilty. To tell the truth, Monique was glad to postpone the party, but she did not permit herself to know this, so she would not have even a half-sin to confess to Père Anselm when he next came.

Fleur settled down on her pallet sore in spirit and offended in ears--for M’sieur’s snoring sounded loud from the next room----and it took very much too long to go to sleep. Also, since she had never before stayed awake more than ten minutes after settling down, she had never heard all the animal noises outside. How all those sounds made her tense and edgy!

She awoke in the depth of the night with a pounding heart and lay still for a moment, wondering what had waked her, and why she felt so strange. It was--fear? Excitement? Expectancy? All three? She had felt a little like this before the cyclone, but today had been clear and still, and apart from M’sieur’s snores the world was now silent. Too

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silent? Peaceful? Alert? Awake as she was? Where *were* the animal noises? She sat up to listen better.

Monique, already half awake, heard her. "Stop fidgeting," she mumbled from the bed. "What do you do, child? *Qu'y a-t-il?*"

"I don't know," murmured Fleur, and went on listening. There was something-- Something like a sound in her bones but not in her ears. Outside, Lucifer and Echo suddenly raised an unearthly duet. Over at the Nilsens', Fjord answered. So did the chickens. Something deep in the earth hummed, quivered. Another dog, further away, howled, a cow bawled, and then it seemed that every creature in the world was screeching.

Monique sat up, now seriously alarmed.

And Creation burst apart with a roar. The floor heaved beneath them like the ship in the Atlantic. The house swayed, jerked, danced. Lightning flashed through the window. Fleur's pallet swooped across the floor, paused, swooped back. She clung to it, almost too stupefied for fear. What was it? Had Tecumseh stamped his foot?

"*Mon Dieu!*" moaned Monique. "It is after all the Day of Judgment!"

Was it? In a fog of bewilderment and terror, a tiny corner of Fleur's mind went on functioning, small and clear. Judgment Day? But so-- so--so *magnifique*, as well as terrible? God's finest storm, splendid beyond bearing! The rest of her mind, of course, along with her body, was quite simply frozen with fear. She just rode her pallet, breathless, silent in the din of every living thing in New Madrid screaming and bellowing.

A crash from the next room must be M'sieur's fine large bed collapsing. Its owner called frantically upon *le bon Dieu*, who had so inexplicably abandoned him. From upstairs, two terrified shrieks brought Monique out of bed, only to fall down on top of Fleur. They clung to each other. A series of heavy thumps on the roof suggested that the chimneys were abandoning any thought of staying together.

In a tiny pause, they could hear the frantic animals outside. Monique staggered to her feet--and fell again as the thunder of tormented earth drowned out all other sounds. The house rolled, groaned, paused as if thinking it over, and then bounced briskly up and

down. Everything that could fall over, off or down, did so. From above, her children wailed again, and Monique, galvanized, crawled and staggered through to the bottom of the stairs.

“Caro! Rudolph! Descend yourselves *now!* Jump if you must, I’ll catch you. Caro, help Ru--”

The floor swooped again and dropped away sickeningly, orchestrated by renewed thuds, crashes, howls. Caro pushed Rudolph down the steep staircase, then fell on top of him. He didn’t even notice.

“Out!” screamed their mother, giving the nearest one a shove. “Go! Go, Fleur! Matteo, it is not the time to pray when the house is falling on you.”

They staggered, crawled, fell toward the back door. Then Monique’s practicality asserted itself, suggesting that night-clothes were not enough warm for even a mild December night. Lurching back to her room, where a stone hurled itself from the fireplace and just missed her, she snatched the blankets from her own bed and Fleur’s pallet, and all the wraps from the hook by the door, and then pushed her family outside, dazed and drunken by the mindless violence around her.

They got out through a deformed doorway, across a bucking porch--and stopped short. In the faint eerie light of a gibbous moon, to the terrible distant sound of the enraged river, the path was twisting like a deranged snake.

“*Mère de Dieu!*” whispered Monique. She had no spare hand to cross herself, but the others were doing so with more passion than ever in their lives. “Come!” she yelled as a chimney hurled a shower of large stones at them. “Away from the house at once!” She started along the temporarily quiescent path. “Fleur, where are you going?”

“The animals!” Fleur yelled back, and careened back to the cow-shed and chicken house where the goats and poultry were galvanized with fear. Even her voice could not soothe them. They were, *en effet*, trying to batter down the walls of their sheds. It was all she could do to get the doors open and duck out of the way as the terrified goats charged past, Beelzebub leading the way out to the road to join cows, horses and much of the rest of New Madrid’s livestock. Only the timid Jezebel stayed behind to push frantically against Fleur. The pigs simply bolted, down the bank to the creek and away at full speed into

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the wild darkness. Fleur called Echo vainly, and then hesitated over the chickens, likely to be eaten by a dozen things if she loosed them. Then a tree fell on a shed roof only a few feet away, and it seemed unlikely that anything would be thinking of dinner this night, so she freed them. Not that they were inclined to leave her: they clucked frantically *en masse* around her ankles, making it even harder to keep Jezebel from knocking her down. Somehow, a grotesque pied piper, she got them to the road just as the picket fence sagged tiredly to the ground and a giant pecan tree crashed across Rue Étienne. Led by Matteo, they all stumbled in the other direction to reach the crossroad of Rue Royale, with no near trees. There they crouched in a whimpering pile, surrounded by their livestock, gabbling appeals to *le bon Dieu* and waiting for hell to end.

A few miles upriver, Firmin La Roche who was transporting furs to New Orléans, was thrown from his bunk to find himself in Stygian darkness filled with horrible noise. *“I was awakened by a crash like thunder, and the boat turned upon its side. Everywhere there was noise like thunder, and the ground was shaking the trees down onto my boats, one of which was never seen again and the air was thick with something like smoke... We got away from the bank that tied us to a log that was there, and in a moment so great a wave came up the river that I have never seen one like it at sea... We believed we must surely die. Frère Joseph gave us all absolution, even Ben my slave...”*

“We did not see either of the other two boats; one of them we never saw again, nor do I know whether the men in it were drowned.”

A hundred miles downriver, John Bradbury’s discontent became justified. His boat, moored to a small island, leaped into the air to the tune of a horrendous roar.

“I was awakened by a most tremendous noise accompanied by so violent an agitation of the boat that it appeared in danger of upsetting. I could distinctly hear the crash of falling trees and the screaming of the wild fowl on the river...”

He staggered out of the cabin to find the river in uproar, to hear trees crashing, and something roaring like a thousand buffalo. The boat

was still moored--but hardly safely, for huge chunks of the high bank began to crash into the river on both sides, causing swells of already swollen water that looked like sinking it. There was nothing to do but crouch, hang on, pray and vow never to come again to such a benighted place! Indeed it was well that England had refused to let them remain as a troublesome colony!

The quake was much lighter downriver below Natchez. Nevertheless, camping along the riverside south of that city, Jean-Claud woke, confused. Were they somehow on the river? But *non*, here he was on land, and it seemed to sway like the river! The boatmen awoke in panic, and demanded of him, the patron, an explanation.

Jean-Claud, never one to admit any lack of omniscience--or for that matter, omnipotence--hid any unmanly uneasiness from mere employees, and said loftily that it was merely Old Broomytail brushing the moon as a farewell gesture.

It sounded reasonable. The men subsided grumbling--but Jean-Claud lay, uneasy, until the unnatural movement died away.

In Tennessee, Charlie Ross and Jean Baptiste Zebon, who had left New Madrid to find game and mysteriously failed to do so, were bounced from their blankets and tossed casually around the forest, terrified and bewildered.

In Pittsburgh, people leaped out of their beds in alarm. In Boston, bricks were falling off chimneys and slates from roofs. In Quebec, doors rattled, furniture moved and clocks stopped. In northern Canada, hunters awoke in bewilderment and fear. They'd known all along that--there comet was up to no good. In Pennsylvania, young John James Audubon, home from last summer's commercial trip down-river with Vincent Nolte, held his terrified wife Lucy as the house shook, and wondered if the birds he so loved to draw would survive.

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In Williamsburg, Lauchlin and Andrew Dare¹ awoke in bewilderment. Their bed jerked and the candleholder waltzed itself off the stand, and out in the slave quarters cries arose. Burglars! Thieves! Inside, their two youngest grandsons wailed that it was the Redcoats or the Injuns come to get them. But the Revolution had been over for nearly thirty years, and there was no new war. Yet. In any case, no enemy would ever again in a thousand years dare to invade American soil. (They were wrong about that. Just two and a half years later, the British would burn Washington.)

In Georgia, the ground swayed, and so did Indian houses. They did not, actually, all fall down, but it was a near thing. And on the predicted day too! The Indians, deeply impressed, concluded that Tecumseh was indeed a great medicine man! On the other hand, it was said that his tribe and brother had just lost a battle to the whites in a place called Tippecanoe, so perhaps, after all, it was safer just to stay here and risk falling-down houses.

In the western outlands, crouched in a hollow made by the roots of a long-fallen tree and staring toward his thoroughly squashed tepee with wide eyes, Kumskaka earnestly addressed That Old Grandmother, not asking that his life be spared: that was up to her. What he most seriously needed, he explained, was human companionship, especially in his last moments. He was not, it appeared, as much the lone cat as he had supposed.

Down in the harbor, even Dante might have been appalled. The earth thundered, the river arose in wrath and raged up the bayou, smashing the low bank, attacking the high one, tossing the boats around like twigs. Much of the livestock and some of the men and boats vanished without trace, along with a great deal else. The survivors clung to what they could, shocked almost to paralysis.

¹ See The Hornet's Nest

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In the New Madrid town hall, the party was over and folks preparing to go home, laughing and talking. If anyone had noticed another small bit of underground thunder, they ignored it--until it knocked them down with a roar. Chaos, of course, took over. They rushed to the door en masse, only to realize that it was not merely the building under attack, but the whole town. Down the street, the fine brick Dupré house simply collapsed before the horrified eyes of its owners. The La Vallées, appalled, turned without words and staggered toward their own home, well across town, where Linette and Edmond were being watched only by Charles-Auguste and the untried Tassie.

Eliza woke from a sound sleep to find her bed banging against the wall, the house heaving, and Fred wailing with fright. From outside rose the cries of stunned neighbors, distraught geese, bellowing cattle. She pulled herself together, seized her son and some wraps, and rushed out into the crash of trees, flashes of what seemed to be lightning, and the roar of the earth. Across the park, the town hall doors opened to a flood of terrified party-goers. Those with families at home--the La Vallées in the lead--had one thing in mind: to get to them. The rest milled about, bewildered, in smoky torchlight. Some one fainted. People wailing that it was the end of the world fled mindlessly, not knowing where.

“Tywappity Hill!” some one bellowed, although Eliza did not know why that should be any safer unless the river should rise some twenty feet to engulf the entire land. And if that should happen, she reasoned, nowhere at all would be safe. Glancing to see that none of the swaying trees was near enough to hit them if--when?--they fell, she wrapped both arms around the sobbing Fred, and stayed where she was. Nothing could be done now. Not until and unless it stopped. So, being a scientist at heart, she mentally began what was one day to be the best first-hand account of the New Madrid Quakes.

“--an earthquake, accompanied by a very awful noise, resembling loud but distant thunder, but more hoarse and vibrating... The screams of the affrighted inhabitants running to and fro, not knowing where to go or what to do - the cries of the fowl and the beasts

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of every species, the cracking of trees falling, and the roaring of the Mississippi formed a scene truly terrible."

In the Vachard home, the little girls were in bed and Louis Philippe and his parents still up, reading, when the house began to pitch and roll like a ship. Madame began screaming. Louis Philippe, who always became very much calm in emergencies, sat still while he decided what was happening and what best to do. He had never felt an earthquake, but this clearly was one.

"*Voilà*," he drawled. "Now perhaps we see how this imitation Louis Quinze architecture will hold up."

His normally taciturn and detached sire spared him a distracted glance. "Out! Out at once!"

A shriek from the bedroom was echoed by Maman. "Angelique! Save my Angelique!"

Louis Philippe's irony grew more pronounced. "Is it permitted that we also save Henriette?"

In the La Vallée house, Charles-Auguste had been wakened earlier by the fretful whimpering of the teething Linette. She was, he feared, becoming a tiresome baby. He could not remember whether his dead sisters Marie-Louise and Anne-Françoise had fussed this much about teeth; he was almost certain Edmond had not; much less, of course, himself. He sat up. Tassie could be heard in the small room she shared with the baby, ineffectually trying to soothe her.

"Take her to *Maman*," he called crossly.

"M'dame and Master are still at the dance," she whined back at him.

"Then take her to *Maman*'s bed, *sotte*; you know that always quiets her." And not knowing or much caring whether this had wakened little Edmond on the other side of the room, he flopped over and went back to sleep--

--and was shocked awake by being flung out of bed and halfway across the room, where he lay dazed while the house rocked and shuddered and fell in bits all around him. Instinctively, he rolled into a ball with arms wrapped around his head, waiting for instant death. But

when the turmoil went on and he seemed to be still alive, his wits began to return. Howls of fear from inside and out added to the din; he wished to howl, as well. But if *Papa* and *Maman* were still not back, then he must do something more sensible than that. He had no idea what--but he was responsible!

He lay an instant longer, weak and mindless with fear. Then a stupendous grind and screech and crash from the next room produced hysterical yelps from Bouche the puppy, and a terrified shriek from Edmond that brought him instantly out of his stupor. Linette! The house was falling down on his baby sister! He was up and moving before he finished the thought.

Not running. Teetering and crawling, hauling the whimpering Edmond behind him, he reached the doorway. "Stay there!" he bawled unnecessarily at the frozen child, and sprawled on into the baby's room, where shafts of gray light came through logs being wrenched apart and together again. A large beam from the roof lay on the splinters of the crib, and Charles sobbed as he began to grope.

Somewhere a baby chortled.

The tortured ground paused, and Linette's voice went on, and at last Charles remembered, turned toward his parents' room, crawled at last to the corner bed where Tassie huddled bravely, protectively, over her charge, a bit of roof on top of her! She raised a dazed head. Only bruised and dented a little, thank *la bonne Marie!* And Linette unharmed, gurgled as if it were a delightful new game! Finally, after more eternities through the leaping house (which, had it been built in the American style or--worse!--of bricks or stones, would doubtless have utterly collapsed by now) he brought them all outside.

Here the chaos was as great, but, *enfin*, less likely to fall on one. Perhaps.

And there, shaking, he realized that he, Charles-Auguste the Superior, was not brave at all, but--literally--scared shitless, and disgraced forever.

It also transpired that he was more fond of Linette than he had suspected. Much!

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The earth paused briefly in its temper tantrum. The dazed Bogliolos perceived for the first time that the Nilsen family were huddled quite close, clutching one another and praying earnestly to their Protestant God. While they stared, the sky became filled with terrified birds who could find no reasonable place to perch in a suddenly unreasonable world, and so swirled aloft over and over, screeching protest. A dozen of them flung themselves at the humans for protection, and were instantly repulsed by frantic waving arms--and by a juggernaut that launched itself into Fleur's arms and clung with frantic claws and yowls.

Lucifer! How could she have forgotten about him? Her arms tightened. Where was poor Echo, then? Hiding beneath the beds *peut-être*? Impossible to find her now. The demented ground tossed again. For minute after minute, while Matteo importuned God, his children wailed, and Monique clutched at them, while a drunken tree just missed the Nilsens, Fleur and a battle-scarred wildcat gripped each other painfully for comfort.

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