

# EARTHQUAKE (HODGINS)

Jack Hodgins

Analysis by Elena Bastianoni

Short Story

*Earthquake* by Jack Hodgins was published in 1986 in *The Canadian Forum*. This short story deals with the 1946 Vancouver Island earthquake. Through the voice of a young narrator, Hodgins exposes the psychological responses to geological disaster, juxtaposing a child’s playful gaze to the fear and superstition of the adults. The story critiques anthropocentric fantasies of control, and uses storytelling as a strategy to preserve memory and exorcise fear.

Year of Publication	Unspecified
Publication Place	Canada
Editor	Unspecified
Entity	Vancouver Island Earthquake of 1946
Magazine	The Canadian Forum; Kunapipi

## GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

### Earthquake Vancouver Island Earthquake of 1946

REAL EVENT

Time	June 23, 1946 at 10:13:26 am Pacific time
Location	British Columbia (Vancouver Island) Canada
Coordinates	49.704528, -125.333061
Impacted Areas	considerable damage on Vancouver Island; damage in Cumberland, Union Bay, Courtenay, Comox, Port Alberni, Powell River, Victoria and Vancouver; the earthquake was felt as far as Portland, Oregon (USA), and Prince Rupert B.C. (CA).
Seismic Fault	possibly the BRF – Beaufort Range Fault
Magnitude	MS 7.3
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

“All historic earthquakes in southwestern British Columbia and northwestern Washington have been crustal and intraplate events” (Clague 13)

Anthropization Level	Houses
	“The earthquake knocked down 75% of the chimneys in the closest communities, Cumberland, Union Bay, and Courtenay and did considerable damage in Comox, Port Alberni, and Powell River (on the eastern side of Georgia Strait).” (Natural Resources Canada)
	Sea Coast
	“Two deaths resulted from this earthquake, one due to drowning when a small boat capsized in an earthquake-generated wave, and the other from a heart attack in Seattle.” (Natural Resources Canada)
	Schools
	“The earthquake knocked down 75% of the chimneys in the closest communities, Cumberland, Union Bay, and Courtenay (including the Courtenay School; fortunately, the earthquake occurred on a Sunday morning so no children were at their desks)” (Cassidy et. al. 9)

Ecological Impacts	Soil Changes
	Mathews 1979 reported over “300 landslides” caused by the earthquake, and Rogers 1980 noted widespread “liquefaction, particularly along east coast of central Vancouver Island” (ltd. in Cassidy et. al. 9)
Social Impacts	Deaths
	“Two deaths resulted, one from drowning when a small boat capsized in an earthquake-generated wave, and the other from a heart attack in Seattle.” (Cassidy et. al. 9)
	Destruction Of Public Buildings
	“The earthquake knocked down 75% of the chimneys in the closest communities, Cumberland, Union Bay, and Courtenay (including the Courtenay School; fortunately, the earthquake occurred on a Sunday morning so no children were at their desks)” (Cassidy et. al. 9)

Earthquake The earthquake of ‘46		LITERARY EVENT
Time	"a warm June day" (Hodgins 92)	
Location	British Columbia (Vancouver Island) Canada	
Coordinates	49.704528, -125.333061	
Impacted Areas	An unnamed city in Vancouver Island; Comox lake	
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)	
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference	
Seismic Fault	possibly the BRF – Beaufort Range Fault	
Magnitude	7.3 on the Richter scale: “it had measured 7.3 on the Richter scale” (Hodgins 96)	
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake	
Anthropization Level	Houses	Public Buildings
	Country Houses	Churches
	Schools	

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

Soil Changes

Social Impacts

Destruction Of Public Buildings

Trauma

Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

## INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

### Reactions

Name	The Narrator, Unnamed
Age	Eight Years Old
Gender	Unspecified
Native Place	Presumably Vancouver Island
Nationality	Canadian
Reactions	ResignationParalysisEmpathy

Name	Neddie Desmond (the Narrator's Uncle)
Age	Unspecified, Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Presumably Vancouver Island, British Columbia
Nationality	Canadian
Reactions	TerrorDisorder

Name	Tobias Desmond (nicknamed Uncle Toby, Another Uncle Of The Narrator)
Age	Unspecified, Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Presumably Comox Lake, British Columbia
Nationality	Canadian
Reactions	ParalysisPassivenessTerrorPost-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Name	The Father Of The Narrator
Age	Unspecified, Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Presumably Vancouver Island, British Columbia
Nationality	Canadian
Reactions	Self-AbsorptionSurvival InstinctFight For Survival

Name	The Narrator's Brother
Age	Five Years Old
Gender	Male
Native Place	Presumably Vancouver Island, British Columbia
Nationality	Canadian

Reactions

Fear

Scepticism

Euphoria

Wonder

Name The Narrator's Mother

Age Unspecified, Adult

Gender Female

Native Place Presumably Vancouver Island, British Columbia

Nationality Canadian

Reactions

Fight For Survival

Fear

Solidarity

Intervention

Survival Instinct

Resignation

## COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name Working class people

Reactions

Paralysis

Solidarity

Self-Absorption

Survival Instinct

Escape

## LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords

Earthquake, Chimney, Barn, Bricks, Fence, House, Shake, Crack, Lake, Story, Fear, Laugh, Trust

Metaphors

- the earth came rolling up in waves (Hodgins 90)

- The hayfield swelled up and moved towards him in a series of ripples (Hodgins 93)

Similes

- the electric poles whipped back and forth like fly-fishermen's rods, and electric wires hooped low like skipping ropes and snapped tight and clearly sang (Hodgins 90)

- Suddenly he felt as if he were on a rocking ship, in need of sea legs, with a whole ocean beneath him trying to upset his balance (Hodgins 93)

- The chimney bent as if made of rubber bricks, then swivelled a half-turn and toppled (Hodgins 93)

- she saw the drying rack above the stove sway like a gentle porch swing, swishing boiled underwear and shirts back and forth over the heat. (Hodgins 93)

- Though the sound of the lake emptying all at once like water down a sucking drainpipe had been horrible enough to haunt him for the next few years (Hodgins 91)

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Violation Of Laws Of Nature

Hyperdisaster

Ruins

Superstition

Nemesis

Syntax

Hypotaxis, Complex Verbal Phrases, High Frequency Connectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Punctuation

Multiple Commas, Hypens, Uncummon Punctuation

Morphology

Preference For Verbs Adverbs, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language, High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms

Phonetics/Prosody

Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration), Relevance of language rhythm

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Jack Hodgins' short story "*Earthquake*", first published in March 1986 in *The Canadian Forum* and never included in any collection by the Canadian writer, is inspired by an autobiographical event regarding the 1946 Vancouver Island earthquake. The story is narrated from the point of view of an eight-year-old child, who describes both the individual and collective reactions to the earthquake.

The Vancouver Island earthquake – a tectonic earthquake (Clague 13) that took place on June 23, 1946 (Natural resources Canada n.p.) – caused considerable damage on Vancouver Island (British Columbia, Canada), while also impacting other surrounding territories and cities, as it was also felt in Portland, USA (Lynch et al. 5). The earthquake caused the death of several civilians (Cassidy et. al. 9) besides considerable damage to towns and cities.

Jack Hodgins' narrative is centred around the perception of the geological event by a family of agricultural workers located on Vancouver Island. The short story also provides the readers with real information about the earthquake through the voice of the protagonist. The autodiegetic voice of the young narrator relates his own reaction to the event, while also reporting his family's reactions to the geological event. The earthquake operates as a moment of individual growth for the protagonist, who passes from innocence to experience:

Why, how had I got to such an age, I'd like to know, still believing that earth would stay steady beneath your feet forever, fathers stay capable of heroic rescues forever, mothers stay calm in every sort of emergency forever, and houses you lived in stay solid and still and safe and true till the end of time? (Hodgins 94)

The young narrator therefore becomes aware of the ephemerality of the human body and of human industriousness when he is faced with the earthquake. The tone of the passage, mirroring the narrative style of the whole story, is interrogative, as the cumulative, hypotactic sentences convey the narrator's need to come to terms with the geological phenomenon. As underlined by Laurie Ricou (Dvorák and New 350-351), the incipit of the short story – "Do you remember the earthquake of '46?" (Hodgins 90) – opens with an intimate tone, directly pointing at the local dimension of the perceived geological risk. In the *incipit*, the frequent repetition of the interrogative phrase "Do you remember" is followed by a piece of information about the local consequences of the earthquake. This element underlines storytelling as a coping mechanism to exorcise fear and to preserve the ecological event as part of collective memory, a strategic choice to come to terms with the impact of the ecological crisis. Moreover, the narrator's desire for the validation of his experience from the community is an attempt at preserving geological memory from oblivion. The protagonist's childish enthusiasm to share his own experience echoes oral storytelling, as the story's syntax is shaped by long phrases, frequent commas, and a colloquial tone that reproduces a conversational tone. Moreover, the frequent insertion of words in italics highlights the emphatic parts of the narration and conveys the shock and wonder felt by the protagonist in the face of survival.

On a structural level, the short story is subdivided into six sections visually limited through blank spaces signalling a change of subject. Each part either focuses on the narrator's personal view of the geological phenomenon, or on the psychological reactions of his family members to the earthquake.

The earthquake is described through an evocative language with subjective perceptions marked by frequent similes and personifications of the environmental and anthropized scenarios portrayed in the story. Passages such as "It was as if the earth, worn out from its convulsion, had taken in a deep breath, and held it, while it gathered up its strength to buck and heave some more and go into another fit" (Hodgins 95), or "The trees began to dance and flop about and try to fly" (Hodgins 90) not only highlight the young narrator's sudden realisation of the destructive power of nature, but also provide a unique perspective on the geological risk, that of a young, growing mind.

The adults' psychological reactions to the geological phenomenon – which are often described in a humorous tone – are marked by a sense of guilt, superstition, moments of paralysis that are immediately followed by a strong survival impulse. The idea of anthropogenic blame for the geological catastrophe is fuelled by superstition: a notable example is represented by Uncle Ned, the protagonist's uncle, who interprets the coincidental manifestation of the earthquake at the exact moment he switches on his new electric fence as proof of his culpability: “‘I mean I thought I'd *really* started it!’ he said. ‘I pulled the switch on my electric fence and away she started to rip!’” (Hodgins 96). The psychological reaction of Uncle Ned is deemed reasonable by the protagonist's parents, who share his view about the abrupt manifestation of the geological phenomenon:

‘I thought I'd caused it myself. I was just coming across from the barn and thinking how maybe we shouldn't've moved into this old house before I'd finished the renovations. Not with little kids – y'know? What a person ought to be able to do, I thought, was just pick up an old house like that and give it a shake and see what's left that's safe.’ ‘I was making bread,’ my mother said. ‘You know how they make fun of the way I punch down the dough like I'm mad. This time I thought well *now* I've gone and done it, this dough's begun to fight back.’ (Hodgins 96)

An interesting perspective on the relationship between mankind and nature is disclosed through the highly ironic description of the protagonist's five-year-old brother, who sees the earthquake as a game. The boy laughs and perceives the earthquake's tremors in the domestic environment he is immersed into as a form of entertainment, as he cannot yet fully comprehend nature's destructive power: “From this day on, he would take it for granted that he might demand any sort of pleasant diversion he wished and needed only wait for all laws of nature to be suspended for the purpose of giving him a laugh” (Hodgins 93), presenting an anthropocentric vision of the biosphere.

The pivotal role played by the earthquake in triggering an ecological, psychological, and relational awakening for both to the protagonist and the adults depicted in his account, emerges in the moment the narrator is separated from his father by a collapsing building:

he solemnly held my gaze with his to acknowledge what we both now knew what he must have known already himself but had kept secret from me too long. What was this thing we shared? That the world could no longer be trusted to stay steady beneath our feet? Perhaps, and that a father and son in such a world must expect to view each other across a space of falling debris. (Hodgins 96)

The image of the father as being separated from his son by overwhelming forces wreaking havoc on ordinary life is highly poetic, as it evokes the *topoi* of human vulnerability and the precariousness of civilisation. Humanity is here depicted in all its helplessness in the face of the destructive forces of the natural world. The trembling earth thus mirrors the uncertain ground upon which human fantasies of superiority rest upon, while the only anchoring point is represented by solidarity, love, and communication.

Storytelling emerges as the primary method to exorcise the fear of the geological crisis. Uncle Toby, for instance, is profoundly shocked by the earthquake purported to be the cause of the drying up of Comox Lake. Therefore, he resorts to repeatedly telling his story while also modifying it with fictional elements. Uncle Toby is deemed by the protagonist as an unreliable narrator who tries to take advantage of the ecological disaster as a pretext to avoid working, an aspect that may well be a consequence of PTSD. Uncle Toby undergoes a process of emotional shock, momentarily throwing him into a state of paralysis, followed by a moment of interaction and emotional sharing: «he stood and watched [...] he would not have the will to drive out of there even if that water had kept on climbing up the posts and started out over the land» (Hodgins 91).

The ending of the short story is emblematic of a psychological coping mechanism of risk denial, as the narrator's father refuses to face the truth relating to the geological disaster:

Uncle Toby was out of that truck before it had even come to its usual stop against the walnut tree, and was running across the yard towards us holding his baseball cap on his head with one of his hands. 'You feel that?' he shouted. 'You feel that here?' I guess he was too excited to notice our stack of bricks. 'Feel what?' my father said. 'What do you mean? We didn't feel anything here.' He put one hand on my shoulder. 'Look around. You see anything here that's *changed*?' (Hodgins 97-98)

The ending has a highly sarcastic tone, enhanced through the insertion of the word "changed" in italics, to emphasize the father's contradictory remark. Trauma is thus managed through the negation of the geological phenomena. The short story is structured as a veiled critique of anthropogenic fantasies of control and security, as it ironically describes of the adults' difficulties in accepting the limits of human agency. Through the demystifying gaze of a child, Hodgins attempts to replicate the delicate process of coming to terms with the geological crisis, disclosing the multi-faceted form of human reaction to geological risk.

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