

EARTHQUAKE (SALKEY)

Andrew Salkey

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Novella

Andrew Salkey's *Earthquake* (1965), which deals with the 1907 Kingston catastrophe, can be read as an ethical inquiry into disaster communication and intergenerational memory. Following the story of three children and their grandfather, a survivor of the 1907 earthquake, Salkey's children's novella reflects how storytelling can mediate trauma, while serving as an effective tool to educate younger generations about seismic risks.

Year of Publication	1965
Publication Place	London
Editor	Oxford University Press
Entity	1907 Kingston earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1907 Kingston earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	14th January 1907, 3:30 PM (20:36 UTC)
Location	The Caribbean Jamaica
Coordinates	18.224945, -76.769817
Impacted Areas	Gordon Town, Above Rocks, Bull Bay, Port Morant, Kingston, Saint Andrew
Seismic Fault	Enriquillo-Plantain Garden Fault system
Magnitude	6.2 Ricther
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

“Those who experienced the shock in Kingston are generally of the opinion that the vibrations were along an east-west line” (Fuller 700)

Anthropization Level

Cities

"Kingston, the island's capital, is today no more than a mass of debris" (Hall 1907)

Shops

"shops and houses that are now masses of ruins" (Hall 1907)

Houses

"spaces from half an inch to two inches were left in massive walls. Floors and ceilings were pulled from the shallow supports in many cases and caused destruction" (Brown 397)

Public Buildings

"The building shook all over, then in a second came an awful, deep, rumbling roar, the building rose in the air and came down a mass of ruins. In about 15 seconds every brick building in Kingston was a mass of ruins" (Chislett 200)

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

"The slopes in many instances are very steep, and as a result of the earthquake many boulders and avalanches were precipitated down the mountain sides, leaving great bare scars on their faces" (Fuller 705)

Tsunami

"the sea retreated for a hundred feet and then advanced inward upon the shore about sixty feet a low wave a couple of feet high" (Brown 401)

Other

"the sky is illuminated by deep red glow of fires still burning in half dozen parts of the city" (Hall 1907)

Social Impacts

Deaths

1000 ("Significant Earthquake Information")

Injuries

"Hundreds were killed outright; hundreds were terribly injured; and hundreds imprisoned in the ruins" (Chislett 201)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"While some high buildings escaped complete demolition, nearly all were badly wrecked, while in many cases even the one-story houses and stores were destroyed. The destruction was not uniform, however, varying greatly according to the nature of the materials used in construction" (Fuller 713).

Trauma

"They are lying about in idleness among the ruins" (Hall 1907)

Resource Depletion

30 Milion \$ damages ("Significant Earthquake Information")

Seismic zone Enriquillo–Plantain Garden Fault system

LITERARY EVENT

Location	The Caribbean Jamaica
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Seismic Fault	Enriquillo–Plantain Garden Fault system
Typology	E–W-Trending Normal Faults
Anthropization Level	Houses Country Houses Shops Facilities Churches Towns Streets Slums

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Ricky Thomas
Age	12
Gender	Boy
Native Place	Kingston
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	Anxiety Apprehension Awareness Carelessness Curiosity Wonder Heroism

Name	Doug Thomas
Age	10
Gender	Boy
Native Place	Kingston
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	Apprehension Awareness Carelessness Curiosity Wonder Heroism

Name	Polly Thomas
Age	8
Gender	Girl
Native Place	Kingston
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	Fear Malaise Distress Apprehension Awareness Wonder Curiosity Heroism

Name	Gran' Ma
Age	Old

Gender	Woman
Native Place	Saint Andrew
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	Discomfort Awareness Acceptance

Name	Gran' Pa
Age	Old
Gender	Man
Native Place	Saint Andrew
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	Apprehension Fatalism Awareness Acceptance Mitigation Caution

Name	Marcus
Age	Early Twenties
Gender	Man
Native Place	Kingston
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	Anxiety Terror Heroism Pessimism Awareness Mitigation

Earthquake The Great Earthquake of 1907

LITERARY EVENT

Time	14th January, 3:30 PM (20:36 UTC)
Location	The Caribbean Jamaica
Impacted Areas	Kingston and Saint Andrew Parish
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Pre-disaster (causes / context)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Seismic Fault	Enriquillo–Plantain Garden Fault system
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Country Houses Houses Shops Churches Public Buildings Streets Towns Sea Coast
Ecological Impacts	Soil Changes Other
Social Impacts	Deaths Injuries Destruction Of Public Buildings Trauma Poverty Diseases Depopulation Destruction Of Facilities

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Gran' Pa (young)
Age	13
Gender	Boy
Native Place	Saint Andrew
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> Escape Passiveness Self-Absorption Astonishment Neurosis </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> Trauma Sharing Of Information </div>

Name	Gran' Pa's Mother
Age	Adult
Gender	Woman
Native Place	Saint Andrew
Nationality	Jamaican
Reactions	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> Escape Fight For Survival Prayer Heroism Sadness Despair </div>

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> Loss Of Consciousness Escape Terror Despair Survival Instinct </div>

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> "Earth" (Salkey 14), "Shake" (13, 62) "Tremor" (15) "Disaster" (24) "Earthquake" (26), "Horror" (30), "Earthquake Story" (31), "Warning" (56), "Cracks" (63, 64, 77, 79, 83, 103), "Rumble" (74, 76, 77, 83), "Catastrophe" (107), "Horror" (111) </div>
Metaphors	"jerking sensation under his feet" (Salkey 6) "strange sensation" (6) "Almost as regular as clockwork" (15), "an echo-chamber" (76) "locked in the bowels of the earth" (76) "a mixture of movements all at once" (101), "one solid movement"
Similes	"something like a jarring sensation" (Salkey 14) "like a wet dog shaking himself" (14), "for nothing like the length of time that a dog would" (15), "as if the ground shuddered" (22), "as if the whole place suddenly twitched all over" (22)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> Locus Amoenus Locus Horridus Hell Apocalypse Cruel Nature </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> Death Superstition Prophecy Evil </div>
Syntax	Simple Sentences
Punctuation	No Peculiarities

ANDREW SALKEY'S *EARTHQUAKE* AND THE ETHICS OF TRUTHFUL STORYTELLING IN CHILDREN-DISASTER-LITERATURE

1. OVERVIEW

Andrew Salkey's 1965 novella *Earthquake* investigates the historical 1907 Kingston disaster focusing on the ethics of disaster communication, and turning historical catastrophe into a meditation on the responsibility to prepare children for geological risks. The story follows three children, Rick, Doug, and Polly, who experience earth tremors during their holiday and become increasingly curious about earthquakes. Their insistent questions about these events force their grandfather, a survivor of the 1907 earthquake, into a moral dilemma about whether and how to share his traumatic memories with his grandchildren. *Earthquake*'s narrative structure illuminates fundamental tensions within the problem of disaster communication.

2. HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE 1907 KINGSTON EARTHQUAKE

The 1907 Kingston earthquake was one of the most violent geological events to strike the Caribbean, though it was far from being an isolated hazard. In addition to the globally recognised 2011 disaster that devastated the Republic of Haiti, the Caribbean Islands have a long history of seismic activity. Like its neighbouring Islands, Jamaica is situated in a complex geographical and tectonic setting, along “a young convergent/strike-slip margin known as the Enriquillo–Plantain Garden Fault system” (Avalon Cullen et al. 4).

This fault system has exposed the Caribbean islands and their inhabitants to recurring geological hazards. Consequently, the high frequency of seismic activity in the Caribbean has drawn sustained attention from both scholars and the media. This aspect is particularly self-evident in the case of 1907 earthquake in Jamaica, which rapidly became the focus of scientific investigation and documentation in its immediate aftermath. Historical records include, for example, articles published by scientist such as Charles Brown (1907) and Myron Fuller (1907), but also by journalist Ralph Hall (1907) or even letters written by survivors of the earthquake (Chislett 2021).

These sources contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the 1907 Kingston earthquake, exceeding the focus on geophysical dynamics to address contemporary perceptions of the resulting damage to the urban landscape, the environment and the population. In Kingston, buildings and infrastructures were severely damaged and “badly wrecked, while in many cases even the one-story houses and stores were destroyed” (Fuller 713). The force of the quake was so intense that “spaces from half an inch to two inches were left in massive walls. Floors and ceilings were pulled from the shallow supports in many cases and caused destruction” (Brown 397). The timing of the earthquake further increased the number of casualties and injuries (over one thousand). As it occurred at approximately 3:30 p.m., many people were engaged in work and leisure activities outdoors and were subsequently trapped beneath the weight of “shops and houses that are now masses of ruins” (Hall 1907). In his short article telegraphed to *The New York Times*, Ralph Hall effectively captured the tragedy of the aftermath: “Kingston [...] is today no more than a mass of debris. Every street in the city tells a story of desolation and ruin, and at night the sky is illuminated by the deep-red glow of fires still burning in half a dozen parts of the city” (Hall 1907). However, the fires were not the only collateral natural hazards triggered by the earthquake. In his account, Fuller noted the occurrence of

avalanches “precipitated down the mountain sides” (Fuller 705), as well as tidal waves. Luckily enough, though, these waves did not cause significant damage, having lost much of their momentum and size. Otherwise, Fuller stresses, “a large wave would have washed over the entire point, sweeping everything before it” (719).

Amid the debris, the Jamaicans who survived the catastrophe were left deeply shocked. Hall’s article, however, shows little empathy to the survivors, perhaps being influenced by the racial prejudices of the time. Indeed, he describes “natives [...] squatting outside their wrecked tenements, smoking, and in a condition of sublime resignation, waiting for the government and the white man generally to handle the situation,” or even “lying about in idleness among the ruins” (Hall 1907). In contrast, native sources provide a more accurate and nuanced account, shedding light on the profound psychological impact the disaster had on the population. In a letter dated 16th of January 1907, two days after the earthquake, survivor Dick Chislett recalls how “in about 15 seconds every brick building in Kingston was a mass of ruins” (Chislett 200). Crushed beneath the debris and lying in a state of despair, Chislett “expected every minute—every second—to be killed, and could only say, ‘O God! Save me!’, ultimately resigned to never to “see any of [his] loved ones again” (200). Although he managed to survive, the same cannot be said for many other citizens, as “[h]undreds were killed outright; hundreds were terribly injured; and hundreds imprisoned in the ruins” (201).

Besides historical records, the 1907 disaster has been interpreted through both official studies and cultural narratives aimed at educating and empowering vulnerable audiences. The Kingston earthquake has been charted by contemporary geological research, such as the National Centers for Environmental Information, but it has also been the subject of literary representation, most notably in Andrew Salkey’s novella *Earthquake* (1965).

Being written by a Jamaican author, and aimed primarily at young readers, Salkey’s work offers valuable insights into what has been defined as the problem of “disaster communication”. Specifically, this concept refers to “how novels can communicate knowledge about disaster after the fact while also teaching publics how to read future disasters for their inevitable complexity” (Scott Parish 134). This problem is particularly relevant within the field of Disaster Studies, but also in Disaster Mitigation Policymaking. Accordingly, scholars have been stressing the potential harms posed by the so-called “disaster gaps” (135), i.e. the creation of disrupted networks of knowledge between official discourses and the lived experience of the affected communities in the aftermath of such events. As Parish notes: “It is important to think about how overlapping and conflicting publics do or might become aware of the “riskscape” in which they all variously live” (135). Among these different publics, children must not be overlooked, as they represent one of the most vulnerable groups in society. For this reason, Salkey’s novella is culturally valuable not only for having “reflected the West Indian landscape and provided West Indian children with a positive self-image” (Pérez Diaz 880), but also delivered accessible and accurate information about earthquakes.

3. SALKEY’S ‘EARTHQUAKE STORIES’

Salkey’s concern for the need of educating children about geological hazards is made explicit within the text thanks to the preoccupation of the character of Gran Pa’. The old man is a survivor of 1907 earthquake and wonders throughout the whole first part of the story, named “Before Gran Pa’ tells his story”, whether it would be appropriate to tell his grandchildren about the Kingston disasters. On the one hand, Gran Pa’’s reticence is due to the trauma inflicted by the quake. The old man openly explains to the curious children how “It isn’t exactly a bedtime story” (26), neither “the pleasantest of memories. In fact, it’s the sort of thing you try your best to forget” (1970: 28). On the other hand, he and his wife both agree on the potential “advisability of re-telling the Earthquake story” (29); otherwise, as Gran Ma’ remarks, “they’ll hear about it from somebody else if they don’t hear it from you” (30). Most of all, what troubles the old man is the search for the adapted way to narrate his experience to his young audience. Initially, he fosters the idea that “the best way [...] is to give the information without making it seem too frightening” (29). Nonetheless, the option of a sanitised version of the 1907 disaster is immediately rejected by Salkey’s text, as the old man concludes how “certain stories, and we know quite a few of them, do sound as though they might happen all over again, don’t they, in exactly the same nightmarish way they first occurred” (30). In this sense, the

novel advocates for an honest and unsparing engagement with historical trauma, suggesting that truthful storytelling is essential for meaningful intergenerational transmission and collective memory.

Gran Pa's dilemma arises after the three children experience tremors caused by activity of the fault system during their outdoor plays. Initially, they are puzzled by the event and struggle to linguistically describe the shakes. To do so, they often use figurative language which rely on familiar referents to express the unfamiliar experience of the earth's movements. For instance, they compare this unknown phenomenon to animals, as in "like a wet dog shaking himself" (14) and "for nothing like the length of time that a dog would" (15), or to household objects, as in "Almost as regular as clockwork" (15). Alongside more neutral terms such as "shake" (13), "tremor" (15), and later "rumble" (74), the children also adopt imagery marked by vagueness, which reflects both their anxiety and their cognitive difficulty in articulating their response to the event. Ricky describes the first shakes as a "jerking sensation under his feet" (6), which he later refers to as a "strange sensation" (6) and then as "a jarring sensation" (14). The alliterative adjective alternation is probably not employed by chance. The word "jerking" emphasises a sudden, forceful motion that is involuntary and unsettling, which is, by consequence, "strange". The two spheres of meaning are then brought together by the meaning of "jarring" which encompass both physical and emotional dissonance, suggesting the idea of a disturbing interruption to what had previously felt safe and familiar. These sensations will then be echoed by other similes employed later on in the text, such "as if the ground shuddered" (22) and "as if the whole place suddenly twitched all over" (22), insisting on the defamiliarizing power of earthquakes.

The children's affective responses to the novelty posed by geological risks are not solely shaped by fear but also reveal a profound sense of curiosity and wonder. Ricky, the oldest of the three, is described as "spellbound" (11) by the earth's tremors, yet he remains aware of their limited scale, observing that "[i]t wasn't a disaster or anything even near" (24). The experience also impacts Doug, who dreams that "he was walking in the village, on his own, trying to find the spot from which all the earth tremors were coming" (62). Even Polly, the youngest, alternates between uneasiness and curiosity, both reflected in her insistent questioning of her grandparents: "Does the earth around here shake much, Gran' Ma?" (13); "What's an earth tremor?" (14); "What causes them?" (15). These questions are initially met with evasive, paternalistic responses: "What you felt was just a slight earth tremor, Polly [...] That's all" (13) and "A very, very tiny quake" (14). However, Salkey's *Earthquake* seems to suggest that these evasive strategies might be counterproductive, potentially leading to careless behaviours. Following the advice of their new friend Marcus, a Rastafarian disciple, to "learn to recognize a signal when you feel one" (43), the children set out in search of "the cracks [...] higher up in the hills" (64). There, a new tremor triggers a landslide that buries Marcus alive, though he is ultimately rescued by the children's heroic actions. After the incident, Gran Pa' resolves to tell his "Earthquake story" (31), committed to becoming a more reliable source of information than Marcus, whose religious view holds that the best protection from earthquakes lies in "fearing and believing God" (54). Accordingly, Marcus interpret the fault's activity as a "signal" (44) and images taken to the holy scriptures are employed to frame the events of 1907, when, for example, "[The harbour] opened up wide, like in the Bible, and closed up again" (44).

The "*Story of the Great Earthquake of 1907*" (98) is narrated in first-person by the children's grandfather. The story begins with a brief focus on the situation before the disaster, which describes a tranquil setting around "three-thirty Monday afternoon, the fourteenth of January" (98). Gran Pa' was 13 years old and remembers how "There weren't any signs of disaster anywhere [...] the sky was blue all over. There weren't any clouds to speak of" (98). However, this mild context is soon disturbed by an unusual hot wind, which "brought with it a stillness which was strange and haunting for the time of day [...] we were all certain that something dreadful was definitely going to happen, but we weren't certain what it was going to be" (100).

On a lexical level, Salkey's representation exploits a contrasting connotation between silence and noise, as well as movement and stasis. Before the quake, the narrator states that the "The whole of our house was dead still. So was our street. I suppose the entire city was silent but for a few sounds" (100). However, when the shakes started, the silence was broken by "a roaring sound which began softly, distantly muffled, and suddenly became louder and louder" (101). This description recalls those provided by real eyewitness of the event, who claimed that "the earthquake was accompanied by a

loud noise, described as a deep crushing sound, somewhat suggesting distant thunder but with less boom and more of a roar" (Fuller 701). Quite interestingly, the previous sentence echoes a metaphor employed by the children in the first part of the novel, which defined the shakes as if coming from "an echo-chamber" (Salkey 76). Moreover, Gran' Pa' relies on another simile to describe the instants preceding the tremors, once again mimicking the playful and familiar figurative language adopted by Rick, Doug and Polly. The earth's sounds remind him of something "like a giant engine, buried in the ground, revving up to get loose and trying to break through and blast its way to the surface" (101). Therefore, the initial moments of the seism are connoted as a brief in-between phase in which the first movements of the crust are rendered as a crescendo of soundwaves, "a mixture of movement all at once" (101), which are about to reach their peak of destruction.

From a linguistic perspective, the impact produced by the earthquake and its agency is signalled phono-syntactically in the text through lexical verbs conjugated in the gerund. The narrator felt that the "movements continued, mixing and over-lapping, jarring, bumping, swelling, rumbling, rushing and rocking" (101). Similarly, the sounds were "splitting" (101), while the dust produced by the house's collapse is described as "choking" and "blinding" (101) the surviving members of the narrator's family. The narrator's lexical choices generate a rhythmic, percussive effect that mirrors the chaotic force of the earthquake itself, "a one solid movement originated in the bowels of the earth" (101). Accordingly, this accumulation of *-ing* verbs produces a sonic and kinetic impression, evoking the relentless, pounding sensation of the tremors and reinforcing the embodied experience of ongoing disruption. This connotation is even transferred to the disruption, as Gran Pa' heard "the creaking and wrenching of wood" (101), "the bending and straining of metal all around" (101) and "a street wall [...] bending and twisting and tumbling down" (102).

Overall, the human loss was enormous. Gran Pa' recounts that the earthquake killed two of his sisters and two of his aunts, "crashed" (101) by the bedrooms' fall as the house "shook violently" (101). His mother reacted as best she could: "praying, while still holding on to us and moving towards the door" (101), to reach the outdoors. The scene outside, however, is described in apocalyptic terms. The rendered picture is that of hell, with "mysterious outbreaks of fire" (103), "the back yard [...] cracked open" (102), and buildings, like the St. Parish Church and the many shops, "collapsing, crushing people till the shouts stopped" (103). Even the population of Kingston is reduced to a condition evocative of the souls of the damned: not merely "dying" (103), but also "running wild" (103), "crying and cursing" (103). Moreover, the "horror" (111) is further underscored by the image of the injured and dying, "lying in the gutters, [...] groaning and writhing with pain from their injuries" (103). Yet, even for those who have survived the initial devastation, safety remains something unattainable, as "[q]uite a lot died some time afterwards from pneumonia and diseases caused by the side effect of catastrophe and by the fires" (107).

After the description of this seemingly endless suffering, Gran Pa's tale ends on a bitter note. The 1907 "catastrophe" is ultimately summarized with grim irony: "all of this upheaval, the suffering, the deaths, and the mess, had been caused by an earthquake that lasted no more than between fifteen and twenty seconds" (106). According to Gran Pa, the government estimated the cost of recovery to be around 30 million US dollars, a figure that "can little compensate for the hundreds and hundreds of people [who] had died" (107).

4. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, Salkey's *Earthquake* transforms the 1907 Kingston disaster into a profound meditation on intergenerational trauma transmission and the ethics of disaster communication. Through Gran Pa's internal struggle over whether and how to share his catastrophic memories with his grandchildren, the novel illuminates a fundamental tension within disaster education. In his narrative, Salkey argues for the preparation of vulnerable member of the population, such as children, through honest acknowledgement of geological risks, while ensuring such knowledge remains psychologically and linguistically accessible. Salkey's nuanced exploration also rejects both sanitised narratives and paralysing fear, demonstrating that effective disaster preparedness transcends mere scientific literacy to encompass culturally sensitive storytelling that honours both historical truth and emotional resilience. By weaving together personal testimony, collective memory, and pedagogical

responsibility, the novella reveals how traumatic experiences can be thus transformed into forms of protective wisdom.

Bibliography

Brown, Charles W. "The Jamaica Earthquake." *The Popular Science Monthly*, May, 1907, pp. 387-403. https://books.google.it/books?id=diMDAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=it&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false. Accessed 17 June 2025.

Chislett, Dick. "The 1907 Earthquake." *The Jamaica Reader. History, Culture, Politics*, edited by D. Paton and M. J. Smiths, Duke UP, 2021, pp. 199-202.

Fuller, Myron L. "Notes on the Jamaica Earthquake." *The Journal of Geology*, vol. 15, no. 7, 1907, pp. 696-721.

Hall, Ralph C. "Saw Kingston's Days of Terror." *The New York Times*, Janauary 20, 1907.

Salkey, Andrew. *Earthquake*. Oxford UP, 1970.

Avalon-Cullen, Cheila, et al. "Big Data, Small Island: Earth Observations for Improving Flood and Landslide Risk Assessment in Jamaica." *Geosciences*, vol. 13, no. 3, Mar. 2023, p. 64. <https://doi.org/10.3390/geosciences13030064>. Accessed 17 June 2025.

Pérez Diaz, Enrique. "Central and South America and the Caribbean." *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, edited by P. Hunt, Routledge, 1996, pp. 870-881. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203168127>. Accessed 17 June 2025.

Scott Parish, Susan. "Mediating Disaster, or a History of the Novel." *Critical Disaster Studies*, edited by J. A. C. Remes and A. Horowitz, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021, pp. 133-148.

"Significant Earthquake Information." <https://www.ngdc.noaa.gov/hazel/view/hazards/earthquake/event-more-info/2801>. Accessed 17 June 2025.

Created: 2025-06-11 | Last Updated: 2026-01-09