

Culture shock

Award-winning Christchurch journalist Amanda Cropp captured at a very personal level the trials and triumphs of a city struggling through adversity.

WHEN A DEADLY EARTHQUAKE jolted the Christchurch area on 22 February last year, Amanda Cropp's instincts were torn. The newshound in her wanted to head straight into the city to report on the aftermath of the second major quake to shake the region. But as a parent and partner, "it didn't seem like the right thing to do". In the end she decided to stay where she felt she was needed most – in the quake-scarred Sumner villa she shares with her husband Mark and two teenage sons Ben and Nic, then 15 and 14. "Me not being there wasn't going to make a difference [to the news coverage] but it would make a big difference to my family," she says. "Mark had to go to work; I really had to stay."

Then The Australian Women's Weekly called and asked her to keep a post-quake diary which would be published in the magazine. Suddenly the award-winning journalist and author had an earthquake assignment that wouldn't take her away from her family – and French exchange student, Martin, who was staying with them. "I was really grateful," she says.

“IT'S LIKE GOING OUT AND COMING HOME AND FINDING EVERYTHING'S MOVED. YOU COME BACK AND YOU CAN'T FIND ANYTHING AT ALL.”

"I was desperate to do something but felt really torn. I needed something to focus on. Diary writing wasn't new to me and I think it really helped me to cope."

Amanda started keeping a record of her family's life in the quake zone. She had no power or water and the roads were "unbelievably terrible" but she had her notebooks and "there's something about writing things down".

She admits to becoming "slightly obsessive" about keeping the diary to the point that her family made her promise not to bring it on their weekend away to the West Coast. "I hid it," she says. "I'd write in it in the loo."

Amanda's entries covering the 20 days following the quake were published in the April 2011 issue of The Australian Women's Weekly under the headline, *Diary of a Disaster*. It chronicled her family's daily struggles – having to queue for five hours for fresh water, digging latrines, weeping over the newspaper images of their shattered city ... It also gave readers an insight into the resilience and spirit of Cantabrians.

After the story appeared, Amanda was surprised by people's reactions to it. "It was the comments from readers; they said they loved it," says Amanda. "There was a woman on the PTA who said she read it again and again." So she decided

to keep the diary going and to turn the entries into a book. *Shaken, Not Stirred: Family Survival in a Quake Zone* is the result. It is a journey through the aftermath of a disaster, with its mixture of the tragic, the poignant and the just plain funny. The book winds up with an entry for 4 September 2011, the year anniversary of the first major Canterbury quake.

It is also the story of a family whose day-to-day existence has altered beyond recognition. Amanda calls this the "new normal" for many Cantabrians. "There are thousands and thousands who may not have been injured or seriously traumatised but whose lives have been irrevocably changed." These days wine bottles are no longer stored on top of the pantry (they "rain down" during quakes and aftershocks) and Amanda still can't bring herself to park in mall multi-storey carparks.

After more than 8000 aftershocks she feels "a bit quaked out". And navigating around post-quake Christchurch is "like going out and coming back home and finding everything has been moved. You come back and you can't find anything at all.

"It will be really nice to go for a drive and not to see anything fluoro orange at all ... We've got a long road ahead of us." ■
For an exclusive extract from *Shaken, not Stirred* and details about where to buy Amanda's book, turn the page.

