

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Three Cups of Tea

By Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin

Introduction

The inspiring account of one man's campaign to build schools in the most dangerous, remote, and anti- American reaches of Asia.

In 1993 Greg Mortenson was the exhausted survivor of a failed attempt to ascend K2, an American climbing bum wandering emaciated and lost through Pakistan's Karakoram Himalaya. After he was taken in and nursed back to health by the people of an impoverished Pakistani village, Mortenson promised to return one day and build them a school. From that rash, earnest promise grew one of the most incredible humanitarian campaigns of our time—Greg Mortenson's one-man mission to counteract extremism by building schools, especially for girls, throughout the breeding ground of the Taliban.

Award-winning journalist David Oliver Relin has collaborated on this spellbinding account of Mortenson's incredible accomplishments in a region where Americans are often feared and hated. In pursuit of his goal, Mortenson has survived kidnapping, fatwas issued by enraged mullahs, repeated death threats, and wrenching separations from his wife and children. But his success speaks for itself. At last count, his Central Asia Institute had built fifty-five schools. *Three Cups of Tea* is at once an unforgettable adventure and the inspiring true story of how one man really is changing the world—one school at a time.

(<http://www.paperbackswap.com>)

About the Author

Greg Mortenson was born in Minnesota in 1957. He grew up on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro, Tanzania (1958 to 1973). His father Dempsey, co-founded Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center (KCMC) www.kcmc.ac.tz a teaching hospital, and his mother, Jerene, founded the International School Moshi www.ismoshi.org. He served in the U.S. Army in Germany (1977-1979), where he received the Army Commendation Medal, and graduated from the University of South Dakota in 1983. In July 1992, Mortenson's sister, Christa, died from a massive seizure after a lifelong struggle with epilepsy on the eve of a trip to visit Dysersville, Iowa, where the baseball movie, *Field of Dreams*, was filmed in a cornfield. To honor his sister's memory, in 1993, Mortenson climbed Pakistan's K2, the world's second highest mountain in the Karakoram range. While recovering from the climb in a village called Korphe, Mortenson met a group of children sitting in the dirt writing with sticks in the sand, and made a promise to help them build a school. From that rash promise, grew a remarkable humanitarian campaign, in which Mortenson has dedicated his life to promote education, especially for girls, in remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. As of 2009, Mortenson has established over 90 schools in rural and often volatile regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which provide education to over 34,000 children, including 24,000 girls, where few education opportunities existed before. Mortenson is a living hero to rural communities of Afghanistan and Pakistan, where he has gained the trust of Islamic leaders, military commanders, government officials and tribal chiefs from his tireless effort to champion education, especially for girls.

(threecupsoftea.com)

Author Interview

Q: K2 is one of the most difficult, dangerous mountains in the world to climb. How did you get into climbing? What did you do to prepare for this adventure?

A: Mortenson: I grew up on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania, East Africa from 1958 to 1973, where my father founded Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center and my mother started Moshi International school. It was paradise for an ideal childhood. As a child, I could always see the giant massif of Kilimanjaro (Africa's highest mountain 19,342 ft.) out my bedroom window, and longed to climb it. For my twelfth birthday, my father let me climb Kilimanjaro. In October 1969, at age eleven, I climbed Kilimanjaro with another eleven year old, Kevin Dawson, with one guide—we gagged and puked our way all the way to the summit. We were the youngest children to ever reach the summit until thirty years later. That began my love for the mountains. To climb K2 in 1993 took a massive commitment, financially, physically and mentally. I spent a year preparing for it, had to raise about \$10,000, train over 4 hours a day, and commit all my time to this.

Q: How did the funding for the schools come about?

A: Mortenson: It took a tremendous effort. When I returned home after K2 in late 1993, I needed to raise \$12,000 to build a school, but had no clue how to do it. I went to the local library and looked up the names and addresses of hundreds of wealthy people and celebrities. At the time I was computer illiterate, so I first hand-typed 580 letters asking them for help. Only one person, Tom Brokaw, the newscaster, replied with a \$100 check. Then I wrote 16 grants, which were all turned down. Finally, I sold everything I owned, including my climbing gear, car, and cashed in my retirement policy. For the first two years, I was essentially homeless and gave up everything I had to get this off the ground. By spring of 1994, I had only raised about \$3,000, and was frustrated. My mother, Jerene, who was the principal at Westside Elementary School in River Falls, Wisconsin, invited me to spend a couple days with the 600 students there. A fourth grader named Jeffrey, and two teachers started a "Pennies for Pakistan" drive after I left, which I did not think much about. Within six weeks, the Westside children had raised 62,340 pennies! Their pennies eventually inspired adults to give, but it was really children who started all this.

Q: How many schools have you established in Pakistan and Afghanistan?

A: Mortenson: Sixty four schools in total, which have helped over 26,000 children, including 16,000 females. with education. There are fifty-five in Pakistan and eight in Afghanistan. A dozen more are under construction. We could have many more schools if we worked in urban or easy to access areas, but most of our efforts are focused in remote, rural, difficult to access and underserved regions, where children and especially girls are deprived of education. In some areas, our nonprofit organization, Central Asia Institute, is the only foreign aid group there.

Q: What can others do to help in this cause?

A: Mortenson: Be aware that education is a very effective, utilitarian way to bring profound change and stability in a society, and it only cost about \$1 monthly to get a rural child educated in Pakistan or Afghanistan. In 2000, the United Nations proposed a fifteen year Millennium plan to get all the world's 115 million (age 5-9) and 45 million (age 10-15) children literate. The external donated cost would only be an estimated \$6 to 8 billion annually (in addition to \$22 billion given by the countries themselves) for 15 years. Last year, the U.S. spent a total of \$94.2 billion in Iraq for the war on terror, which would have almost achieved the entire global literacy compliance in a year!

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Reviews

Three Cups of Tea is one of the most remarkable adventure stories of our time. Greg Mortenson's dangerous and difficult quest to build schools in the wildest parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan is not only a thrilling read, it's proof that one ordinary person, with the right combination of character and determination, really can change the world."
– Tom Brokaw

"Greg Mortenson represents the best of America. He's my hero. And after you read *Three Cups of Tea*, he'll be your hero, too." – U.S. Representative Mary Bono (R-Calif.)

"*Three Cups of Tea* is beautifully written. It is also a critically important book at this time in history. The governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan are both failing their students on a massive scale. The work Mortenson is doing, providing the poorest students with a balanced education, is making them much more difficult for the extremist madrassas to recruit." – Ahmed Rashid, best-selling author of *Taliban: Militant Islam and Oil in Central Asia* and *Descent into Chaos*.

"A Template for Peace" – *Bloomsbury Review*

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Further Reading

Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul by Tracy Kidder

Loving Frank: A Novel by Nancy Horan

The Help by Kathryn Stockett

The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story by Diane Ackerman

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. There is a telling passage about Mortenson's change of direction at the start of the book: "One evening, he went to bed by a yak dung fire-- a mountaineer who'd lost his way, and one morning, by the time he'd shared a pot of butter tea with his hosts and laced up his boots, he'd become a humanitarian who'd found a meaningful path to follow for the rest of his life." What made Mortenson particularly ripe for such a transformation? Has anything similar happened in your own life?
2. Relin gives a "warts and all" portrait of Mortenson, showing him as a hero but also as a flawed human being with some exasperating traits. Talk about the methods Relin chose to write about Mortenson's character—his choice of details, his perspective, the way he constructs scenes. Is Mortenson someone you'd like to get to know, work with, have as a neighbor or friend?
3. At the heart of the book is a powerful but simple political message: we each as individuals have the power to change the world, one cup of tea at a time. Yet the book powerfully dramatizes the obstacles in the way of this philosophy: bloody wars waged by huge armies, prejudice, religious extremism, cultural barriers. What do you think of the "one cup of tea at a time" philosophy? Do you think Mortenson's vision can work for lasting and meaningful change?
4. Have you ever known anyone like Mortenson? Have you ever had the experience of making a difference yourself through acts of generosity, aid, or leadership?
5. The Balti people are fierce yet extremely hospitable, kind yet rigid, determined to better themselves yet stuck in the past. Discuss your reactions to them and other groups that Mortenson tries to help.
6. After Haji Ali's family saves Greg's life, he reflects that he could never "imagine discharging the debt he felt to his hosts in Korphe." Discuss this sense of indebtedness as key to Mortenson's character. Why was Mortenson compelled to return to the region again and again? In your opinion, does he repay his debt by the end of the book?

7. References to paradise run throughout the book—Mortenson’s childhood home in Tanzania, the mountain scenery, even Berkeley, California, are all referred to as “paradise.” Discuss the concept of paradise, lost and regained, and how it influences Mortenson’s mission.
8. Mortenson’s transition from climbing bum to humanitarian hero seems very abrupt. However, looking back, it’s clear that his sense of mission is rooted in his childhood, the values of his parents, and his relationship with his sister Christa. Discuss the various facets of Mortenson’s character—the freewheeling mountain climber, the ER nurse, the devoted son and brother, and the leader of a humanitarian cause. Do you view him as continuing the work his father began?
9. “I expected something like this from an ignorant village mullah, but to get those kinds of letters from my fellow Americans made me wonder whether I should just give up,” Mortenson remarked after he started getting hate mail in the wake of September 11th. What were your reactions to the letters Mortenson received?
10. The authors write that “the Balti held the key to a kind of uncomplicated happiness that was disappearing in the developing world.” This peaceful simplicity of life seems to be part of what attracts Mortenson to the villagers. Discuss the pros and cons of bringing “civilization” to the mountain community.

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