

***Three Cups of Tea:***  
***One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time***  
by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin  
(New York: Penguin Books, 2007)

## **Authors**

Born in 1963, David Oliver Relin graduated from Vassar and went on to the Teaching/Writing Fellowship at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Since his graduation, Relin has used his writing skills to advocate for child welfare around the world, including a 1992 bicycle trip around Vietnam and features on school shootings, ecstasy abuse, child soldiers and teenage imprisonment. He is currently a Contributing Editor for *Parade* and was Senior News Editor for *react*, which won the National Magazine Award for General Excellence under his tenure. His collaboration with Greg Mortenson on *Three Cups of Tea* has garnered many awards, such as the 2007 Kiriya Prize, the 2007 Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Book of the Year, Time Magazine Asia Book of the Year, People Magazine Critic's Choice, and a BookSense Notable Title. Relin has also recently set up a website ([www.davidoliverrelin.com](http://www.davidoliverrelin.com)) where he hopes to interact with readers and provide discussion questions and other book club support.

Greg Mortenson was born in 1958 in Tanzania, where his parents were teachers and missionaries. After moving back to the United States with his parents, Mortenson served as an army medic and then graduated from the University of South Dakota with degrees in nursing and chemistry. After the death of his sister, Mortenson, a mountain climber, decided to climb K2 as a tribute to her memory. He failed this attempt, and wandered into the remote Pakistani village of Korphe. Moved by his experience in Korphe, he went on to promise to build the village its first school. Since that time, he founded the Central Asia Institute and builds schools throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. More of Mortenson's biography can be found in the summary of the book.

## **Summary**

In September of 1993, Greg Mortenson, a climber and emergency room nurse, fails to climb the Himalayan mountain known as K2, an attempt he was making in honor of his recently deceased sister. Separated from his climbing group and his Balti guide (Pakistani people who live in the mountains and serve as guides, much like the Sherpa of Tibet and Nepal), Mortenson wanders into the small mountain village of Korphe. The residents of Korphe care for Mortenson, who is disoriented, exhausted, and dehydrated. In return, he gives them most of his climbing gear and treats a number of the villagers' cuts and minor injuries with his first aid kit. When he asks the leader of the village, Haji Ali, to see the village school, Ali shows him an open ledge where eighty-two children sit scratching multiplication tables in the dirt with sticks. Korphe has no school building, and they share the teacher with a neighboring school. Touched by the children's desire to learn and how much they remind him of his beloved sister, Mortenson promises Haji Ali he will return to Korphe and build them a school.

While working shifts as an emergency room nurse in the U.S., Mortenson writes 580 letters to famous figures asking for help raising the \$12,000 he needs for his school. He receives only one reply. A doctor Mortenson knows suggests he contact Dr. Jean Hoerni, a retired Swiss-born physicist and climber. Hoerni, impressed by Mortenson's cause, writes Mortenson a check for \$12,000. Mortenson returns to Pakistan and, with the help of a couple of key people, buys all the materials he needs and returns to Korphe. Instead of returning to cheers and a village ready to build a school, Mortenson finds that Haji Ali wants him to

build them a bridge first to connect their remote village to the rest of Pakistan. Mortenson returns to the States to ask Hoerni for additional money for a bridge.

With the Korphe bridge and school built, a now-married Mortenson expands his mission. What had been a desire to build one school in one small village in Pakistan turns into a mission to build schools all over Pakistan. With money for an endowment from Hoerni and help from the friends he has made in Pakistan, Mortenson creates the Central Asia Institute (CAI) and travels around to small villages in Pakistan, planning additional schools. Mortenson also spends his money and energy on other small projects that will have a big impact.

Mortenson spends almost every dollar the CAI takes in. He travels around the country, asking for donations and receiving very little in return besides suspicion. Just as Mortenson feels that no one is listening to his speeches on the importance of girls' education as a way to combat extremism, reporter Kevin Fedarko writes a story about him for *Parade* magazine. Instead of hate mail and struggles for money, words of encouragement and donations come pouring in from every corner of the United States. With his Institute's new wealth, Mortenson is able to give himself and all his employees in Pakistan a raise. He is also able to move on to his newest venture: building schools in remote regions of Afghanistan near the Pakistani border.

## Questions

Discussion points for narrative nonfiction are not limited to such questions as agreeing or disagreeing with the author, debating the book's accuracy, or taking a stand on polemical issues. Just as for fiction, readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one reason we find book discussions such a rewarding activity. While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word.

### What role does Haji Ali play in the book?

Haji Ali, the uneducated leader of Korphe, serves as a father-figure for Mortenson, whose own father died very young. This is never clearer to Mortenson than at Haji Ali's death: "His own father's heart hadn't let him live beyond forty-eight, far too soon for Mortenson to ask enough of the questions that life kept piling up around him. And now, the irreplaceable Balti man who had helped to fill some of that hollowness, who had offered so many lessons he might never have learned, moldered in the ground at his wife's side" (p. 260). Haji Ali teaches Mortenson many of the lessons his own father never lived long enough to pass on.

Respect and the importance of relationships are the main themes of this book, and they are part of what Haji Ali teaches Mortenson. He tells Mortenson, "If you want to thrive in Baltistan, you must respect our ways. . . . The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die" (p. 150). Haji Ali instructs Mortenson to develop relationships with a village leader before beginning any schools and, as a better tactic, to work only on schools where he already has a relationship with the villagers and local leader. These relationships will keep Mortenson safe as he travels around Pakistan.

Respect and relationships go together throughout the book. One of the reasons Mortenson succeeds is that he is always respectful of the variety of cultures around him. Throughout Mortenson's travels, the author highlights the many times Mortenson shows respect for the people around him and is able to build relationships upon that respect. The Pakistanis Mortenson works with respect him because he shows them respect first. On page 62, Mortenson learns to pray from the tailor who makes his *shalwar kamiz*. When

asked if he is a Muslim, Mortenson's response is "I respect Islam." This respect for the religion is enough for the tailor to teach Mortenson how to wash himself, face Mecca, and pray. Moreover, after demonstrating this respect, Mortenson is invited back to the tailor's to improve his praying and build a relationship with the tailor. The knowledge Mortenson gains through the tailor serves him in many difficult situations

The lessons of Haji Ali serve Mortenson well throughout the book. By showing respect to everyone around him, Mortenson builds relationships that will get him out of many difficult spots, including one kidnapping and two *fatwas*. By learning the languages and customs of the people with whom he works, including Taliban leaders, Mortenson gains access to places and people most other Americans cannot. By showing respect, Mortenson receives respect in return and is able to work on his mission in some of the most dangerous places on earth for an American.

### **How does Mortenson change throughout the book?**

Mortenson begins the book a lost soul and a man without direction. He is working his way through college after the Army when his father dies. He is working odd-hour nursing jobs to fund his climbing hobby when his beloved sister dies. After spending most of his life in Africa, he remained "out of sorts with American life" (p. 39). Relin writes about Mortenson as a man who goes through the motions of living, never truly without friends, family, and coworkers, but never fully integrated into the group either. Especially after his sister's death, Mortenson has no responsibilities other than to keep himself fed and clothed. As a nurse, he cares for people as part of his job, but Relin implies working as a nurse is not a mission for Mortenson, but only a way to earn money to eat. The one mission Mortenson creates for himself as a young man, finding a cure for epilepsy, turns into a disappointment as he soon decides a cure is probably impossible.

The force of his mission to found schools in Pakistan changes Mortenson from man adrift to a man with roots. When Mortenson starts up K2, his only responsibility is to leave beads on the summit in honor of his deceased sister. The gesture is a solitary one, and his only true obligation in the quest is to himself. After his rescue by the people of Korphe and his return to the United States, Mortenson has the weight of a village on his shoulders. As the book progresses, the number of people he wants to help grows exponentially. Mortenson founds the nonprofit Central Asia Institute and collects employees thousands of miles away from his home. He has to live up to Jean Hoerni's first instruction, sent with the first twelve thousand dollar check: "Don't screw up" (p. 55).

Mortenson also begins to develop closer relationships with those around him. He develops a romantic relationship with a coworker, and then marries and has children. These close family relationships are accompanied by the many close relationships he develops in Pakistan and the United States, including those with Haji Ali, Hoerni, his board members and his Pakistani employees. Rather than flitting in and out of people's lives, Mortenson becomes a permanent fixture in the lives of many and lets many become permanent figures within his.

Mortenson may have originally built his first school in Korphe out of a desire to help people who helped him, but he continues building schools because he has adopted Pakistan and its people as his friends and family. His relationships continue to expand as he moves his mission into Afghanistan. As Haji Ali explained, Mortenson has shared tea with Central Asia and her people, and they have become his family. These relationships give Mortenson a direction in life he had never had before.

### **What does failure mean in *Three Cups of Tea*?**

*Three Cups of Tea* begins with failure. Mortenson walks down from K2, lost and dejected after having failed to leave his sister's beads on the top of the mountain. He begins his mission writing 580 letters, from

which he only receives one check, and “all sixteen of his grant applications had been rejected” (p. 52). After he gathers his materials for the Korphe school, he learns he should have built a bridge first, and when he travels around the United States speaking to audiences about his mission, he speaks to empty chairs.

Mortenson could have given up at any of these points. He could have left Korphe never to return, and the villagers would not have known where to find him. He could have left Korphe with the building supplies on the other side of the river, with no bridge. He could have stopped giving speeches to empty REI stores. Yet, through each of these episodes, Mortenson and his mission become stronger.

Each failure in the book is a moment when Mortenson manages to create something greater. From his failure to climb K2, Mortenson finds his second home of Korphe, Pakistan. By building the bridge to Korphe, Mortenson helps relieve the isolation of many women from their families in other villages. After speaking at one REI store with many more empty chairs than full, Mortenson finds a personal check for twenty thousand dollars.

Failure, in *Three Cups of Tea*, is never the end. It is a call for Mortenson to work harder and, in the end, get something greater. Throughout the book, Mortenson’s dogged determination to keep going through all hardships is one of the constants. The importance of turning failure into success is clear when Mortenson is asked to speak with Jon Krakauer in front of a picture of K2: “Here, in front of scores of the world’s leading alpinists, was his failure, projected high as a three-story house for thousands of people to see. So why did he feel like his life had reached a new summit?” (p. 277).

### **Why does Jahan become so important to Mortenson’s mission in Pakistan and Afghanistan?**

Mortenson insists that all village elders sign a pledge to increase the enrollment of girls by ten percent a year in return for support from the CAI. He explains:

Once you educate the boys, they tend to leave the villages and go search for work in the cities. . . . But the girls stay home, become leaders in the community, and pass on what they’ve learned. If you really want to change a culture, to empower women, improve basic hygiene and health care, and fight high rates of infant mortality, the answer is to educate girls. (p. 209)

As an Afghan woman says, when asked about her *burkha*, “We women of Afghanistan see the light through education. . . . Not through this or that hole in a piece of cloth” (p. 289).

This philosophy is based on the work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen who argues that a culture can change “by giving its girls the tools to grow up educated so they can help themselves” (p. 234). Mortenson travels around Bangladesh and the Philippines visiting rural developments and learning lessons to take back to Pakistan. These trips “fired [Mortenson] up to fight for girls’ education in Pakistan” (p. 234).

This mission and Mortenson’s dreams are personified in Jahan, Haji Ali’s granddaughter. Jahan “graduated from school and was the first educated woman in a valley of three thousand people. She didn’t defer to anyone. . . . [she had] a proposal, in English, to better herself, and improve the life of her village” (p. 300). With Jahan’s education, all the goals of the CAI and the economic work of Amartya Sen come to fruition. Jahan can now dream big and dream more. She no longer wants “to be just a health worker” (p. 313). As she says, “I want to be such a woman that I can start a hospital and be an executive, and look over all the health problems of all the women in Braldu” (p. 313). Jahan not only accomplishes Mortenson’s goals for education, but her dreams also make the sacrifices of her grandfather a “small price to pay” (p. 313).

## **What characteristics of Greg Mortenson make him able to succeed on his mission?**

Greg Mortenson is a man of “pure tenacity and determination” (p. 229). Sure of his mission, Mortenson lives out of his car, leaves his pregnant wife behind to travel around the world, and risks kidnapping by violent militia groups. Tenacity and determination allow him to overcome the many setbacks and failures he meets with during every project. Along with his stubbornness, Mortenson seems to know when to turn down money and what tactics not to take. He is determined to build his schools, but will not pay a bribe to end a *fatwa*. He desperately needs money, but he will not take any from the American government for fear villages will not want his schools anymore and his mission will be tainted by the association with a foreign government. Mortenson’s determination works because he seems to know where to draw the line.

Another characteristic his wife comments on as “the essence of Greg” is his desire to fade into the background and let his work speak for itself (p. 195). This helps him overcome two *fatwas*, a kidnapping, and a venture into unknown parts of Afghanistan. Sadhar Kahn celebrates the arrival of Mortenson, not because Mortenson carries the card of Afghanistan’s former king, but because Kahn has already heard of the work Mortenson has done in Pakistan. Khan knows Mortenson is not setting up schools to teach Western values because news of Mortenson’s work has traveled across country borders, from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Mortenson does not need to put his stamp on the schools in the form of a name, a plaque, or a portrait. He is known as trustworthy because people know his work.

And lastly, no one could succeed at this mission were they not willing to abandon their Western standards of cleanliness and comfort. Mortenson does not merely “put up with” blankets that smell of goat, sleeping on hard floors, and relentless cold. He seems not to notice what most Westerners would consider deprivations at all. He never has to worry about accidentally revealing his disgust at a smelly blanket because he does not feel it in the first place. Mortenson’s mission requires an ability to live without Western comforts and that comes naturally to him.

## **What changes about Mortenson’s mission after September 11, 2001?**

One of the most shocking parts of the books is the picture of Mortenson, his wife, and his child with automatic weapons on the Khyber Pass. They send that picture with Christmas cards and the phrase, “Peace on Earth.” The Mortensons’ big smiles and their baby’s hand on the gun clench the gut. After September 11, 2001, Mortenson’s message and mission is not just fighting poverty, but also fighting terrorism with moderate schools run by and for the local people in every village of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mortenson repeatedly confronts misguided impressions and ignorance about Pakistan and its people. This comes in the form of death threats through the mail and the meetings he has with American government officials when they offer him money to build schools near *madrassas*. As Mortenson travels around the country, speaking out about his work to both governmental and public audiences, he wonders, “if anyone was listening?” (p. 296). Mortenson calls for the American government to follow bombs with what news organizations commonly call “winning the battle for hearts and minds.”

His conversations with both his employees and his audience take on a more political air after September 11. Rather than just being about poverty and education, Mortenson is now required to talk about the effects of extreme religion and violence. Brigadier General Bashir Bas sums Mortenson’s new message up best when he says, “You have to attack the source of your enemy’s strength. In America’s case, that’s not Osama or Saddam or anyone else. The enemy is ignorance” (p. 310).

## How do the mountains both constrain and improve the lives of Korphe?

The Balti are ancestrally related to the Sherpa, the people famous for their work with climbers at Mt. Everest. Their languages are distantly related, and their body shapes, climbing skills, and ability to live in extreme high altitudes have led the land to be called “Tibet of the Apricots” (p. 30). Visitors have imagined Baltistan as a type of Shangri-La in the mountains, where people live simple lives with few problems in view of the most majestic mountain range on earth.

Mortenson originally holds the same naïve views of the Balti, until he comes to stay with them. Instead of just protecting the Balti from the corrupting effects of the modern world, the mountains also isolate the people from basic health care and nutritious varieties of food. People suffer from cataracts and goiters and the children have ginger-colored hair indicative of malnutrition. “One out of every three Korphe children died before reaching their first birthday” (p. 30). The mountains and the river not only isolate Korphe from medicine and economic development, they also separate families. “If a bride leaves an isolated village like Korphe, she knows she may never see her family again” (p. 141).

And yet, the mountain life has benefits, too. The mountains restrict the Balti, but they provide richly in other ways. Local animals such as the yak and the ibex, which is a kind of mountain goat, supply the villagers with food, and their hides and horns are used to make many of the other necessities of life. The mountains are also an important means of employment outside of subsistence farming for many of the Balti men. With the help of Mortenson and a porter training school teaching subjects like basic mountain rescue, the Balti men are able to ask for higher salaries and lower their injury rate, further increasing the standard of living for their communities and, especially, their children.

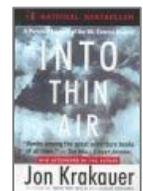
Moreover, the mountains bring Mortenson to Korphe, and then to other villages where he builds his schools. The lure of the mountains and the impact it had on many Western men provides Mortenson with an audience of mountain adventurers such as Hoerni and Krakauer to donate money to his schools. The mountains make life difficult in remote Korphe, but they also open up possibilities not available elsewhere in Pakistan.

## Further Reading

### Nonfiction

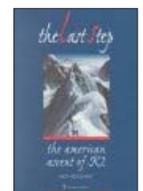
Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* (1999)

In this first-hand account, Krakauer tells the story of a 1996 Mt. Everest summit that left eight experienced climbers dead. Krakauer weaves a history of previous Mt. Everest disasters and successes through his painful retelling of a climbing tragedy.



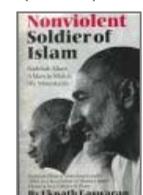
Rick Ridgeway, *The Last Step: The American Ascent of K2* (1980)

In 1978, fourteen men and women became the first Americans to climb K2, the world’s most dangerous mountain. Through sixty-seven days on the mountain, the group not only fights the weather and treacherous mountain conditions, they are still faced with the squabbles that confront all groups, including a love triangle and cliques which threaten to bring the expedition to a halt.



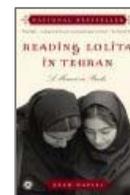
Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan: A Man to Match His Mountains* (1985)

Badshah Khan led the world’s largest nonviolent army, a force of some 100,000 “servants of God,” was nominated for the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, and was a close friend of Gandhi. He is also largely forgotten to Western history. Easwaran lovingly tells the story of a man who challenged Western ideals about Islam.



Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003)

Azar Nafisi, a professor in Tehran, invites seven of her brightest female students to her home in secret to read and discuss banned classics of Western literature. Intimately involved in women's education under a repressive government, Nafisi's work highlights both the importance of education and the interaction between life and literature.



## Fiction

Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (2003)

After a traumatic flight from his native Afghanistan, Amir settles down in America, until he is drawn back to Afghanistan to find the son of his best friend and right a wrong committed years before. This debut novel weaves the story of a deep friendship into the political and religious turmoil of Afghanistan's recent past.



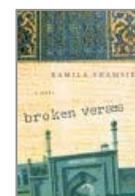
Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke* (2001)

After being reunited with his childhood friend Ozi, Daru begins an affair with Ozi's wife. Addicted to hashish and in love with his best friend's wife, Daru is shaken after seeing his friend kill a child during a hit-and-run accident. Full of sex, drugs, and violence, Hamid writes of the destructive effects of love and revenge during the Pakistan-India arms race. Mohsin Hamid, along with Kamila Shamsie, has been featured on NPR's program *Morning Edition* for his nuanced depictions of modern Pakistan.



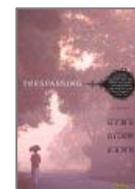
Kamila Shamsie, *Broken Verses* (2005)

Fourteen years after her activist mother's disappearance, Aasmaani receives a letter. Written in a code known only to Aasmaani, her mother, and her mother's deceased lover (a man known only as "the Poet"), the letter hints that the Poet is still alive. Shamsie weaves Pakistani fundamentalism, the war in Afghanistan, and the idea of political responsibility into this family mystery. Along with Mohsin Hamid, Shamsie was featured on the NPR program *Morning Edition* for her intimate stories of modern Pakistan.



Uzma Aslam Khan, *Trespassing* (2004)

Love and politics clash in this novel, set in 1990s Pakistan. Dia's mother encourages her to marry for love. Doomed to repeat history, she falls in love with American-educated Daanish, the son of her mother's lover. Because they are unable to navigate between Western education and traditional values, Dia and Daanish's love affair is tainted from the beginning.



*This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Jennifer Lohmann, a librarian at the Durham County Library in Durham, North Carolina.*

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