First Opinions: Learning for Real


*Kara Keeling*

*Three Cups of Tea: One Man’s Journey to Change the World…One Child at a Time, The Young Reader’s Edition* chronicles the humanitarian efforts of Greg Mortenson to build schools for children in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The original book, though written for adults, has children’s needs, abilities, and experiences at the heart of the story. Coming down from a failed attempt to scale K2, the second highest mountain on Earth, a sick
and disoriented Mortenson stumbled into Korphe, a small village in Baltistan, part of the Himalayan mountain region of Pakistan. The villagers cared for Mortenson, and he formed strong ties of respect and friendship with many of them, particularly the head man of the village, Haji Ali. Many of Korphe’s children were fascinated by their first acquaintance with a Westerner. When Mortenson asked to see their school, Haji Ali showed him seventy-eight boys and four girls kneeling in an open field, working their multiplication tables in the dirt, with no teacher for guidance. Haji Ali explained that the village had no school building, nor could they afford to pay a teacher daily, so the teacher came only three days a week. “I felt like my heart was being torn in two…I knew I had to do something,” Mortenson recalls. He promised Haji Ali he would return and build a school for the children of Korphe.

On his return to America, Mortenson discovered the difficulties of fund-raising to fulfill his promise. He had estimated the costs of the school at $12,000 before he left Pakistan. His mother, an elementary school principal, asked him to talk to her students about his plan. “It was hard to explain to adults why I wanted to help students in Pakistan,” he writes, “But the children got it right away. When they saw the pictures, they couldn’t believe that there was a place where children sat outside in cold weather and tried to hold classes without teachers. They decided to do something about it.” The students started a drive to collect pennies and eventually collected 62,345 of them: $623.40. “Children took the first step to build the school,” Mortenson writes, “And they did it with something that is basically worthless in our society—pennies. But pennies…can move mountains.”

Given the centrality of children to both Mortenson’s educational mission and the beginning of his fund-raising efforts, versions of his story aimed at young readers are a natural extension of the original book. Two have been produced, both in cooperation with Mortenson himself, a picture book for young readers, *Listen to the Wind: The Story of Dr. Greg and Three Cups of Tea*, by Greg Mortenson and Susan L. Roth, and *Three Cups of Tea: The Young Reader’s Edition*, by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, adapted by Sarah Thomson. Both books do a remarkable job in capturing Mortenson’s story in a fashion that young readers can easily comprehend.

*The Young Reader’s Edition* is extremely faithful to the original book; it offers a sensibly slimmed-down version of Mortenson’s life and experiences while showcasing the tremendous efforts required to build the first school in Korphe and subsequent schools in the area. Thomson works hard to avoid inculcating colonialist views in her young audience: this is not the story of the great white man who rescues benighted foreigners. Instead, she captures Mortenson’s respect for the people he works with, their intelligence, their culture, their abilities, and his hard-learned philosophy that he had far more to learn from the Balti than to teach them. One stand-out example comes when he finally arrives back in Pakistan ready to build the school and Haji Ali tells him that he needs to build a bridge first; Mortenson then realizes that without the bridge, they cannot transport the building materials across the chasm that isolates the village from any road. Another piv-
otal scene comes during the construction of the school, when Haji Ali takes Mortenson’s tools, locks them away, and tells him gently but firmly to shut his mouth because he is making everyone crazy by trying to run the construction site. Ali takes Greg home, makes tea for him, and tells him that sharing tea three times transforms a stranger into family: “Dr. Greg, you must make time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated. But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here a long time.” Mortenson calls it the most important lesson of his life: understanding that he could not build projects without first building relationships.

Thomson adds a number of aids for young readers: a glossary of terms (both foreign terms and unfamiliar English vocabulary), a timeline of Greg Mortenson’s life, a Reader’s Guide with discussion questions, an interview with Mortenson’s daughter Amira, and a section of color pictures to supplement the black and white photographs of the region and the Balti people Mortenson met and worked with that are sprinkled through the text, enabling readers to visualize the places and people the book is about.

Susan Roth’s *Listen to the Wind* shifts the narration of the story to the children of Korphe who tell the story of their lives before Mortenson arrived, the efforts to build the bridge and the school, and the celebration once it was finished. Roth also emphasizes the agency of the children in their own education: “We are the children of Korphe….We are learning in the school that we helped to build.” Roth uses appealing illustrations created as fabric and paper collages, an art form that she notes she shares with Balti women who recycle items in their clothing and art work. At the end of the book, maps illustrate the location of Korphe, and a series of photographs show the children of Korphe with Mortenson in the school they built.

Both books also suggest that young readers participate in the school-building process that Mortenson started: at the end, each refers readers to the Web site for Pennies for Peace. Anyone can collect pennies: in Pakistan, a penny buys a pencil; a dollar educates a child for a month. Mortenson’s schools started with children collecting pennies; what better way to involve and empower young readers to make a genuine difference in the world?

**About the Author**

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