

Southfield Public Library

Three cups of tea by Greg Mortenson

Discussion questions used at SPL -- July 2008

Disclaimer! There is some concern that many of the events in this book are fabricated. The issues were brought up by 60 Minutes and author Jon Krakauer in 2011. Here's a link to some background information <http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/04/17/three.cups.of.tea.controversy/index.html>

1. What sort of man is Greg Mortenson? Toss out some adjectives to describe him.
2. How did his living in Tanzania as a boy influence his life? How did his father and his mother influence his choices as a man?
3. Why do you think he was as restless as he was, before he found his mission in Pakistan?
4. Did you get any insight into the minds of mountain climbers? Why do you think they take the risks that they do?
5. Besides the fact that the villagers saved his life, what else drew Greg to Korphe?
6. How did Greg do in adapting to local customs? What were some of his mis-steps? Why do you think those were tolerated as they were?
7. What sort of things did he learn from the local people?
8. The custom of sharing three cups of tea with someone was charming – do we in the US have anything similar?
9. At the beginning, how would you rate his expectations? Reasonable, do-able? Too high? Why was he able to succeed?
10. What do you think the smartest thing was that Greg did? What was the most foolish? The most dangerous?
11. Why do you think his failed relationship with Marina was discussed as much as it was? Do you think she was talked about more than his wife? Could Greg have accomplished what he did without Tara?

12. Was he bringing progress to the villages he visited? Is progress always a good thing?
 13. An interesting quote on p. 120 about the success of a country - is it more about the Gross National Product or the Gross National Happiness? What do you think of that?
 14. From what you know of these countries from this book, can you compare the happiness of the U.S. to that of Pakistan? Afghanistan? How would you rate the happiness level in general of our country?
 15. Can you compare the value placed on education between the U.S and Afghanistan and Pakistan? Do you think education is a valid way to promote peace?
 16. What do you think of the notion that by educating girls you can change the world? Why does that work?
 17. Did you learn anything about the region's history? What about the many tribes? Do things in the Middle East make more sense to you now?
 18. There were a lot of serendipitous events in the book - from Greg meeting Tara, to finding sponsors for his quest, helicopters making emergency landings near his first school and more - what others can you think of? Do you think everything happens for a reason?
 19. Did your view of the people of the region change after reading this book?
 20. Did this book inspire you in anyway? Did it change your thinking in any way? Spur you to action?
 21. Would you recommend this book to someone?
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General Discussion Questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Three Cups of Tea

Discussion questions taken from Penguin Reading Group Guides -

http://www.us.penguin.com/static/rguides/us/three_cups_of_tea.html

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 how 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, or 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 the 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 11. What was your reaction to the letters Mortenson received?
10. Mortenson hits many bumps in the road—he's broke, his girlfriend dumps him, he is forced to build a bridge before he can build the school, his health suffers, and he drives his family crazy. Discuss his repeated brushes with failure and how they influenced your opinion of Mortenson and his efforts.
11. 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.
12. Much of the book is a meditation on what it means to be a foreigner assimilating with another culture. Discuss your own experiences with foreign cultures—things that you have learned, mistakes you have made, misunderstandings you have endured.
13. Did the book change your views toward Islam or Muslims? Consider the cleric Syed Abbas, and also the cleric who called a fatwa on Mortenson. Syed Abbas implores Americans to "look into our hearts and see that the great majority of us are not terrorists, but good and simple people." Discuss this statement. Has the book inspired you to learn more about the region?