

The Herald

News for those who served with the Peace Corps in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

MONTHLY ARCHIVES: APRIL 2013

Editor's note

Posted on [April 13, 2013](#) by [janetlee](#) | [2 comments](#)

By Janet Lee (Emdeber 1974-76)

The response from the readership to the last issue of *The Herald* was outstanding! There were 950 views the first day and 450 the second, the highest in *Herald* history. Readers obviously enjoyed reading the stories of the Travelers who participated in the Return to Ethiopia. E&E RPCVs may continue to connect to their fellow Volunteers and read time-sensitive announcements of interest by signing up and monitoring the "[Ethiopia and Eritrea Returned Peace Corps Volunteers](#)" Facebook page.

One aspect of these stories that struck me was the terrific connections that the RPCV Travelers made with current Volunteers, something that rang true for me throughout my recent journeys to Ethiopia. My connections with PCVs have been further expanded for me through introductions via email and Facebook and usually around the theme of libraries and early literacy. It was through the introduction from a current Volunteer that I "met" Jennifer Miller (Debre Markos, Addis Ababa 2011-) and became aware of the Early Grade Reading Center Project that ten communities of Volunteers had embarked upon, for which she was a most tenacious spokesperson. For some time I had been working on a Books for Africa project to collect a shipping container of books for Ethiopia, and Jennifer invited me to combine my efforts with a like-minded project that PCVs in Ethiopia were organizing as part of the Reading Center project. Had we not joined our projects together, mine might have stayed dormant forever. I like to think that inclusion of my project gave her project the boost it needed to increase the momentum at just the right time. In any event, I was able to observe the perseverance and determination of the group firsthand. Although there were ups and downs, frustrations, and waylaid truck drivers, (and funny stories along the way), it went amazingly well.

Jennifer, Daniel Thornton (Woliata-Soda), Megan Sievart (Injibara 2011-), Paul Voigt (Shambu 2011-) and Chad Miller (Debre Markos, Addis Ababa 2011-) reflect on their individual and group experiences in *If You Build It Will They Come? The Early Grade Reading Project*. This group of ambitious Volunteers from throughout Ethiopia rose to the challenge of securing a container of books through Books for Africa and distributing the books to various projects in their communities by working with local NGOs and community leaders. Through the use of individual fundraising and Peace Corps Partnership grants, there was virtually no overhead expense in their projects. This group has laid the foundation for future projects for incoming Volunteers to come. Hats off to their success.

We were introduced to RPCV Karen Dawn Speicher (Wukro, Bonga 1973–75) in Chuck Adams' (Bonga 2011-13) piece in the December issue of The Herald, "[The Spot in the Cow Field: An RPCV Returns to Ethiopia After 35 Years.](#)" Karen returns in this issue to relate her Return to Ethiopia quest to find a former student and friend in *Return to Ethiopia 2012: A Tribute to Fisseha Haileselassie, 1957-2012*. It is a touching story.

Alice Gosak (Harar 1964–67) has also been working on library and literacy projects in Ethiopia for a number of years and describes one such project at her former site of Harar in *Opening a Children's Library*. She teamed up with a fellow American teacher in fundraising and shipping books to the site. Congratulations to her on her hard work.

Speaking of libraries, I have just returned from the American Library Association Midwinter conference, where I am active in the International Sustainable Library Development Interest Group. ISLD was formed a number of years ago, when several librarians discovered that they were RPCVs from around the world. The group met informally for several years at lunch on the Saturday of each conference and decided that they would formalize and thus ISLD was formed. Among our group is Marcy Carrel (RPCV Ecuador) who works at the Information, Collections, and Exchange office at Peace Corps/Washington. Marcy has just put together a 227-page "Sustainable Library Development Package" with accompanying handouts. It can be found on the Peace Corps website along with many other wonderful resources by doing a search in the "[Index of Publications.](#)"

Joe Tenn's review of *The Lion of Judah in the New World* by Theodore M. Vestal. (Praeger, 2011) in the December issue of The Herald, persuaded me to pick up a copy. To my delight, I found the following tribute in the preface:

My friends in the Ethiopia and Eritrea Returned Peace Corps Volunteers have been a wonderful source of information — especially in their outstanding newsletter The Herald, edited by that nonpareil wordsmith Barry Hillenbrand.

Thank you Ted, for that ringing endorsement.

Please check out the Books section in this issue, which reviews books about Ethiopia or by E&E Peace Corps Volunteers.

Finally, a video by current Ethiopia Volunteers and staff has come to light. I am not sure that Ethiopia knew what hit it when these very talented Volunteers set foot on the land of 13 months of Sunshine. See Ethiopia G8 and their take on Gangnam Style:

Huruta Style: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhS-fjUAk_E&feature=youtu.be

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2 Comments

PCVS in Ethiopia

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If You Build It Will They Come?

THE EARLY GRADE READING CENTER PROJECT

by Jennifer Miller (Debre Markos, Addis Ababa 2011-)

THE EARLY GRADE READING CENTER PROJECT is focused on establishing accessible Reading Centers in kindergartens, primary schools, and public libraries where Peace Corps Volunteers are currently living and working. The concept is simple: If communities establish Early Grade Reading Centers, Ethiopian teachers and English language learners of all ages will directly benefit.

During our first three months at our sites, all Education Sector Volunteers completed a CENA Report (Community Educational Needs Assessment). We found that in many communities there was a critical need for English language books for beginning-level readers. In reality, most young children attending first grade in government primary schools lacked access to simple, high-quality reading materials and literacy activities that match their reading proficiency level in English as well as in their first language (which may be Amharic, Tigrinya, Afan Oromo, Awinya, and so on).

An Early Grade Reading Assessment conducted in Ethiopia in 2010 found that a significant percentage of children are illiterate in their first language; even those children who attend primary school for two or three years are not able to answer any comprehension questions after trying to read grade-level passages. One possible reason for this statistic is the lack of resources for learning to read. In addition, the same EGRA study found that most people in Ethiopia do not have any reading materials in their own homes.

For this reason, a group of Peace Corps Volunteers decided to work together on a project to bring English language books to our communities specifically targeting preschool, kindergarten, and primary students in grades 1 to 4. By creating Early Grade Reading Centers, it was our hope that Ethiopian children and their families will be able to experience the joys of reading.

The PCVs and communities who participated in this collaborative project were:

- Thor Hong — Abbi Addi, Tigray
- Laura Harrington — Bonga
- Jeff Hornyack and Blair Garnett — Bale-Robe
- Jennifer and Chad Miller — Debre Markos, Amhara
- Megan Sievert — Injibara-Awi Zone, Amhara
- Brendan Boland — Kemissie-Welo, Amhara
- Marie Agosta — Finote Selam, Amhara
- Paul Voigt — Shambu

- Daniel Thornton, Wolaita-Sodo
- J. D. Mitchell — Welkite-Gurage

In January of 2012, we started by raising funds to obtain a shipment of book from [Books for Africa](#). By July, our friends/family/schools from the US and around the world had donated to our project but we were \$2,000 short of our goal. On July 4th, we learned about a generous grant from Books for Africa that would complete all our fundraising if we agreed that the shipping container would leave the US in August. Of course we agreed.

We secured a project partnership with FIDO (Fayyaa Integrated Development Agency) and the container of books arrived in Addis Ababa in October, 2012. Nothing short of a miracle there! A total of 575 boxes of books were brought from the US through BFA to Ethiopia.

Communities were responsible for transporting the books from FIDO's office in Addis back to their schools.

In Debre Markos, we donated books to Early Grade Reading Centers (Mini-Libraries) in five Dibza cluster schools, five Negus Tekla Haimanot cluster schools, and three Biruh Tesfa cluster schools. We also donated books to start a lending library in the Negus Tekla Haimanot primary school. Other beneficiaries included Debre Markos University, two orphanages, the public library, The College of Teacher Education (CTE), and the CTE English Language Improvement Center .



575 boxes of books and volunteers at FIDO*
(Click for larger photo.)

Four members of our group have submitted reflections on their experiences with the projects and include the trials and tribulations of bringing literacy to Ethiopia, working with community leaders and teachers, and most importantly with the children.

*In the photo, from left to right:

Getachew Chane of FIDO, and PCVs Jennifer Miller (seated), Jeff Hornyak (back row, yellow shirt), Megan Sievert (seated), Brendan Boland (seated), Dan Thornton (standing, black shirt), JD Mitchell (standing, grey shirt), Thor Hong (standing, white shirt), Chad Miller (standing yellow shirt), Paul Voigt (seated on floor)

WHERE DOES THE FUTURE COME FROM?

By Daniel Thornton (Wolaita-Sodo)

The future is such an elusive thing constructed on inaccuracies, hope and raw emotion. So why is it that we insist on envisioning mammoth structures that would be built on shaky ground, at best, when simply starting with an outline will do? I suppose that I see the future as a series of streams, unique to each of us and flowing in every direction. A select few of these streams will become raging rivers that cascade through time, while

others are simply streams content to drift quietly along. Some of us will carve the landscape ahead while others will be defined by it.

A short time ago a group of Education Sector Peace Corps Volunteers, which included myself, were able to acquire a shipping-container of books through Books for Africa. This process took the veracity of a few Volunteers and the sweat and tears of everyone else. The container was comprised of 575 boxes and my portion of the container amounted to 95 boxes equaling 8,212 books.

There are views within the NGO community that books would be the tools to shake the very foundation of the education system within Ethiopia. That with these books, an army of knowledge would invade Ethiopian schools and enhance every faculty of the student's lives. Then, with purpose, this empowered population would take the reins of Ethiopia and create a wave of change that will lead it into the 21st century. While this outlook is beautiful in its optimism, it is ludicrous.

I see these books as opportunities, 8,212 opportunities that will hopefully exist for years to come. 8,212 ways to influence the creativity of a single mind. 8,212 questions: Why would a cat wear a hat? What do you feed a dog to make it that big and red? How is Texas interesting enough for an entire book? 8,212 rounds at the craps table to bet on the hope that a single win will push you through the day. I have no preconceived notions. I hope with every fiber of my being that my effort will lead to results, but in the end only time knows. My hope is fueled by the curiosity I see in the eyes of my students.

They do not know their path but they know it can lead somewhere . . . somewhere unexpected, somewhere beautiful, and above all somewhere of their own. The few books I have given to them in the past have tantalized their imagination. Words that are meaningless to them don't stop them from demanding more. The pictures guide and drive them to inquire more. I will not always be here to answer the questions that they so eagerly ask. But hopefully they will keep asking them. Asking how the word bus is created from the letters b, u and s. Exploring the magic of words and coming to comprehend that word magic is something impossible that should fill their lives. Then, finally, taking that magical journey on that incredible bus. That is my dream, to fuel a future of possibilities.

The truth of it all is that my job was simple: paint a place to excite the mind, add shelves to house dreams, and supply books to create insanity. I am simply the mad man shouting about the existence of infinity and how to reach it. All hope rests on a few children to raise their brows so they may take their trickling life stream and infuse it with endless power through learning, creating an unstoppable force. Then, one day, they will carve the landscape into an image that they have created, not being defined simply by their surroundings.

At least I have raised the stakes to 8,212 to 1. I would bet on that horse.

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THE REALITY

Megan Sievert (Injibara 2011-)

At this moment, it is a struggle to get the primary schools to keep the early grade reading centers open regularly for the kids. It has been an amazing journey advocating for the cause of literacy in a country that has

the third lowest literacy rate in the world. It has been quite a process getting the schools excited about books for the earliest grades and such a blessing that so many family and friends donated to Books For Africa for the container of 22,000 books to be shipped. What a whirlwind distributing the allotments of boxes upon arrival, getting the books from Addis to site, negotiating terms of agreement with the city council administration for handing over the books to the schools, getting them out of the boxes and onto shelves in a designated location.

But now the hard task is getting the teachers to utilize the books in their classroom and it feels like a stumbling block instead of a no-brainer. Getting the books into the hands of kids on a regular basis isn't as simple as one would think. Books are treated as a special commodity due to their scarcity and keeping them locked up has been the norm. While preservation and protection is a necessity for longevity, the idea of a lending library for the early grade students is such a foreign concept in this location in northwestern Amhara. The true challenge of making use of amazing books within a disadvantaged school system is at the forefront here and it isn't all pretty. The great point is that these books are here to stay and they have been incorporated into the public school system and this is a great addition to the community in the long run. I have to believe that over time each book will have its own impact. In my last months of service, I really need to plant the seeds of why it is beneficial to supplement the books with the curriculum and embrace reading time and storytelling time into the daily classroom life. But when the earth is dry and cracked and there is no rain for the seedling to grow, can the seedling germinate? I wish I had some Miracle Grow.



Megan Sievert shares the love of books.
(click for larger photo)

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WOULD YOU TRADE YOUR FOOD FOR A BOOK?

Paul Voigt (Shambu)

The kids in my town love books. Before our Books for Africa project, there were virtually no English language books in the primary schools in Shambu.

Thanks to a small storybook donation from friends and family in the U.S., I had given a few books to kids on my street. There are two cute sisters around 7 to 10 years old who live a few houses away from me and whose parents run a small electronics shop. I often see them manning (girling?) the store while their parents are busy doing other things. Since they missed out on getting a book when I handed a few out in the neighborhood., they motioned me over to their shop window daily as I passed by saying, "Book!", pronouncing the "oo" in book as in "loop."



I finally chose a couple books from the ones I had left and brought them with me on the way to dinner one evening. I had just seen the girls on my way home from the college and they had sweetly repeated their request for a book. As I handed the books to one sister, another one handed me three small boiled potatoes. Most kids expect something for nothing, but these sisters had saved some of their dinner in exchange for the books. They sacrificed what little they had for a book. The kids in my town are literally hungry for books.

Paul Voigt and the boxes of books for Shambu.

(Click for larger photo.)

It was important for me to try to get books for Shambu on a larger scale than just a few flat rate USPS boxes full. Books for Africa was the answer. As I watched our book donation goal get closer, I hadn't yet realized the logistics involved in getting the books from Addis Ababa to Shambu. The Peace Corps Volunteers made surprisingly short work of unloading the huge shipping crate of the 575 boxes of books. After a few failed attempts at renting a truck, I was able to get a minibus with the help of an Ethiopian counterpart. My sitemate, Adam, and some of my Peace Corps partners loaded 35 boxes of books inside and on top of the minibus the day after unloading the huge crate. We got a late start because the driver wanted to have lunch after spending a couple hours driving to the Kality bus station on the outskirts of Addis for the necessary transportation papers.

After four hours of traveling, the driver refused to press on. It was getting dark and he didn't want to venture over the back roads of western Oromia because of the notorious *shifita* (bandits) in the area. We stopped in a town called Gedo, which is where the paved road from Addis ends. The local police removed a section of their fence so we could drive the minibus into their compound so the books would be safe. In the morning we started out over the bumpy, rutted highland roads. We arrived in Shambu and lugged the books up a flight of handmade stairs leading to Adam's house, which is large enough to accommodate the 35 boxes of books.

After spending a few days sorting the books into four reading levels and then a few more days stamping them with a Peace Corps stamp to try to limit the number of books disappearing into students' and teachers' homes, the boxes were ready for delivery to the schools. The elementary school principal rounded up a group of more than 30 students who marched down the road to Adam's house. In one trip, kid power had done what no available truck could do — transport the boxes to the school library. Now students in Shambu have the books they have been hungry for.



from Jennifer Miller

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LIBRARIES, BOOKS, HOPES AND DREAMS

by Chad Miller (Debre Markos, Addis Ababa 2011-)

Back in April of 2012, I was nosing around in the library at the primary school, trying to find a set of books that might be suitable to use with a reading club for seventh and eighth graders. A fellow PCV had told me about his reading program, which was centered on a set of books from his library, Oromian folk tales translated into English. I was hoping I might find something similar.

Plenty of English language books were available, and they were pretty well organized on metal shelves. The distance between those shelves, though, was approximately the width of my body, shoulder to shoulder, which made browsing pretty difficult. What a strange assortment of English books I found. And almost all of them were far beyond the English reading level of any student in primary school (grade 1 through 8). Some were quite new and others hopelessly outdated. I found *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver and *Get Shorty* by Elmore Leonard. I found *Famous Negro Entertainers of Stage, Screen and TV*.

Of particular interest to me were some of the nonfiction books. *A Survey History of World, Africa, and Ethiopia* looked like something I might like to paw through and that might be appropriate at the university, or possibly preparatory school (grades 11 and 12). That book would be well out of bounds for any student, teacher, or administrator at the primary level, though, and from what I'd seen of the college students, it would make 99% of them go cross-eyed, too. Even more interesting and other-worldly was a book called *Language A to Z* with David Crystal — not “by”, but “with,” as though it wasn't a book, but a talk show. In fact it was a reference book, a glossary of sorts, Book 2 in a series. How a book that explains English language terms such as anapaest, diacritic, group genitive, litotes, malapropism, and suprasegmental feature was placed in the library at Nigus Tekle Haimanot primary school in Debre Markos, Ethiopia is beyond me. By happenstance I came there, and I began reading it. Otherwise, what would have become of it?

Back on the home front, I found another book that I brought to the primary school as a piece of realia, a prop, a teaching aid. It was called *SOCCKER GAME!* and was marked as Level 1 (Preschool/Grade 1). It worked well in the first grade English class as a prop, simply to teach phrases like “This is a book,” “Bring me the book,” and “Show me the book.” After class I was showing it to a 7th grade physics teacher, who began reading it with keen interest. Then he began asking questions: What is “doomed”? What does “slipped” mean? What about “dribble”?

Flash forward to November, 2012

I was in the process of sorting through and categorizing some of the ninety-odd boxes, containing some untold thousands of books, that my wife and I had arranged to donate to our community through the US Nonprofit organization Books for Africa (BFA). As noted above, the libraries in Debre Markos primary schools were severely lacking in age/reading-level appropriate English language books, and what books were stored there were not readily accessible to students. Hence the BFA project.

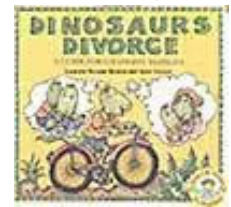


That long process of pulling books out of boxes, examining them, and putting them into piles, put me back in touch with books, and more specifically American books, in an intimate way. For a younger Volunteer, nostalgia may have come into play, but not for me (alas, no *Doctor Dolittle* or Arthur C. Clarke books were included). My reactions were mixed. Let me sketch out a few of those here, in random order:

- *Design and Quality.* I was almost overwhelmed by the beauty, precision, and thoughtful design that went into many of these books. The carefully chosen language, wonderful illustrations, and superb book-making craft were almost enough to bring tears to my eyes. I've been teaching for awhile, and I know that teachers need resources. In the US I wasn't particularly dependent on books because I had ready access to the internet, a printer, scanner, photocopier, and a hard-wired projector mounted to the classroom ceiling. Here what most teachers have access to is the *English for Ethiopia* textbook, and not much else. Many of the donated BFA books have enormous potential as teaching resources. The tabbed

sections at the back of the Teachers' Guides alone contain a wealth of photocopy-able tools that would be extremely time-consuming and difficult to create or assemble through other means.

- *Culture Gap.* The level of English in some books was obviously too challenging for most of the schools here. But an even bigger issue wasn't English language, per se, but American culture. Many of the books pertained to topics or cultural situations that aren't familiar here or just flat out don't apply. Bathtubs and rubber duckies; the travails of potty training, issues involved in the proper care of one's new Guinea Pig, personal responsibility demonstrated through the cleaning up of one's room (yes, a child with a huge, personal, carpeted space and a mountain of industrially produced toys), pizza parties at the mall, and so on and so forth . . .
- *Bizarreness gap.* At some point regular stories ceased to be sufficient for American children. It wasn't good enough to have a clever or intriguing story about, say, a monkey. A monkey in a forest just doesn't cut it anymore. The monkey has to be an astronaut. And he has to be an exceedingly clever, zany monkey/astronaut, one who can't resist silly monkey/astronaut word play of the sort that will confuse the bejesus out of any right-minded second-language learner. And we have gargoyles driving school buses and zombies playing soccer and some cartoon character named Captain Underpants who seems to specialize in zany, toilet-themed hijinks. Someone had also put a great deal of thought into creating a book that would help children deal with divorcing/divorced parents. For some reason, though, the parents and children depicted in the book all had to be dinosaurs. When a teacher at the secondary school would later pull this book out of a box, he would immediately remark along these lines: "Ah, yes, dinosaurs, these are extinct fossil reptiles of the Mesozoic era." It would be difficult, to say the least, for me to explain the whole self-help, divorced parents angle to him, and the fact that the book was not about dinosaurs at all.
- *Commercialism.* Amongst the many gems were any number of books in a series based on various television shows and part of much larger marketing/sales campaigns. I never knew much about Spongebob Squarepants, but when I saw his likeness wash up on an otherwise pristine, protected beach in Costa Rica five years ago, I knew we were in trouble. In my shipment I received many chapter books detailing his exploits, no more or less enthralling than those of Dora (of Explorer fame), Barbie, or Hanna Montana. There was even a Spongebob Trivia book that would only have relevance and meaning for those devotees already well-versed in Spongebob lore. I guess anything that gets kids reading is good, but I'm not sure about literature that only "works" if preconditioned by a TV series.
- *Rejects.* There was only a very small handful of books for which I could not find a good and proper home. Most of these were either severely damaged or included other languages (dual-language English/Spanish textbooks, Spanish only textbooks, and tiny (storybooks?) in Vietnamese). Perhaps the least appropriate was a paperback accurately titled *Truly Tasteless Jokes* and included chapters for various ethnicities and religions, male and female anatomy, and so on. The Gover Norquist polemic *Leave Us Alone [Getting the Government's Hands Off Our Money, Our Guns, Our Lives]* was hard to picture in any public school or library here. Then there were the books that seem designed to indoctrinate children in X, Y, or Z religion. Among the other marginal titles were *Your Nine-Year Old [Thoughtful and Mysterious]* and a work of teen fiction called *Stop in the Name of Pants*. The latter seemed, on cursory inspection, to deal with one young woman's neuroses about said article of clothing and made for bizarre reading here in Ethiopia. There is nothing wrong with any of these books, per se, but they're simply too far off in left-field for this project and the local context, and almost certain to be confusing or misunderstood.



Overall, though, it must be said that I was very impressed by the quality and variety of books, and the almost limitless potential for their use. Students seemed immediately enthusiastic, too. When I delivered a box of books to one primary school, a young boy lit up and exclaimed, “Thomas!” when he caught sight of the *Thomas the Train* book at the top of the stack I was carrying. A librarian at one school studied a non-fiction book about princesses. A supervisor found a Teletubbies reader of great interest and volunteered to read it to kindergarten students at one of the smaller, poorer schools on his next visit. One student was fascinated by the labels I had just created and put up on the shelves of the new lending library, and was reading them all out loud to his friends: “Chapter books, leveled readers, phonics, picture books, alphabet, numbers . . .”

Yes, my main school now has a lending library that is well-stocked with age-appropriate English language books and useful resources for teachers. As I requested, these books are all shelved separately from the general collection, in a place (unlike those other books) that is easy for students and teachers alike to see and access. Time will tell how successful this whole endeavor can be. From a personal perspective, I can already say it’s the most successful thing I’ve done since being assigned here. Donations came from friends and family back home via the BFA website. I partnered with a group of other Volunteers around Ethiopia, and we coordinated our efforts with a broad mix of organizations and agencies at the national and local level to get these books from Djibouti to Addis, on to our local communities, and finally into local schools and libraries. This project embodied the spirit of partnership and coordination that we Volunteers strive for, and provided resources the community could not afford to invest in on its own. The community was far more involved with this project than any other I’ve initiated, and it reached farther than any of my day-to-day work: into more remote pockets of the community, from schools small and large to the public library, to a large orphanage, to the local prison. There were a lot of setbacks and problems along the way, but we navigated those with the help and expertise of local actors. And best of all (unlike so many things we try to do) this lending library has great potential to be sustainable; now that it’s been established, staff at the school can easily run it, maintain it, and even expand it.

As with any volunteer project or effort, though, the question of sustainability rests ultimately with the local community. Sooner or later, volunteers leave. While I’m still in Ethiopia, I left Debre Markos at the end of 2012, before I could see how well the lending library project would really play out. I left with hope that, with the resources and system in place, there would always be someone at the school with the interest and enthusiasm needed to keep the project going.

Someone who loves books and knows, first-hand, their incredible potential, will always be around to keep the library running, to help kids and adults alike enjoy books that interest them. That’s my hope. That’s my dream.

GETTING THE BOOKS FROM ADDIS TO THE LIBRARIES



Books were delivered by semi in Debre Marcos.

(Click to see larger photo.)



Books were delivered by horse and garry in Debre Marcos.

(Click for larger photo.)



Two to a box in Wolaita-Sodo.

(Click to view larger photo.)



One girl could carry two boxes in Debre Marcos!
(Click for larger photo.)



Children helped in Wolaita-Sodo.
(click for a larger photo)

HAPPY TEACHERS, HAPPY STUDENTS, HAPPY LIBRARIES



In Debre Marcos
(click for larger photo)



In Injibara
(Click for larger photo)



In Wolaita-Sodo
(Click for larger photo.)



In Debre Marcos
(Click for larger photo)

Friends

Posted on [April 13, 2013](#) by [janetlee](#) | [1 comment](#)

A Peacemaker Who Inspired Goodwill in All

A Tribute to Fisseha Haileselassie 1957–2012

by Karen D. Speicher (Wukro, Bonga 1973-1975)

As a teenager, he seemed wise beyond his years . . .

In 1973, when my Ethiopian colleagues in Wukro, Tigray, were filled with paranoia and begging me to help them get visas to the United States, Fisseha maintained a calm innocence and a quiet equanimity. Amidst the charged atmosphere of hushed denunciations of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie, that confused me as a newly arrived, 23 year-old Peace Corps Volunteer, Fisseha became a dear counselor and friend. Against the backdrop of hatred toward the U. S. for supporting the Emperor, who was responsible for a political famine creating starvation in the north, Fisseha became my cultural liaison and interpreter, protecting this *firenje* from the taunts of out-of-towners and advising me on local customs and taboos. Following the hasty departure of my Peace Corps site-mate — leaving me as the only foreigner in the area — I don't think I would have survived my first year in Ethiopia without Fisseha.

One of at least ten children, Fisseha told me that his name meant “happy”: “My mother was happy that I was born,” although the exact year of his birth was uncertain. He had come from a remote village to attend school in Wukro and needed a place to stay. I was the local English teacher with an extra room in my house. So Fisseha moved in, and along with Ukwar, who came daily to cook and clean, our little compound became a place of refuge during that storied year of student strikes and political intrigue.

The local people were always very kind to me. However, there was an occasion when older university students returned to Wukro for a visit. Upon seeing me riding a bicycle on the main road, they began throwing rocks, calling out, “Bloodsucker! Bloodsucker!” When I arrived home in tears, Fisseha sought out these offenders, telling them how I had helped the villagers with medical needs beyond my school duties, and he brought them around for tea. Typically, Fisseha was a peacemaker who inspired goodwill in all.



Fisseha & Karen

During the summer before the coup of September 1974, I was relocated to Bonga, Kaffa. I left Ethiopia the following year, and Fisseha and I subsequently lost contact. Yet my heart remained with the people of Tigray, whose suffering I had witnessed firsthand. I especially wondered about Fisseha: Was he dead or alive? Was he imprisoned by the Dergue? What kind of life was he living? Did he join his sister, Tadelech, in Addis? Sometime in the late 1980s, when I was a Montessori teacher in Arlington, Virginia, I received an out-of-the-blue phone call from someone

in California stating that he was Fisseha's brother: If Fisseha came to the U.S.A., would I meet him? "Of course!" But aside from that isolated phone call, I had no evidence of Fisseha's existence for 37 years.

On the recent RETURN TO ETHIOPIA trip, my innermost wish was to have a reunion with Fisseha. I took a few old photos along, intending to show them to some of the folks in Wukro who might remember him.

It is uncanny how fate intervenes to bring closure to our innermost questions. On the evening of our arrival in Addis Ababa, while we were being entertained at the lovely Hiber restaurant, a young news reporter asked if he could interview me. It turned out that he was from Wukro. I showed Alem my photos of Fisseha, and he confidently asserted, "Don't worry! I will find him for you!"

On our second day in Addis, while we were attending a reception at the presidential palace, Alem approached me with some grim news: "I called my uncle who lives in Wukro. Ato Fisseha died two weeks ago . . ." This was stunning! After 37 years, how strange it was to miss someone by two weeks?! "Are you sure it was the same person?" I protested. Alem assured me that he had described Fisseha's unique features and hair, and he gave me the phone number of his Uncle Berhane so that I could arrange to meet him personally in Wukro where I was scheduled to be on Saturday.

On Saturday, my nephew Jared, who had travelled to Ethiopia with me, and I flew to Makele. We were greeted at the airport by Kidane, a driver, who would take us to Wukro where we had arranged to meet current PCVs Kevin and Rashad.

I was mindblown upon arriving in Makele, but words cannot begin to describe how I felt upon entering Wukro. Growth and development have brought such enormous changes to the area that I barely recognized the village where I once lived. In fact, an entirely new town has been annexed to that old village. (Credit for this progress is no doubt due to Tigray-born Meles Zenawe, Prime Minister of Ethiopia from 1991 until his death this past summer.) I sought out the ancient, fixed features: "Gut Bahari" — the river where I used to go swimming until Fisseha advised me not to, reporting that the townspeople had been gossiping about my impropriety; "Cherkos" — the ancient rock-hewn church carved in the shape of a cross containing religious cave art. Seeing those landmarks gave me some comfort, but the juxtaposition of the old village with the new town was unsettling: How had I managed to live in that simple, remote place so many years ago, before computers, cell phones, etc? Yet a part of me longed to see that very spot again just as it was in my memory.

We met Kevin and Rashad as planned and were chatting gaily at a sidewalk table when I turned my head and screamed in surprise and delight: "G'relassie!" Gebreselassie was another student whom I remembered fondly, and I happened to have with me an old photo of him playing his harmonica. He had heard that "Miss Karen" might be coming to town, so he showed up at the hotel with his son, Tesfay. Gebreselassie confirmed the news I had received about Fisseha's death, which added poignancy to our joyful reunion, even more so when, during lunch, Gebreselassie conveyed the news of the passing of another former student who had been killed fighting the Dergue.

Gebreselassie currently works as the registrar in the same school where I used to teach, so he led us there and even pointed out my former classroom. In fact, he was able to guide us to the houses where I used to live, one

on top of a hill near the church that I vacated due to termites, the other in the village where I rented from Wzro. Hewot, a native of Eritrea who has since returned there.

We made our way back to the Luam where two Berhanes awaited us: Berhane M., Alem's uncle, and khaki-clad Berhane Woldeyesus, a friend of Gebreselassie who had also been a close friend of Fisseha. Berhane W. explained in Tigrinya that Fisseha had died of cancer, placing his hand on his head to indicate a brain tumor. His passing had actually occurred three months ago. Fisseha's widow, Tsion, was an Amhara woman, and they had a son, Miserak, who had graduated from Gondar University and a daughter, Muluberhan, 20, who was studying to be a pharmacist in Addis Ababa.

Jared and I traveled north to Axum through the dramatic mountainous scenery of Tigray. There we met up with sixteen others for a four-day historic tour which included Axum, Gondar, Bahar Dar, Lake Tana, and the Blue Nile Falls. Throughout, I was quietly grieving for Fisseha and making phone calls to his daughter to arrange our meeting in Addis.

Tsion, Muluberhan and I met at a hotel in Addis Ababa. We embraced. We cried. We sat. We sipped our sodas. We shared a few photos. I gave Muluberhan two pictures of her father as a teen, and Tsion showed me her husband's ID photo as a man of 50+. I did not recognize that short-haired, sober-faced fellow in the business suit.



Tsion and Muluberhan

Fisseha must have been proud of his lovely family. The Tigray native who did not want to visit Bonga ended up marrying an Amhara and settling down in Mizan Tefari, a town even further southwest than Bonga! There he worked with the Department of Public Works and raised his children.

When we parted, we agreed to meet again in the afternoon when Muluberhan would bring more photos to share. She arrived with a friend and we three ladies went to the Habesha restaurant to share a vegetarian *beyanetu* meal. Muluberhan gave me a few more photos of her father. One which I particularly like shows him in his thirties, smiling, a happy family man. Was he truly happy? Muluberhan indicated that his life had not been easy, but her lack of fluency in English and my lack of fluency in Amharic limited the sharing of details. Leaving the restaurant after dark, we shared a taxi part way back to my hotel. Then we bid each other farewell on the eve of my departure from Ethiopia.

Fisseha Haileselassie has always been a vivid memory of my Peace Corps experience. To return to Ethiopia and find him gone punctuated the finality and the finite context of my stay there. Our lives had touched during a particular intersection of time and space at a unique point in Ethiopia's history. I shall always feel grateful for having known that kind and gentle young man, and I am grateful for the opportunity to meet his daughter, Muluberhan, whose name means "full of light" and who represents the bright future of Ethiopia.

Rest in peace, Fisseha!

Projects

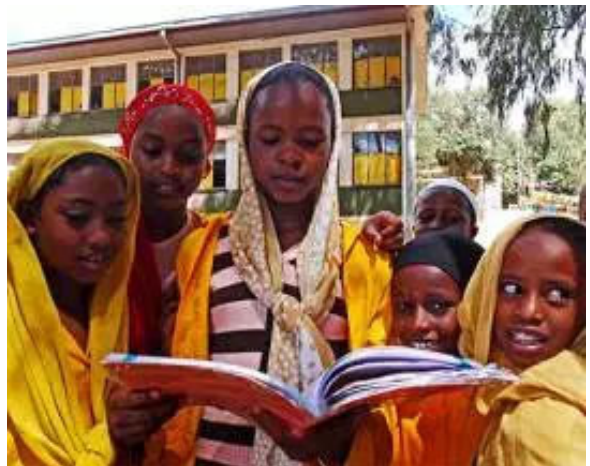
Posted on [April 13, 2013](#) by [janetlee](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Opening a Children's Library in Harar

by **Alice Gosak (Harar 1964-67)**

FIVE YEARS AGO I visited Harar with Patricia White Johnson who was concluding her foreign service career as the cultural officer at the U. S. Embassy in Ethiopia. Patricia and I were fellow teachers at the Medhane Alem Secondary School years ago. In her role as a cultural officer, Pat often times visited schools and invited me to accompany her. During these visits we saw the need for books and libraries wherever we went. In response to this need and with some help from our friends, we were able to ship 400 pounds of books to Harar TVET (formerly Medhane Alem), the Teacher Training College and [Haramaya University](#) (formerly Alemaya University) Medical Sciences Branch.

All of the receiving schools were for students in Grade 10 and above, and this was very encouraging; however, we felt that there was a need for a children's library that would stay open to children of all ages throughout the year. From a distance, we enlisted our old Ethiopian friends to find a suitable place for a library as we had no Peace Corps contacts on the ground to help us. Harar has not had Volunteers since 1974, and it is considered off limits to the current Volunteers. During our long distance search, we were offered a space in a religious school, but both Christian and Muslim friends cautioned us that parents would not send their children to a reading room associated with another denomination. We came to what looked like a dead end.



[Click for larger photo.](#)

We knew that Ethiopia Reads was opening children's reading rooms in Addis and Awassa, and we set about convincing them to turn their attention to Harar. The city seemed so far from Addis that Ethiopia Reads was hesitant to spread their resources in an untested location. We persisted, adding Emily Cotter Richardson (Harar 64-66) to our ranks. Emily's interest in libraries went back to the time when she started a library at Ras Makonnen School, and even managed to obtain a set of encyclopedia for the school. An opportunity finally came up when Ethiopia Reads agreed to open children's reading rooms in each of Ethiopia's regions in conjunction with an AID-sponsored project to bolster English-language instruction and reading as well as teaching in general.

We began our fund-raising campaign, selling tee-shirts (and if you sport that

Debre Birhan Selassie Church angel on your chest, you are part of this story) and generally badgering our friends for funds. It took a while to raise the \$10,000 to fund a reading room, but we were assured that it was going to be opened in Harar although we didn't know where it would find its home in the sprawling city.

Finally, we were told that the inauguration of the reading room would take place in October of 2012. Emily was unable to join us, but Pat and I traveled to Harar for the event. Even when we got there, the date was tentative, but finally on October 21, 2012, we were able to attend the inauguration at the Model School No. 1 Reading Room.



Photo by Martha de Jong-Lantink



At the Inauguration

As experiences in my later life go, this one was spectacular. Five hundred children from kindergarten through grade eight and their parents filled the bleachers, benches and even the trees in front of the stage. When Pat and I stepped foot on the compound — at any time — the children began rhythmic clapping, something I had never experienced in 40 years of teaching. There were speeches by the headmistress, officials from the Harari Educational Bureau, the staff of Ethiopia Reads, Pat and me — all translated into Amharic and Afan Oromo, the language of instruction at the school. There was a coffee ceremony with popcorn and ceremonial bread for all the adults in attendance.

Afterwards, we visited Kalad Amba I (K-4) and Kalad Amba II (5-8) schools nearby which did not have any of the resources of the children's reading room. Directors and teachers alike pleaded for references books — for chemistry, English grammar and other subjects. In all the schools we visited, the outer walls were painted with pictures of the map of Ethiopia labeled in Amharic, the parts of a plant labeled in Oromiffa, the human body labeled in English. Computers were not a prominent part of any campus, but in view of the fact that the entire area of the country east of Awash was without electricity for nine of the days that we were there (a theft of equipment in a remote location!), they are not yet a reliable educational support.

The day after the inauguration Pat and I were back to Model School No. 1 to take part in an Ethiopia Reads workshop for librarians from several Harar school libraries as well as from Dire Dawa, Jijiga, and the Afar region. “Libraries” is perhaps a misnomer here; the two librarians from the Afar region still hope for a library. Work on one in their region has yet to be funded and commenced, while the Jijiga reading room is in progress.

Pat and I also worked with the chief of the Harari Regional Educational Bureau on a grant to obtain textbooks for the 72 schools in the region. As we traveled to villages like Koromi, which had no roads or schools 40 years ago, we saw schools and health clinics where none had existed in the 1960s. President Murad Abdulhadi made one of the most poignant remarks about the work to be done in the country as a whole when he said “We have lost one and a half generations so we must work very hard to catch up.”

Before we left, Pat and I even taught classes to micro-scholarship students, an advanced placement program for ninth graders from various schools sponsored by the U. S. Embassy and taught by faculty from Haramaya University. The classes were at Medhane Alem. We had come full circle.

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Books

Posted on [April 13, 2013](#) by [janetllee](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Heart. Wood.

by Eric Torgersen (Addis Ababa 1964–66)

WordTech Communications, 2012

84 pages

[\\$18.00](#)

reviewed by *Judy Hodges Coryell* (Debre Zeit 1965–67)

THIS SLIM VOLUME OF POEMS is Eric Torgersen’s seventh. He has also written a full length study of German poets, translated poetry from German and written two books of fiction.

This erudite professor’s poetry — old and new — uses free and more structured forms in dealing with tragic or humorous vignettes. The everyday is highlighted for the reader to ponder, as in “Clearing Out Old Books”; the tragedy of pedophilia in “Believe the Children.” There are two references to Ethiopia in the book — you’ll find and enjoy them. Nature, childhood memories and friendship are important sources of inspiration in *Heart.Wood*.



This collection can be read many times over and give the reader something new to savor.

Enlightened Aid

U.S. DEVELOPMENT AS FOREIGN POLICY IN ETHIOPIA

by Amanda Kay McVety

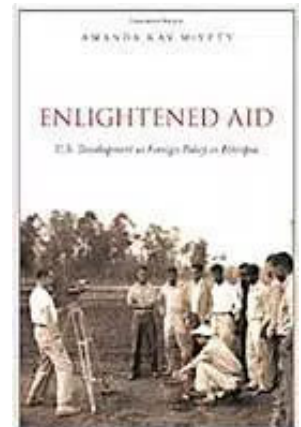
Oxford University Press, 2012

312 pages

[\\$74.00 \(cloth\)](#)

Reviewed by Ted Vestal (Peace Corps Staff, Addis Ababa 1964–1966)

McVETY, WHO IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR of History at Miami University in Ohio, takes on an ambitious subject. In documenting the origins and development of U.S. aid programs, she goes back to the eighteenth century Enlightenment's ideas of progressive change and traces how they evolved over a 200-year period into present-day U.S. government programs. U.S.-Ethiopian aid connections are used as a case study to illustrate the changing trajectory of the concept of development aid as part of American foreign policy since its beginnings in the Point Four Program of the Truman administration. In reviewing the philosophy and economic theories of Scottish, European, and American thinkers starting with Adam Smith and David Hume, McVety traverses a vast literature that lays the groundwork for current ideas about progress and development.



Readers may find challenging the opening chapters, but the pace picks up when the narrative gets beyond World War II and U.S. policy makers become concerned with a global economy and the Cold War competition between capitalist development and the Soviets' model. Especially noteworthy is the author's detailed explanation of the contentious genesis of Point Four and its technical assistance projects to "further the secure growth of democratic ways of life, the expansion of mutually beneficial commerce, the development of international understanding and good will, and the maintenance of world peace." There follows a description of the programs of Point Four and its progeny, including the Technical Cooperation Administration (TCA), Foreign Operations Administration, International Cooperation Administration (ICA), and finally, John Kennedy's U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that strives on today.

Programs are listed, but the author does not go into details about what happened in the projects or what they produced. Much of the narrative is based on government reports, Congressional hearings, and scholarly papers delivered at academic meetings. After a two-chapter review of U.S. development programs in Ethiopia, McVety concludes that U.S. assistance fails because it invariably serves as a political instrument rather than as an agent of change. Most Ethiopians remained deeply impoverished, and aid failed to produce real improvements in Ethiopian lives. According to the author, real economic growth must come from within impoverished countries. She recommends that the United States and other wealthy nations assist this process by curbing their own domestic agricultural subsidies, supporting global disease eradication, promoting entrepreneurship, and encouraging poorer countries' investments in infrastructure and education. The final

chapter includes a sweeping survey of the recent literature about foreign aid and the contemporary debates shaping what she proposes to be a new “American Answer” to developing programs that “transform the lives of the world’s poorest peoples.”

The book is basically a history of the macroeconomics of U.S. aid. That is fine as far as it goes. The devil is in the details, however, and McVety’s work would benefit from more devilish delving into the what’s, where’s, and when’s of aid programs. Starkly missing are the perspectives of people who worked in the field or were recipients of the assistance rendered. The Peace Corps is skipped in the analysis and does not merit a mention in the book’s index. Interviews with U.S. personnel in the field, as well as Ethiopian beneficiaries of the programs, would have provided a very different view of development efforts. Most Peace Corps and Point Four workers I knew in Ethiopia were involved in small-scale projects at the grass-roots level with a heavy emphasis on personal contacts. Ethiopians that had American teachers, especially PCVs, in these programs uniformly commend the individuals involved and the U.S. programs generally.

To my knowledge, neither the Peace Corps nor Point Four had the goal of ending poverty in the country, a goal implied in McVety’s analysis. It is doubtful that Emperor Menelik I’s father, King Solomon the Wise, would have the wisdom to achieve such an aim. More modestly, American teachers in the Ethiopian aid projects provided instruction that improved the lives of their students. As Stan Meisler points out in his history of the Peace Corps, [*When the World Calls: The Inside Story of the Peace Corps and Its First Fifty Years*](#), the English language proficiency of educated Ethiopians improved markedly as a result of the PC education projects in the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise, American instructors and researchers at Haile Selassie I University and the Imperial Agricultural College at Alemaya raised academic standards and contributed to improvements in agriculture, public health, and education. A thriving coffee industry, new breeds of cattle, and heightened care of livestock and other animals were a few of the major accomplishments.

The U.S. investment in human capital paid off in producing, among others, Ethiopian scientists, scholars, and international civil servants. In addition, American aid worked on the premise that it would make itself unnecessary. So it was at Alemaya, where, over time, Ethiopian administrators and faculty replaced the Americans, and a thriving university there today is testimony to the efficacy of the program. A graduate of Alemaya developed a successful vaccine against Rinderpest and another was the 2009 World Food Prize Laureate. Could any Ethiopians conclude that such accomplishments facilitated by U.S. development aid had done more harm than good for their country?

The only Ethiopian quoted at length in McVety’s book is Emperor Haile Selassie. Where are comments by Ethiopian students and teachers and leaders in higher education, agriculture, and health? Where is commentary from Ethiopian and American newspaper articles about the aid programs?

One could argue that U.S. aid has kept and continues to keep repressive governments in power. On the other hand, the case can be made that in subtle ways, the American presence in Ethiopia planted seeds of doubt about the Ethiopian government’s bringing progress to the people and being outdated. By improving the English reading and writing skills of Ethiopian students, the Americans left a legacy of a generation of the country’s educated elite that was better able to grapple with the meanings of Jefferson and Lincoln as well as Marx and Lenin. The subtleties of that legacy are still being worked out today.

Enlightened Aid provides a Van Gough-like wide brush stroke appraisal of U.S. development programs. More Seurat dots or microeconomics might be more satisfying to RPCVs and others who served in Ethiopia. The book is helpful in delving into the background and theories of how the programs we worked in came to be. McVety's plea to reconsider contemporary aid practices is timely and well taken. Her book will help inform such considerations.

Dr. Dark

by Robert E. Hamilton (Ethiopia 1964-66)

Amazon Digital

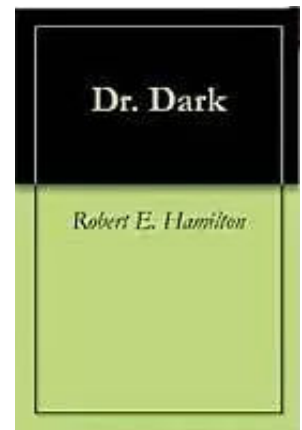
356 pages

October 2012

[\\$0.99 \(Kindle\)](#)

Reviewed by Ted Wells (Rural Gemu Gofa, 1968-71)

THIS IS A SUBTLE but very captivating novel about power and ambition among mid-level bureaucrats in a mid-sized American university. It is set in the heat of Florida, which helps simmer its understated tension. The story is told through an intricate, concisely written series of vignettes; crisp, sometimes quirky descriptions of the musings and activities of the two main characters; Dr Karl Dark, Director of the University's African Studies Program and one of his assistants, Dr. Barbara Kelly, the program's Outreach Director.



With intrigue but without haste, the story soon engulfs other university staff who through the novelists omnipotent eye help explain the one sided conflict that develops between the two main characters. Before long it becomes evident that Dr Dark, a very capable director, is easily threatened by the success of anyone who works for him. Highly motivated Barbara Kelly is simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. From a corporate point of view, Dr Dark's heart is in the right place, but unfortunately for his staff he is the typical self-serving empire builder found in many large corporations and corporatized universities today.

Nothing is quite as it seems, however. The plot continually twists and turns in directions that, like a well crafted crime novel, could possibly have been deduced if inflections between the lines had been carefully read, but each, including the ending, still comes as a surprise.

The author clearly knows the intimate details of corporate university politics, and although there is a loud disclaimer at the beginning of the book that it is "a work of fiction," it is difficult to imagine that there aren't many autobiographical bits in it.

I could have used more story behind the anomaly of a white man (and his white assistants) running an African Studies Program, particularly given the director's name. "Dr Dark" may be a catchy book title, but it seemed to me a little trite, given the quality of the writing otherwise. I also thought the dust jacket description of the

book somewhat off-putting with its over stated reference to Dr. Dark as a “continent” that “believeth” in his own genius.

But don't let such minor niggles put you off. Robert E. Hamilton's novel about corporate university intrigue is very much worth downloading.

The Old Man in the Bag

AND OTHER TRUE STORIES OF GOOD INTENTIONS

by Ted Wells (Shileh, Kelam 1968–71)

CreateSpace, November 2012

\$12.95 ([paperback](#)); \$2.99 ([Kindle](#))

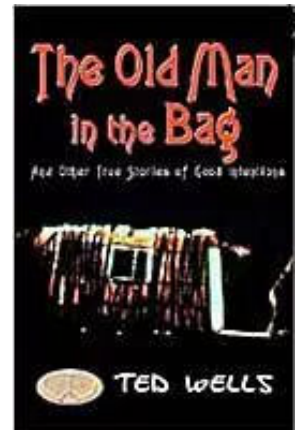
Reviewed by Mike O'Brien (Grawa, Ethiopia 1967-69)

AFTER MY WIFE VANA AND I returned to the U. S. from teaching in an elementary school in Grawa, a rural town high in the mountains of Gara Muleta, we had a hard time re-adapting into our American lives. Our society seemed overwhelming — too fast-paced, too much stuff, wasteful, and obsessed with war and money. We soon realized that we had been changed by Ethiopia much more than we were aware while we were there. Every single day of life in our little town had been intensely direct, purposeful, and full of strange new and unexpected encounters. One might say, packed with life. And, as it turned out, it was a life beyond our power to describe back here at home. We weren't able to condense our experiences and emotions to provide a tidy version that would be comprehensible to our stay-at-home family and friends.

We tended to speak in headlines, like “I learned more than they did” or “Every day was a roller coaster.” We could only hint at the incredible highs and heart-staggering lows of our two-year immersion. I think only our grown children, one of whom has visited Ethiopia, have heard and seen enough to begin to understand our experience.

So when I read Ted Wells' new memoir of his and his wife Helen's 1967-69 life and work in Shileh in the far southern Rift Valley of Ethiopia, I was struck by how artfully and precisely he has captured its everyday wonder and weirdness. He combines conversations in halting Amharic and English with descriptions of places, people and events, and with photos, and facsimiles of letters home, to build up an engaging read — alternately funny, charming, horrifying and painfully truthful. As a reader I felt like I was right there with him and Helen, looking over their shoulder, encountering each amazing day just as they did. And time and again, I found myself nodding my head in recognition. Ted's book accomplishes what I thought impossible, it takes a reader along on a story of life in Ethiopia so unlikely that it reads like melodramatic fiction — except, of course, it's all true.

Arriving in Addis Ababa after training in the Virgin Islands, already an odd but engaging adventure in itself, Ted and Helen were steered into their new assignment by this pitch from Peace Corps staffer David Levine:



“Anyway, there’s a place called Shileh next to a couple of rivers near Lake Chamo where they could really use your help. The Ethiopian government wants to build a new town and start farming in the valley using irrigation from the rivers, only it’s down in the Rift Valley where the malaria is really bad . . . have you been taking your malaria pills?” asked Dave suddenly.

This quote — so appealing yet foreshadowing — brought back my own memory of a similar conversation in 1967 with Marc Scott, also a Peace Corps staffer in Addis Ababa, about a small town in the mountains of Gara Muleta that really needed a married couple to help turn around an elementary school. Of course Vana and I, despite our reservations as to our qualifications and some hints of problems to come, accepted eagerly, as did Ted and Helen. From this point in the book I was hooked, cheering them on, compelled by their fascinating story, with nearly every page a reminder of our own experiences.

As you can guess, their formal assignment didn’t begin to cover the realities of life in a “new town” that only existed in the mind’s eye of government planners. To start with, Shileh was only accessible during the dry season via a track that crossed two rivers, was partly submerged by a lake, and otherwise was impassibly muddy during the rainy season. They were warned about hazards, like Gugi tribesmen who still liked to present their bride-to-be with the penis and testicles of slain enemies, and crocodiles known to snatch unwary humans — which had actually happened to a Peace Corps Volunteer in Gambela. Arriving, they realized no one living in Shileh knew they were coming, or why. Ted introduced himself and Helen to curious townspeople in this brave speech:

We are volunteers from overseas. Your Government wants us to live here and help you make your new town. We can help you survey your new house sites and your new fields. We can help you treat your malaria and your sick animals. We want to help you help yourselves.

Which drew this reaction:

Although my speech was all in crude Amharic, it was clear neither the old man nor anyone else around us had understood a single word, or if they had, they gave us absolutely no hint of it. The old man just stood there silently staring at us, with an increasingly perplexed look on his face. All the villagers stood there silently staring too.

Change the wording slightly, and I made a similar first-day speech in Grawa to townspeople who, while politely welcoming, were incredulous and disbelieving that rich foreigners with university degrees were actually going to live there and teach at the school. In crude Amharic and simple English, I tried to explain about opposing the Vietnam war and choosing Peace Corps service. Heads nodding, my lame speech was understood as “He has been banished by his government,” something all too familiar to Ethiopians.

So began Ted and Helen’s adventure. Suffice to say, they quickly began to adapt, learn what needed to be done and got to work. Ted’s writing captures their life vividly — when the *shintab* catches fire while Ted is in it, it’s funny; when a new baby can’t make it after its weak and undernourished mother dies, it’s grievously sad. Ethical dilemmas are an everyday matter, like having to help poison a baboon family to prevent them destroying the farmers’ hard-won corn crop. To deal with it all, Ted and Helen have to rethink their initial

assumptions and expectations, about Ethiopia, their work, and even about their own relationship and marriage.

Perhaps all married Volunteers went through a crisis such as Ted and Helen experienced. The repeated challenges of daily life finally force you to ask frank questions and reveal previously hidden thoughts to each other. Although naked honesty can be hard to take, some things come out that might never have been revealed in “normal” life back home, so being truly open and vulnerable with each other ultimately strengthens love and respect.

I especially appreciated Ted’s use of conversations — how he remembered or recorded these I don’t know, but they sound authentic — for creating a sense for the reader of actually being there with him. We all struggled with getting across any complex idea in a second language, and the conversations here are touching reminders of how we hoped our good intentions could overcome our limited speech.

There is no philosophizing, rather just candidly honest observations from which the reader may draw their own conclusions. Ted skillfully weaves memory into a story so real and compelling that I read the book in a single night. I think you will too.

... and also by Ted

Power, Chaos and Consensus

CONSOCRATIC THEORY

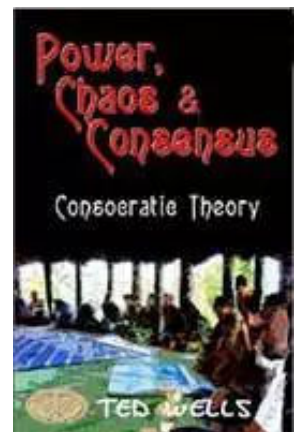
CreateSpace, November 2012

\$14.95 ([paperback](#)); \$3.99 ([Kindle](#))

IN TED’S WORDS, *The Old Man in the Bag* is a “prequel” to *Power, Chaos & Consensus: Consocratic Theory* because his Peace Corps experiences in the 1960s set in motion years of thinking and practice that shaped the second book, an essay on radical change.

While in Ethiopia, Ted realized that sincere goodwill alone could not overcome barriers between people: “What I learned was that sometimes even peaceful selfless good intentions can have a serious downside to them, generating anger and hatred between people rather than love and understanding.” My guess is, most of us who have worked in service organizations like Peace Corps have grappled with this reality. For me as a school teacher in Grawa, for example, it was the futility of teaching an academic curriculum, mandated by the Ministry of Education, to rural kids who needed practical life skills but all too often ended up in the city: graduates, yes, but unemployed, frustrated and sometimes angry.

This book addresses nothing less than our fundamental human dilemma: “We have still not figured out how to ensure social equity between people under a market economy, how to live in the natural environment that surrounds us without abusing it, how to resolve serious conflicts with our neighbors without going to war.” Here Ted has articulated his vision in a thoughtful assessment of humanity’s essential character, our intractable problems, and how they might realistically be addressed. When he began thinking about these



issues he believed his ideas were original, as he grew older he realized he was following a path blazed by earlier thinkers ranging from E. F. Schumacher to Arizmendi to Sir Patrick Geddes, who all originated creative yet practical solutions to difficult problems. His ideas also remind me of Rob Hopkins and the Transition Towns movement.

Following their Peace Corps service in Ethiopia, Ted and Helen returned to the U. S. where he began a career as a town planner. In the early 1970s they moved their family to New Zealand, and Ted began working with communities across Asia helping them to plan for growth and to achieve goals like social equity. Based on his experiences in Ethiopia, the U. S and Asia with community planning and making complex decisions and investments using truly democratic processes, he has synthesized his thinking into a guidebook for a “realistic way we might achieve peace, social justice and environmental sustainability on this planet without having to resort to further violence, terrorism or war.” To an RPCV reader, these words bring up mixed reactions: hope that he is right, and fear that the problems are too great for rational solutions.

Perhaps the book’s core idea of “consensus” and “democracy” or “consocracy” is summed up in this recollection of Ethiopians he knew during Peace Corps:

They intuitively recognize that despite their differences, whatever the cost, they need the support of everyone to live together in peace. They need to reach consensus among themselves to survive.

But how did they reach consensus? Ted goes on to explain in more detail a practical method for small-group consensus decision-making that could realistically be applied across our modern world and its many diverse and conflicted societies. His suggested process is based on some core realities:

- Humans have much in common. At the same time, no two people think alike. Decision making must take this reality into account.
- Democratic decision-making in western societies is frequently in name only, tends to be patriarchal, and to exclude dissenters, which may lead to “winners and losers,” or resentment and resistance.
- Market economies lack moral values to guide decisions that are fair and equitable.
- Governments waste economic wealth on wars and ill-considered schemes.
- We need new ways to achieve social equity, environmental health and a fair economy. Consensus must be used to achieve workable solutions to a wide range of problems.
- Consensus can work in small groups. We have the technology and capability to organize and involve small groups, and aggregate their choices into a truly democratic process.
- Consensus does not mean everyone agrees. It is better defined as a democratic process in which:
 - All are welcome to participate.
 - All ideas are heard and understood.
 - Reasons for decisions are clearly stated.

These key factors can ensure that minorities are heard and their ideas are addressed. They do not guarantee unanimity, rather, comprehension, mutual respect and ultimately acceptance of decisions. Ted draws on the example of a Samoan community’s decision-making ceremony to illustrate how they work “inclusively rather than divisively.”

When someone in a Samoan community raised an opposing idea to something that already seemed to have the backing of most at the meeting, the immediate response of everyone was attentive rather than dismissive.

The first thing that happened was someone supportive of the original idea would thank the “opponent” for bringing the alternative idea to the meeting’s attention. He . . . would then ask for more details about the new idea and what might make it better than the one already on the table.

In Samoa this process works for most decisions, in the sense that it respects minority views and ensures a fair hearing. It sometimes fails, in that opponents may experience social pressure to go along, but it suggests a workable model for other small groups. In this essay, Ted is seeking a way forward toward change that is radical, but not revolutionary.

As a former Peace Corps Volunteer, I found I concurred with passages describing our current problems. For that reason alone, I think Ted’s ideas for change are worthy alternatives to today’s authoritarian dictatorships and wars. I’m not sure how practical they really might be, but they would be a huge improvement over the chaos and destruction we take for granted today. For example, Ted does not really come to grips with troublesome issues like violent men who exploit and abuse women and girls.

The last section is a “Consocratic Plan” for addressing fifty of the world’s most pressing problems, wherein Ted proposes specific ways he would address problems. The plan has much in common with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If, like me, you are feeling a bit overwhelmed by the gravity of our current situation, Ted’s recommendations will definitely impel you to articulate your own ideas. Whether you agree with his recommendations, his ideas will challenge your own thinking.

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