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The Mountain School: Three Years Learning As A Peace Corps Teacher In Lesotho, Africa



Synopsis

The Kingdom of Lesotho is a mountainous enclave in southern Africa, and like mountain zones throughout the world it is isolated, steeped in tradition, and home to few outsiders. The people, known as Basotho, are respected in the area as the only tribe never to be defeated by European colonizers. Greg Alder arrives in Tšoeneng as the village's first foreign resident since 1966. In that year, the Canadian priest who had been living there was robbed and murdered in his quarters. Set up as a Peace Corps teacher at the village's secondary school, Alder finds himself incompetent in so many unexpected ways. How do you keep warm in this place where it snows but there is no electricity? For how long can dinners of cornmeal and leaves sustain you? Tšoeneng is a world apart from his home in America. But he persists in becoming familiar with the new lifestyle; he learns to speak the strange local tongue and is eventually invited to participate in initiation rites. Yet even as he seems accepted into the Tšoeneng fold, he sees how much of an outsider he will always remain—and perhaps want to remain. The Mountain School is insightful, candid, at times adaptive and at times rebellious. It is the ultimate tale of the transplant.

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Customer Reviews

This book gives you a good view of what life is like in this small country. Greg went there from living a life in California with all the conveniences that Americans have at their fingertips, to a small two room house with no electricity or running water! He adapted to the African way of life and felt he was helping his students and the students helped him become a part of the village. Greg's dream of submerging himself in another culture has been fulfilled! Very good book, with a good message. We would all be better people if we accepted people as they are and not try to change them..

I very much enjoyed Greg Alder's "The Mountain School," and I was very surprised to realize that it had been self-published: the writing is fluid and correct, and the pacing is absolutely perfect. Three years pass by without ever feeling rushed or dragged out. Alder is clearly an extremely gifted writer, with a clear and vivid style perfect for non-fiction. He ably balances the two languages of the book, and has a knack for the artful metaphor: the blood on a struck man's head "glows," for instance. Alder's characters really come alive, and he is insightful in describing their motivations and placing them in larger contexts. He does a wonderful job creating a sense of place and culture, and effectively engages the reader in the story. Alder is largely thoughtful, frank, self-aware and (occasionally) self-critical regarding his motivations and feelings in the book, which I felt was personally impressive and added to my enjoyment of the story. Throughout his experience, Alder seeks an impossible authenticity, to actually become a member of the village where he works. He strives for complete and casual fluency in the language; he eats the same food and listens to the same music; he even alters his physical performance, trimming his hair and proudly noting the effect of a limited diet on his height and stature. He reiterates that this opportunity for complete immersion as his motivation for joining the Peace Corps, but makes no effort to understand a still deeper motivation. A rejection of America's materialism? A desire for an identity outside his family? Nervous energy after failing to build a career post-graduation? Sometimes this quest reads as a commendable anthropological ideal; at other times, he just sounds like a middle schooler striving for conformity. Most often, the Quixotic quest for transformation is just mildly humorous in its impossibility: A white boy from California can eat all the porridge he wants, but he cannot alter his inherent and inborn privilege. However, the joke stops in a disturbing and abhorrent moment, when Alder witnesses the kidnapping and rape of a young girl in his charge, and resists coming to her aid. Instead of acting immediately, he sits there and wonders whether helping her is just more White foreign intervention -- a moral quibble that I doubt would have occurred to the girl he would be saving. Alder's failure to act immediately in this instance is self-indulgent and morally

indefensible. While I greatly enjoyed this book and would certainly recommend it to a friend, even one without a direct interest in Lesotho, a few items frustrated me.* I found Alder's occasional description of his sexual feelings (or lack of sexual feelings) towards the ladies of the village to be quite disconcerting. I guess on some level, I'm aware that men are constantly horny, but I really prefer those feelings to remain unstated. Honestly, as a young lady, I just found it creepy to imagine out there, some dude on the street could be staring at my boobs and analyzing whether, how and why he finds them to be arousing.* Alder also does not engage in any discussion of Lesotho's overarching health and economic problems: though >20% of the population has AIDS (one of the highest rates in the world), exacerbated by a polyamorous culture, Alder only references AIDS to say that no one in the village is tested. I would have enjoyed his perspective on this issue, considering his expertise. Also, while he references work in the mines as causing death in people's middle age, he does not further explore the societal ramifications of an average lifespan just over 40 years old. How do you have a village without elders? How has this changed over the past decades? He's so thoughtful and insightful on micro issues, I would have appreciated his perspective on these macro issues* Alder criticizes aid workers and even his fellow volunteers for staying in the city and not living with the people. However, surely Alder must acknowledge the good brought by these alleged dilettantes: medical aid, administrative support, efforts to stimulate the local economy. Certainly he offers no alternative course or solution -- just snide mentions of those who engage with foreign cultures by methods other than his own. One almost receives the impression that he would have the people of Lesotho live harrowing lives of poverty, shortened by avoidable illness, than intervene or alter their circumstances. His tolerance for the ways of Lesotho is such that this judgmental and intolerant stance towards his own, actual people stands out in unflattering contrast.* I wish Alder had written about how he felt teaching English to these children, considering his concerns about authenticity, foreign interventionism, and the glory of the village's isolation. Surely teaching English is just another echo of imperialism, by these rigid standards* Alder does not devote much ink to the position of women in Lesotho, except for a passing reference to the hilarity that a law increasing the legal rights associated with marriage would have any true cultural impact. Considering that some women are leaders and girls do attend school, it'd be interesting to understand their place in society further. I don't think I'd ever want to get a beer with Alder, but I greatly enjoyed his book and am glad that I read it. I'd love to read more of his non-fiction and hope this book receives the attention it clearly deserves.

This book captures the emotions and situations of living and working abroad very well. I would

reccomend this to anyone thinking of doing Peace Corps or similar service as well as anyone who has returned. I would love to see a follow up book of Gregs realizations upon coming home to America. I followed the link to his blog to see photos of the people in the village and it really deepened the story for me. This book highlights more than just cultural assimilation and learning new language skills, it really examines how yor identity and morals can change while fully immersing yourself in a foreign culture. I am impressed by the attention to detail in describing his own personal thoughts without making me feel like it was a therapy session. It is very realistic, witty, and encouraging dialouge. I am so glad he chose to share his story.

I wanted to know how it would feel to live and work in Lesotho. Someone close to me was with the Peace Corp in Lesotho around the same time as the author. Through Greg Adler I learned what it was like to live without electricity and running water in a country where the language and customs were very different from middle class life in the USA. I enjoyed the book because Greg wanted to learn the Lesotho ways and life and not try to change the people or the way they lived. He did a good job of letting me know his thoughts about teaching, the problems with student books, the talents of the students, his frustrations in some situations, his joys in others, and his sincere love of the country and its people.

Amazingly Engaging! Once I started reading the book, I couldn't put it down. I wanted to know all about life in Lesotho through Greg's eyes. Greg is an excellent story teller. I could feel his frustrations, worries, fears and joy. I could 'see' his surroundings and be a part of his conversations. The book is well written and I can only hope there will be a next. I would really like to see pictures!!! Maybe your next book could include some of your (I'm sure) fabulous pictures. GREAT READ!!!
Â The Mountain School

Well written in a very personal voice. Thoroughly enjoyed every moment of the book. It was engrossing from the start. I can only imagine what it would have been like to live through these experiences. It took 6 years to finish it, but was well worth the wait. It is also fun to go back and read some of the blog posts from the same time that these stories took place. Hopefully photo galleries for the book will be up on the author website soon. Putting faces to names always makes the story more rich.

While not the best book ever written, Mr. Alder manages to paint a vivid picture of his time serving

with the Peace Corps teaching English in a high school in a small village in Lesotho. Overall I would recommend this book if you're interested in learning about what life is like for someone who is involved with the Peace Corps. I feel like this book would have resonated better had it incorporated more humor.

On the bus on my way to work this morning, I read Chapter 1. Greg's words put me at the school, allowed me to see the students' fraying uniforms, hear the patter of the pigeons, and feel the excitement and the isolation. It's beautiful, Greg. I can't wait to read more.

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