

HOPE

VOLUME 1

How a children's librarian and his donkey-drawn bookmobile are saving the world one kid at a time

By Melissa Fay Greene

On a mild and clear morning, I walk through the Ethiopian countryside beside a two-wheeled cart drawn by a pair of donkeys. Outside the busy agricultural town of Awassa, a warm blue sky spreads above farmland from horizon to horizon. Near round straw huts, women in kerchiefs and long skirts work the ground, looking up as we pass on the dusty road. Roosters relentlessly interrupt the quiet rhythms of hoeing and chopping.

The donkeys turn right, plod into a neighborhood of small houses, and stop under a wide-spreading acacia tree. Carts hauling produce or passengers are common here; but ours, pulling a brightly painted yellow metal trailer, is unique. My walking companion, Yohannes Gebregeorgis, unhitches the animals and props open the flaps of the trailer to display not vegetables or tools, but children's books. This is the Donkey Mobile Library, the first of its kind in Ethiopia and one of only a few in the world.

Yohannes Gebregeorgis (geb-RAY-gee-OR-geez) is a children's librarian from the San Francisco Public Library who returned to his homeland five years ago after more than two decades in America. He lives now in Addis Ababa, the capital, and circuit-rides with the donkey bookmobile across a landscape of grass huts, volcanic lakes, camel drivers, and hyenas, accompanied by his old friends Winnie the Pooh, Peter Rabbit, Babar, the Wizard of Oz, and the sleepy bunny in *Goodnight Moon*. For many years, he brooded over how to introduce them to Ethiopian children.

The yellow trailer is filled with used picture books donated by American librarians, teachers, and school children: *There's a Wocket in My Pocket!*, *Arthur Babysits*, and *Richard Scarry's Bedtime Stories*. Here, too are books in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, including *Silly Mamma* and *The Fig Tree*. These were published by Ethiopia Reads, a nonprofit organization cofounded by Yohannes in 1998.

He sets out small painted benches in the shade, and suddenly, like American children pursuing an ice cream truck, Ethiopian kids come racing and shouting down every footpath and bursting out of every compound into the clearing. It's library day!

Bright-eyed, dusty, barefoot, they circle the shelves hungrily. Until the Donkey Mobile Library began its bimonthly visits, many of these children had never seen a book. An estimated 72 percent of Ethiopian children can't go to school because their families are

too poor to send them, according to UNICEF reports. Only 43 percent of Ethiopian adults can read and write.

“How is the Queen, Ato (Mr.) Yohannes?” one of the children asks.

“She is very well, thank you,” he replies. Queen Helina, the Most Beautiful of All Donkeys in Ethiopia, is the third of Yohannes’s donkeys and a special friend to the children. She leads the bookmobile rather than hauls it, appearing in public only on special occasions, like the day last year when the Donkey Mobile Library was introduced to the world by Ethiopia Reads.

Crowds of adults and children lined the streets of Awassa then. Queen Helina wore her finest scarves, beads, and feathers, and was escorted by an umbrella bearer, who shaded her sensitive ears from the harsh sun. Since today is not an event of state, Queen Helina has remained regally behind in her pasture.

Yohannes is a tall, formal man of 56. A natty dresser, he wears a button-down shirt and a blue blazer over blue jeans, despite the heat and dust. In a resonant bass voice, he reads aloud to the children without TVs and electronic games, whose great sports are jump rope, hoop-rolling, jacks played with pebbles, and soccer with a rag ball. Storytelling is a treasured art in Ethiopia, and to see a tale arise from a colorful picture book is a delightful technological advance.

I am hoping to read to the children, too. I’d been pleased to receive an invitation from Yohannes and Ethiopia Reads to walk about with the Donkey Mobile Library. I love children (I have nine, four of them from Ethiopia), I love children’s literature, and I like donkeys, so what could be better? Browsing the cart for the right book, I consider *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, but doubt it will translate well. I love *Make Way for Ducklings*, but what sense will it make in a village where all chickens and ducks range freely? *Snow Day* by Betsy Maestro? Forget it! I settle on *The Berenstain Bears and the Truth*, with Yohannes translating.

Fifty or 60 children lean forward earnestly as the cool acacia leaves stir above us. Beyond our circle of shade, the fine dust of the clearing glows white in the sunlight. The story of Brother and Sister Bear playing soccer in the living room despite a family rule against it, then lying about a broken lamp, makes perfect sense to my listeners. They chuckle knowingly.

“Do you have important rules in your families, like the Bear family’s no-ball playing-in-the-house rule?” I ask when the book is finished. Yohannes translates my question. Little hands fill the air. “Yes?”

A stout boy stands up and announces in Amharic, with Yohannes translating: “No ball playing in the house.”

“Gobez, gobez,” murmurs Yohannes, meaning “great, excellent.” He leads everyone in a round of applause.

“No goats in the house,” a girl offers in Amharic.

“Gobez,” says Yohannes, and we politely clap again.

“Don’t lie to your parents!” says a big boy, recalling the theme of the book, and he accepts his ovation with a huge smile and a bow.

“Twelve years ago, when I began to work in the children’s section in San Francisco,” Yohannes tells me later, “I met Curious George for the first time, and the Little Engine That Could, and Peter Pan. I felt sorrow for the children of Ethiopia who would never know them.” We sit over demitasse cups in a canopied café on Awassa’s main street. Traffic – just beyond the café railing – is a melee of bicycles, taxis, motorbikes, and donkey carts.

“Ninety-nine percent of Ethiopian schools I’ve surveyed have no library,” he continues. “Many classrooms do not have a single book. The teacher writes the lesson on the board, and the student copies it into his exercise book. You know how to read, but you don’t have anything to read. It’s rote learning. Without books, our education in Ethiopia is very bland, like food without salt. You can survive, but you can’t really come alive.”

In this drought-prone region of East Africa, where children suffer every day for lack of clean water and nutritious food, of medicine and mosquito nets, aren’t books a luxury? Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. Half of all children under 5 suffer the stunting effects of malnutrition. There are 4.8 million orphans in the country. Are books really an answer?

Yohannes believes they are. And experts on global poverty agree. Out of the 6.5 billion people on Earth, nearly one billion are nonliterate, most of them in Asia and Africa, the majority women. Yet literacy is now understood to be a threshold to greater productivity, better health, longer life, and decreased maternal and neonatal death rates. There is nothing like an alphabet to help an impoverished family apply fertilizer correctly, follow instructions on a medicine bottle, use contraceptives to avoid unwanted pregnancy or HIV/AIDS, or vote in an election. Children exposed to books will look beyond a lack of material goods to a world of possibilities. “Books saved my life,” Yohannes says.

He was born in the rural town of Negela Borena in 1951, the only child of a nonliterate mother and a father who could make out a few words of the Psalms. “Although hundreds of children in my town were not going to school,” he says, “I was lucky that my father was keen for me to get an education.” His most vivid childhood memories are of books. “My sixth-grade teacher had a book called *The March of Time*,” he recalls. “We learned about the Queen of Carthage, Hannibal, and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.” He joined the Ethiopian navy at 18, after the death of his father, and at 19 moved to Addis Ababa, where the casual gift of a book from a friend changed his life. The transforming book was

Love Kitten. “Now, I know it was a romance novel,” he says smiling. “Then, the main thing I knew was that this was a book that did not concern Hannibal, the Queen of Carthage, or the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.”

Eager to repeat the experience of being transported through the portal of written language to another world, he lingered in bookstores reading volumes he couldn't afford to buy. He reenrolled in high school and read his way up from *Love Kitten* to Agatha Christie to Mark Twain and Charles Dickens. “Books,” he says, “became my closest companions.”

In the 1970s, Ethiopia's centuries-old monarchy was crumbling. Yohannes joined a revolutionary student movement. But in 1974, a violent military dictatorship overthrew and executed Emperor Haile Selassie, and Yohannes, like many young people, was marked as an enemy. He fled to Sudan, applied for political asylum to the United States, and emigrated in 1982.

After putting himself through college and earning an M.A. in library and information science from the University of Texas, he married a young Ethiopian-American chemist named Hirut. They moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where their two sons were born. Though Yohannes had trained to be a college librarian, the San Francisco Public Library offered him a position in the children's section of the main branch. “Suddenly, I was surrounded by books I'd never seen before,” he says. “I had never realized how important children's literature is, how joyful and imaginative.”

“I thought always of Ethiopia. In summer, when the American children made long lists of the books they were reading, I knew that Ethiopian children were playing with rag balls and tin cans. Ethiopia has an ancient history of literacy, but no modern culture of literacy. I thought, “How do you bring the little characters of children's literature into a country without libraries?”

In 1996, the collection-development librarian asked for Yohannes's help in locating Ethiopian children's books. “The library had books in more than 75 languages, but I could find none in Amharic,” Yohannes says. “I wrote to Ethiopian publishers and got no response.” Ethiopian children's books were hard to find, he realized, because there weren't any.

“What I did find was a picture book, *Pulling the Lion's Tail*, written in English by an American author, Jane Kurtz,” he says. This retelling of a folktale about a young girl and her new stepmother reflected real knowledge of and love for Ethiopian culture. Yohannes thought, I must meet this woman.

Jane Kurtz was born in Oregon but grew up in Ethiopia, the child of Presbyterian missionaries. She and her four sisters and brother were raised in the southwestern village of Maji, so remote that few Ethiopians have traveled there. “It was a magical place to be a child, full of flowers and sun and fog, mountains and rivers and waterfalls,” says Jane. At 55, she still manages to look like the smartest fourth grader in the class, skinny and tall, fearless and bespectacled, her reddish-brown hair in a pixie cut. Of course there was

no radio, TV, or movies, she says, so when the children weren't exploring mountain waterfalls and bat caves or camping on the savanna with the roaring of lions in the distance, they read books, and told one another stories.

Jane attended boarding school in Addis Ababa, then college in the United States, visiting her family in East Africa until they left permanently in 1977. She married a Presbyterian minister who was also a philosophy professor, and they raised three children. At 40, gripped with intense homesickness for Ethiopia, she began to write about her childhood. Her longing inspired the creation of children's books; the first, published in 1994, was *Fire on the Mountain*, about an Ethiopian shepherd boy.

Two books later, in 1996, Jane Kurtz opened an e-mail from an Ethiopian-American children's librarian who, with little preface, told her: "We have to get books to Ethiopian children." She was immediately interested, and impressed with Yohannes's vision, she says, but stunned by the enormity of the task he was tackling. I thought, "Someone has to support this guy. And, I guess that someone is going to be me."

Jane and Yohannes began to speak publicly—to librarians, teachers, and readers—about the need for kids' books in Ethiopia. Maureen Evans of Washington, D.C., an adoptive mother of Ethiopian children, read about the project and offered to write up some of Yohannes's dreams and ideas as grant proposals. At Jane's suggestion, Reverend Gretchen Graf, of the First Presbyterian Church in Grand Forks, ND, rallied her congregation and raised \$10,000 with a readathon, a book sale, and grants from a church foundation.

Ethiopia Reads was born, and its first project was publishing a children's book, *Silly Mamma*, in English and Amharic, the first of its kind. Other volumes would follow, including translations of Jane's books, and multilingual books by Ethiopian writers. The second project was more ambitious—the creation of a free library for children in Addis Ababa, the first public children's library in a country of 77 million people. To make it happen, Yohannes upended his life, leaving his American career and returning to Ethiopia. His wife was reluctant to leave the U.S.; they separated and eventually divorced.

"It was a gamble," Yohannes tells me. "Maybe children would feel disinterested in libraries. But, given how little the children of Ethiopia have, I did not really think they would be disinterested."

His send-off from colleagues in San Francisco was a container filled with 15,000 used children's books. The gift allowed Yohannes to convert a modest house in Addis Ababa into the Shola Children's Library; he lived upstairs. In 2003, its first year, the library hosted 40,000 visits.

A second library, the Awassa Reading Center, opened in 2005, and the next year, the Donkey Mobile Library began its rounds in rural areas outside Awassa. Earlier this year, Ethiopia Reads opened five school libraries, among the first in the country, and it offers

ongoing free training for new libraries. Part of the money for the libraries came from American children, like the students at Escondido Elementary School in Stanford, CA, who collected \$5,500. Ethiopian Children's Book Week, an annual event created by Ethiopia Reads, celebrated its fourth anniversary this year with ceremonies in Washington, D.C., Addis Ababa, and Awassa, where Queen Helina appeared in her feathered finery.

All of these projects operate with no government assistance. "It is said that with this crisis of HIV/AIDS, the Ethiopian government has no time or budget to concern itself with books for this generation of children," Yohannes says bitterly, "but that is a tragedy. It is unacceptable." Yohannes glances at his watch and pays for the coffee. We step to his car and head for the Awassa Reading Center, a white-brick house behind wrought iron gates and within an exuberant yard of flowering bushes and vines. Inside, dozens of children browse the bookshelves and read at tables or on old sofas. Most have come from school and wear purple uniform shirts; others are too poor to go to school and have no uniforms—and no chance for education outside this room.

Yohannes asks the children to greet their American visitor. They squeeze together on the sofas and bunch up on the floor at my feet.

"How did you discover this place?" I ask, and Yohannes translates.

"My friends told me, 'Come quickly, there is a library!'" says snaggle-toothed Leah, 7. "And I said, 'What is a library?'"

"I never read books before!" calls Minty, 10. "Then I found this place in my own neighborhood!"

Dereje, a handsome seventh grader with bare feet and torn, too-big sweatpants, adds, "I was very surprised that the library was free and that I was welcome."

I ask the children about their favorite books. Little Leah is first again. "Joke books are my best!" she says in Amharic, then tells a joke she's read, which Yohannes translates, chuckling:

"A very fat lady goes to the doctor and asks, 'How may I lose weight?' The doctor asks what she eats. 'I eat 10 injeras for breakfast, nine for lunch, and 18 for dinner.' (Injera is the round Ethiopian sour flat bread; one-half piece would suffice at a meal.)" The doctor says; 'From now on, just eat one bread and one tea at each meal.' "OK", says the fat lady, 'is that before or after my injeras?'"

Birtukan, an 11-year-old boy, raised his hand and says in English, "I like Jack and the...Beast! Jack is a nice guy trying to kill a bad guy."

"I like Cinderella, because she is nice," says Tzion, an 11-year-old girl, in English. "when her stepmother is trying to harm her, something good happens to her instead."

Daniel is an 8-year-old with a serious under bite and a scaly scalp; he wears enormous ripped men's pants. "This is what I like," he says, and holds up a high school text, *Environmental Science Student Workbook*.

"What are some things you've learned at this library?" I ask.

"I learned that the Pacific Ocean is the deepest," shouts one boy.

"I have learned about George Bush and Condoleezza Rice," says Dereje.

Mintesinot says. "I have learned about the Great Wall of China. You can see it from the moon."

Yohannes and I walk Leah home so I can see where our jokester lives. A half-mile down a hot dirt road, we step into a cluster of mud houses. When she spots her mother, Leah runs to her and bursts into tears. She thought she was in trouble! We assure her that our visit is congratulatory. Leah's widowed mother cannot read. She cooks and sells injera, earning 70 Ethiopian birr each month--\$7.70. The UN Development Programme reported in 2006 that 78 percent of Ethiopians live on less than \$2 a day. Leah, her older sister, and her mother are among them.

"Your daughter is an excellent reader," Yohannes says.

"At first, when she told us she was going to study, I didn't believe her," says Leah's mother in Amharic. "I thought she was going to play. But now I see it is true: She can read books. The neighbors are amazed."

Leah's sister Mekdes, 17, is in seventh grade at a government school without books. Ninety students pack her classroom. She smiles wistfully as we praise Leah. "If there had been such a library when I was young," Mekdes says, "I could have been a brilliant student."

Back at the Awassa Reading Center, I ask a few children in private conversations whether the library has helped them know what they want to do in life.

Daniel, with the huge ripped pants and the *Environmental Science Student Workbook*, is completely thrown by the question. He has never been asked this before. He looks worriedly into the distance before desperately replying, "A driver?"

But others respond with animation. Barefoot Dereje wants to be a scientist. "Since a lot of people are dying of HIV/AIDS. I will try to find a cure for it. If I'm too late, I will find a cure for other diseases."

A pretty girl, Fikerte, 11, wears a dirty white T-shirt meant for an adult. Her skin and hair are dusty and dry. "I want to be a scientist," she tells me. "I want to do research on the moon and discover new facts about outer space."

Tamrat, 10, is a very slight and absolutely filthy child, with ragged clothes, rotten teeth, and black toenails. He lives with his parents and six siblings in a mud hut and comes to the library seven days a week. He doesn't know what he'll do with his life, but he loves the library. "What brings you back here day after day?" I ask him. Tamrat replies instantly: "The stories pull me back."

Melissa Fay Greens is the author of *There is No Me Without You: One Woman's Odyssey to Rescue Africa's Children*. Read about it at her Web site thereisnomewithoutyou.com.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

"Every tax-deductible \$10, \$20, or \$50 donation stretches far," says Laura Bond, the director of the U.S. Branch of Ethiopia Reads. "There are many ways to support our programs for children, from donating the proceeds of a neighborhood book sale to organizing a school or community group to buy and ship high-quality new and gently used books for children." Visit ethiopiareads.org for the current wish list as well as ideas about how to bring the organization's message of hope and reading into the classroom and the community. Financial donations may also be mailed to Ethiopia Reads, 50 South Steele St., Suite 325, Denver, CO 80209.

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING October 2007

Hope is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes with respect to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large. As a verb, its definitions include: "expect with confidence" and "to cherish a desire with anticipation.". Among its opposites are dejection, hopelessness, and despair. Professor of Psychology Barbara Fredrickson argues that hope comes into its own when crisis looms, opening us to new creative possibilities. Frederickson argues that with Add hope to one of your lists below, or create a new one. More. {{name}}.Â (Translation of hope from the Cambridge Englishâ€“Russian Dictionary Â© Cambridge University Press). Translations of hope. in Polish. in Chinese (Traditional). (Received Pronunciation) enPR: hÂp, IPA(key): /hÉ™ÉŠp/. (General American) IPA(key): /hoÉŠp/. Rhymes: -É™ÉŠp. From Middle English hopen, from Old English hopian (â€œto expect, hopeâ€), from Proto-West Germanic *hopAn, further etymology unclear. hope (third-person singular simple present hopes, present participle hoping, simple past and past participle hoped). (intransitive, transitive) To want something to happen, with a sense of expectation that it might. I hope everyone enjoyed the meal.