

Mountains Beyond Mountains

by Tracy Kidder

About the Book

At the center of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* stands Paul Farmer. Doctor, Harvard professor, renowned infectious-disease specialist, anthropologist, the recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, world-class Robin Hood, Farmer was brought up in a bus and on a boat, and in medical school found his life’s calling: to diagnose and cure infectious diseases and to bring the lifesaving tools of modern medicine to those who need them most. This magnificent book shows how radical change can be fostered in situations that seem insurmountable, and it also shows how a meaningful life can be created, as Farmer—brilliant, charismatic, charming, both a leader in international health and a doctor who finds time to make house calls in Boston and the mountains of Haiti—blasts through convention to get results.

Praise for the Book

“In this excellent work, Pulitzer Prize—winner Kidder immerses himself in and beautifully explores the rich drama that exists in the life of Dr. Paul Farmer... Throughout, Kidder captures the almost saintly effect Farmer has on those whom he treats.

—*Publisher’s Weekly*

“[A] Skilled and graceful exploration of the soul of an astonishing human being.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*Mountains Beyond Mountains* is the only book I’ve read in years that made me feel like cheering. It left me uncomfortable, guilty, and exhausted—but it also inspired me, kept me up all night, and moved me to tears. Some readers will find their lives changed forever; everyone else will emerge, at the very least, with an unexpectedly revised set of values. Tracy Kidder has given us not only an unforgettable book but an unignorable life lesson. Hurrah!”

—**Anne Fadiman, author of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down***

“Saints are notoriously difficult people, but who knew one could be so funny, so utterly charming, and finally so deft in accomplishing that most impossible of all job descriptions--changing the world? Tracy Kidder's spellbinding story presents us with an unlikely saint and finally, with inspiration so compelling it makes the usual cynicism about global change seem indulgent foolishness.”

—**Patricia Hampl, author of *A Romantic Education***

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About the Author

Title: Tracy Kidder

American Writer (1945 -)

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Personal Information:

Family: Born November 12, 1945, in New York, NY; son of Henry Maynard (a lawyer) and Reine (a high school teacher; maiden name, Tracy) Kidder; married Frances T. Toland, January 2, 1971; children: a boy and a girl. Education: Harvard University, A.B., 1967; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1974. Addresses: Agent: Georges Borchardt, Inc., 136 East 57th St., New York, NY 10022.

Career:

Writer, 1974--. Contributing editor, *Atlantic Monthly*, Boston, 1982--. Military service: U.S. Army, 1967-69, served in intelligence in Vietnam; became first lieutenant.

Awards:

Atlantic First Award, *Atlantic Monthly*, for short story "The Death of Major Great"; Sidney Hillman Foundation Prize, 1978, for article, "Soldiers of Misfortune"; Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, 1982, both for *The Soul of a New Machine*; National Book Critics Circle nomination (nonfiction), 1986, for *House*; Christopher Award and National Book Critics Circle Award nomination (nonfiction), 1989, Robert F. Kennedy Award and Ambassador Book Award, 1990, all for *Among Schoolchildren*; New England Book Award, 1994, for *Old Friends*.

Works:

Writings by the Author:

Nonfiction

- *The Road to Yuba City: A Journey into the Juan Corona Murders*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1974.

- *The Soul of a New Machine*, Little, Brown (Boston), 1981, revised edition, Modern Library (New York, NY), 1997.
- *House*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston), 1985.
- *Among Schoolchildren*, Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- *Old Friends*, Houghton Mifflin, 1993, large print edition, Wheeler, 1993.
- *Home Town*, Random House, 1999.
- *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*, Random House, 2003.

Other

Contributor to newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times Book Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Country Journal*.

Sidelights

In several critically acclaimed and award-winning nonfiction books, Tracy Kidder has combined meticulous research and reportorial skills to produce fascinating portrayals of subjects as diverse as elementary education, homebuilding, and nursing homes. Kidder's *The Soul of a New Machine* proved by its critical reception that technical subjects can be comprehensible and intriguing to laymen when they are skillfully presented. Winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1982, the book details the eighteen-month-long struggle of engineers at Data General Corporation to create a competitive super-mini computer. Kidder, a newcomer to this highly technical world, spent months in a basement laboratory at the corporation's Massachusetts headquarters observing teams of young engineers at work: the hardware specialists, or "Hardy Boys," who put the computer's circuitry together, and the "Micro-kids," who developed the code that fused the hardware and software of the system. In telling the story of the assembly, setbacks, and perfection of the thirty-two "bit" prototype computer, the Eagle, Kidder exposes the inner workings of a highly competitive industry, illustrates both concentrated teamwork and moments of virtuosity on the part of the project's brilliant engineers, and produces what reviewer Edward R. Weidlein, in the *Washington Post Book World*, judged "a true-life adventure" and "compelling entertainment."

Many critics cited Kidder's masterful handling of the complex subject matter in *The Soul of a New Machine* as one of the book's strongest features. "Even someone like this reviewer," wrote Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times*, "who barely understood the difference between computer hardware and software when he began *The Soul of a New Machine*, was able to follow every step of the debugging mystery, even though it involves binary arithmetic, Boolean algebra, and a grasp of the difference between a System Cache and an Instruction Processor." Weidlin concurred, observing that Kidder "offers a fast, painless, enjoyable means to an initial understanding of computers, allowing us to understand the complexity of machines we could only marvel at before."

Kidder's portraits of the Eagle's engineers were applauded by critics as well. A *New Yorker* reviewer proclaimed that Kidder "gives a full sense of the mind and motivation, the creative genius of the computer engineer." And a *Saturday Review* critic claimed that *The Soul of a New Machine* "tells a human story of tremendous effort." Critics also lauded *The Soul of a New Machine* for its departure from the standard journalistic approach to nonfiction. Jeremy Bernstein, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, declared, "I strongly recommend Tracy Kidder's book. I do not know anything quite like it. It tells a story far removed from our daily experience, and while it may seem implausible, it has the ring of truth."

Following the working style he established in *The Soul of a New Machine*, Kidder immersed himself once again in the workaday world of a diverse group of individuals for his next book, *House*. Documenting the construction of a new home from blueprints to finished product, *House* presents the pleasures and pitfalls that occur at all phases of the building process. The book allows the reader to view that process through the eyes of the seven adults involved: architect and "Renaissance man in delirium" Bill Rawn, the quartet of counterculturist builders known as the Apple Corps, and the prospective homeowners, Jonathan and Judith Souweine. Kidder, who spent six months observing all aspects of the construction, as well as the lives of the people involved, traces their combined efforts to design, finance, and build the house, and places special emphasis on the parties' abilities to forge relationships under somewhat trying circumstances.

Reviewers noted that the theme of *House* centers on the building of these relationships, and of the lines of trust and communication necessary for the relationships to occur. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Esther McCoy noted: "*House* . . . essentially is concerned with the people who build the house and their interaction with clients and architect." The ties do not come easily, however, as the participants haggle and argue about the various problems that arise. A rift develops between the Souweines and the Apple Corps over the final \$660 of the \$146,660 construction cost; in another instance, the builders are at odds with Rawn over his underdeveloped designs for a staircase. Commenting on the give-and-take nature of these dealings, Paul Goldberger of the *New York Times Book Review* stated: "The clients, the architect and the builders form a kind of triangle . . . and they push and pull each other in every possible way." Jonathan Yardley, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, agreed, adding, "The construction of a house is an undertaking that puts human beings in an odd relationship of cooperation and conflict, a relationship that begins as business but invariably acquires intensely personal overtones."

To some reviewers, these "personal overtones" were also reflected in Kidder's quiet observations of the differences in the characters' social positions and the tensions that exist as those distinctions become more and more apparent. Though three members of the Apple Corps "had upbringings more white collar than blue collar," Goldberger wrote, "they are aware that their lives are different from those of people like Mr. and Mrs. Souweine." **Kidder** approached the situation democratically, claimed R. Z. Sheppard in *Time*, giving "equal time to client, architect and builders." Sheppard went on to find that "the interplay between confident professionals and self-conscious craftsmen conveys

much about misunderstandings and bad feelings in a society stratified by education and status."

House does more than chronicle the relationships that developed over the course of the home's construction; it is also a nuts-and-bolts account of the construction itself. In addition, Kidder fills the book with a collection of short essays on topics as varied as the history of nails and a cost analysis of Henry Thoreau's Walden Pond shelter, so that *House* becomes more a study of architectural lore than a how-to of homebuilding. "The book keeps opening out into discourses on welcome, unexpected subjects," stated *Newsweek* reviewer David Lehman, "Kidder's book is filled with this kind of unobtrusive information." Affirming Kidder's inclusion of these asides, Adele Freedman of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* claimed: "After reading *House*, no one will ever take the design of a staircase or the installation of a window for granted."

As with *The Soul of a New Machine*, Kidder earned praise for his clear presentation of unfamiliar terms and operations. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of the *New York Times* found Kidder "a master at the difficult art of describing complex objects and processes." Citing the parallels in style between *The Soul of a New Machine* and *House*, *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Max J. Friedman declared that Kidder wrote *House* "with the same thoroughness, attention to detail and technical explanation that marked the earlier work. . . . Kidder's careful, precise reportage and brand of literary verite take us on a remarkable journey into the technical, mechanical and emotional world of housebuilding." Finally, Goldberger summarized the feelings of many critics with his statement that *House* "is told with such clarity, intelligence and grace it makes you wonder why no one has written a book like it before."

Kidder changed his subject matter but retained his reportorial methods for *Among Schoolchildren*, a record of the nine months he spent observing a Holyoke, Massachusetts, elementary school classroom. The book follows thirty-four-year-old Chris Zajac and her class of twenty fifth-grade students from their first day together at Kelly School to their last. In order to gather his material, Kidder placed himself at a desk in the front of the classroom, right next to Mrs. Zajac's own. He remained there, a silent observer on the scene, for nearly 180 schooldays. "I missed two days all year," Kidder told *Publishers Weekly* interviewer Amanda Smith. "One I just played hooky, and the other one, I was sick." The author eventually took over 10,000 pages of notes, compiled from his own observations and his frequent talks with Mrs. Zajac, which he then assembled, edited, and reworked into the finished book.

Written from Zajac's point of view, *Among Schoolchildren* serves as an account of the teacher's thoughts and feelings about her day-to-day teaching decisions and provides a first-hand look at what occurs in an American classroom. Kidder drew praise for his portrayals of the diminutive, energetic Zajac and her "fragile rubber raft of children," as *New York Times Book Review* contributor Phyllis Theroux called them. Students like the hyperactive, destructive Clarence, the barely literate Pedro, who was "born and raised with my grandmother, because I was cryin' too much," and the intelligent, introverted Judith test the limits of Zajac's teaching skills and patience. Because of his proximity to

the participants, especially Zajac, Kidder was able to get "inside her head and inside the heads of the children," reflected Gerald Grant in the *Chicago Tribune Books*, adding that the author's "close observations of the children in their many moods tie us into the emotional networks that make up classroom life." Those thoughts were echoed by *New York Times* reviewer Eva Hoffman, who asserted: "By the end of the book, we appreciate Mrs. Zajac's skills and strengths, and we come to care about the children's small hurts and triumphs."

Aside from providing insights into these characters, *Among Schoolchildren* also tackles some of the difficult issues facing the American educational system. Talking about the progress of reform with Smith, Kidder noted that "most efforts at reform usually are conducted independently of the experience, knowledge, wishes of teachers. And that's a *terrible* mistake, of course, since, for better or worse, education *is* what happens in these little rooms." Several reviewers found Kidder's observations worthy of praise. "Kidder writes with sensitivity . . . of the need for educational reform," a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer judged. "We see Kelly School as a compelling microcosm of what is wrong--and right--with our educational system." Grant concurred, adding: "Tracy Kidder has written a wonderful, compassionate book about teaching. While we have some cause for despair about the operation of the system, we have grounds for hope if his book helps draw more Mrs. Zajacs into our classrooms." And Phillip Lopate in the *Washington Post Book World* stressed: "At a time when public education seems to be fair game for attacks from all sides, Tracy Kidder has written a celebration of the work of one good schoolteacher."

Kidder's next book was a foray into the world of a nursing home. With much the same technique he used in his other "journalistic" works, in *Old Friends* Kidder spent a year observing the lives of the residents of Linda Manor, a nursing home near Northampton, Massachusetts. The residents of the nursing home are a diverse group, including the former actress Eleanor, who at eighty years of age is running the facility's theater program; Ted, a former morse-code operator who still drums the code on the arms of his chair; Winifred, who because of her obesity must be winched into her wheelchair every day; and Fleur, a ninety-two-year-old who is convinced she is still at summer camp. The narrative focuses, however, on Joe Torchio and Lou Freed, two reluctant roommates forced together out of economic necessity. After living together, their friendship grows, despite their apparent differences. A well-educated former probation officer, Joe was incapacitated by a stroke in his early fifties. Now, at seventy-two, he is young enough to be Lou's son. Lou, ninety-two, is a retired machinist whose beloved wife has just died. During the book's course, Kidder shows their happiness at being able-bodied enough to live on the top floor (the one requiring the least assistance), their thoughts about life and death, and their hopes and disappointments. Paul Hemphill related in the *Los Angeles Times* that the book shows "that behind those doors and inside those wasted bodies there are hearts and souls still lusting to go around the block one more time, no matter how reduced the circumstances."

David L. Kirp, writing in the *Nation* found fault with the book, calling the writing "mainly treacly, and that evinces another, related kind of failed vision, another misuse of

authorial omniscience." He believed that the book "emphasizes the superficial and noncontroversial," and stays away from important, yet untidy, aspects of the clients lives. However, Reeve Lindbergh, writing in the *Washington Post Book World* commented that Kidder has a "breathtaking writer's skill," adding that "the real tour de force here . . . is the author's ability to look so closely and unsentimentally at the sufferings of age, and yet with such unwavering affection for the individual aged." Lindbergh concluded that "this beautifully written and remarkably compassionate book, my own favorite in Tracy Kidder's impressive body of work, shows us the way."

In his best-known books, Tracy Kidder has shown himself to be adept at creating works of nonfiction that, as he told Smith, "do a lot of the things that novels do." By using similar research and writing techniques for all of his works, Kidder has discovered a formula for success, yet his books are far from formulaic. Critics have complimented Kidder's ability to transform the ordinary and everyday into something fascinating, a talent that Friedman termed Kidder's "penchant . . . for taking the reader on a journey into undiscovered knowledge." But as informative and entertaining as those journeys may be, the focus of Kidder's energy is on the people who inhabit his books. Speaking of his writing to Smith, Kidder admits that one of his purposes is "to bring people to life on the page." According to reviewers, who agree with Theroux's summation that Kidder's works are "full of the author's genuine love, delight and celebration of the human condition," he does so successfully.

Further Readings About the Author:

Periodicals

- *Business Week*, November 1, 1993, p. 18.
- *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1985.
- *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), December 14, 1985.
- *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1985; September 12, 1993, p. 1, 9.
- *Nation*, April 11, 1994, p. 490.
- *New Leader*, September 6, 1993, p. 18.
- *New Statesman*, May 20, 1994, p. 39.
- *Newsweek*, October 28, 1985.
- *New Yorker*, October 19, 1981.
- *New York Review of Books*, October 8, 1981.
- *New York Times*, August 11, 1981; September 5, 1985; October 3, 1985; August 30, 1989.
- *New York Times Book Review*, August 23, 1981; November 29, 1981; October 6, 1985; September 17, 1989; October 3, 1993, p. 1.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 21, 1989; September 15, 1989; July 26, 1993, p. 50; October 10, 1994, p. 67.
- *Saturday Review*, December, 1981.
- *Time*, October 14, 1985; October 11, 1993, p. 86.
- *Tribune Books* (Chicago), August 13, 1989.

- *Washington Post Book World*, September 9, 1981; October 6, 1985; September 3, 1989; September 19, 1993, p. 4.

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<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom_kentdl>.

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Author Interview

A Conversation with Tracy Kidder, author of MOUNTAINS BEYOND MOUNTAINS

Q: How did you meet Paul Farmer, and what made you want to write about him?

A: I met him in Haiti in 1994. I was doing a story on American soldiers sent there to reinstate the country's democratically elected government. Farmer showed up one night at the barracks and got into an argument with the commander. I wasn't very interested in him then, but a few weeks later I ran into him on the plane to Miami and I began to learn some of the outlines of his life, which I found very interesting. Farmer was the second of six children, and spent most of his childhood in Florida, the whole family living on a bus and a houseboat that was moored in a bayou on the Gulf Coast. He went to Duke on a full scholarship, and then, while he was earning his M.D. and Ph.D at Harvard, he conceived and helped to build an amazing health care system in one of the poorest corners of Haiti. Around the time when I met him, he and his small band of colleagues were about to go to war against the dominant ideologies in international health — eventually they'd actually win some significant battles.

And I was drawn to the man himself. He worked extraordinary hours. In fact, I don't think he sleeps more than an hour or two most nights. Here was a person who seemed to be practicing more than he preached, who seemed to be living, as nearly as any human being can, without hypocrisy. A challenging person, the kind of person whose example can irritate you by making you feel you've never done anything as important, and yet, in his presence, those kinds of feelings tended to vanish. In the past, when I'd imagined a person with credentials like his, I'd imagined someone dour and self-righteous, but he was very friendly and irreverent, and quite funny. He seemed like someone I'd like to know, and I thought that if I did my job well, a reader would feel that way, too.

My favorite teacher once used to talk about how writers often have their best stories bestowed upon them, seemingly by accident. I felt as though, in meeting Farmer, I'd been offered a rare opportunity.

Q: What was Farmer's initial response to your wanting to write a book about him and his work?

A: I think the idea made him uncomfortable. At any rate, it took him some months to make the decision. I can't speak for him, but I think he agreed mainly because he was persuaded by some of his closest friends that a book about his life and work might bring attention both to the issues that he cares most about and also to the little organization that he helped to create — Partners In Health.

Q: What was involved in doing the research for this book?

A: A lot of time in airplanes. I traveled with Farmer to Haiti more times than I can now remember. I also went with him twice to Moscow, and to Siberia, to Peru, to Cuba, to Paris, to Chiapas in Mexico, to Montreal and New York City and, many times, to Boston. And I went to Geneva, Switzerland, with one of his closest colleagues.

I also visited his mother and some of his siblings, and the places of his childhood. I interviewed dozens of people. And I read a great deal, about medicine and public health, about the places where Farmer works, especially about Haiti.

Q: What does the title, MOUNTAINS BEYOND MOUNTAINS, mean?

A: The title comes from a Haitian proverb, which is usually translated as: “Beyond the mountains, more mountains.” According to Farmer, a better translation is: “Beyond mountains there are mountains.” I first heard the proverb from Farmer, and I remember that he told me, “The Haitians, of course, use it in a zillion different ways.” Sometimes it’s used to express the idea that opportunities are inexhaustible, and sometimes as a way of saying that when you surmount one great obstacle you merely gain a clear view of the next one. Of course, those two meanings aren’t inconsistent, and I meant to imply both in the title. To me, the phrase expresses something fundamental about the spirit and the scale and the difficulty of Farmer’s work. The Haitian proverb, by the way, is also a pretty accurate description of the topography of a lot of Haiti, certainly as I experienced it in my hikes with Farmer through the mountains of the central plateau.

Q: Farmer didn’t have a conventional upbringing. Tell us more about that. Do you think Farmer’s childhood was influential in the path he’s chosen?

A: Farmer’s father was a great big man, a ferociously competitive athlete nicknamed Elbows by people who played basketball with him, a sometime salesman and school teacher, with a lot of unconventional ideas and an absolutely pig-headed determination to have his family live by them. He took his family to a town north of Tampa, Florida, where for about five years they all lived in a bus in a campground. Then he took them to a bayou on the Gulf Coast where all eight of them lived in a leaky old 50 foot-long boat. As a boy, Farmer thrived in these unusual circumstances. He was a tall, skinny kid and he disappointed his father by not being much of an athlete, but he excelled in every intellectual department. He seems to have been precocious spiritually as well. At 11 he was given a copy of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, which he read and then immediately re-read in the space of a few days. Then he took it to the public library and said to the woman at the desk, “I want more books like this.” She gave him adventure and fantasy novels and he kept coming back and saying, “This isn’t it.” Finally, she gave him Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, which he devoured, at the age of 11. It wasn’t adventure or fantasy that interested him; it was the epic struggle between good and evil. He didn’t have the words to say that then. Returning the library’s copy of *War and Peace*, he simply told the librarian, “This is it! This is just like *Lord of the Rings*.”

It was a childhood full of family adventures and misadventures and completely unconventional. Farmer himself didn’t like to make too much of the connections between his background and the life he chose. At the very least, though, that childhood was good preparation for a life of travel and doctoring in difficult places like Haiti. He emerged from living on a boat in a bayou with what he called a “very compliant GI system,” and from dinners of hot dog bean soup without much fussiness about food, and from years of cramped quarters with the ability to concentrate anywhere. He could sleep in a dentist’s chair, as he did at night for most of one summer in a clinic in Haiti, and consider it an improvement over other places he had slept, and I imagine that his fondness for a fine hotel and a good bottle of wine had the same origins.

There were other advantages, Farmer insisted. The kind of father who thought it reasonable to house his family in a bus, then a boat, was also the kind who saw no reason

his son shouldn't keep a large aquarium inside. Farmer insisted that he never really felt deprived throughout his childhood, though he did admit, "It *was* pretty strange." After living through some of his father's very public misadventures, it was hard to feel embarrassed or shy in front of anyone. He allowed that growing up as he did also probably relieved him of a homing instinct. "I never had a sense of a home town. It was, 'This is my campground.' Then I got to the bottom of the barrel, and it was 'Oh, *this* is my hometown.'" He meant the central plateau of Haiti.

Q: In your travels with Farmer, what most surprised and interested you? Did you learn something from the experience?

A: The thing about travel with Farmer is that you don't visit the brochure sights. His itinerary is pretty much restricted to visiting hospitals, slums, and prisons. The dreadful places of the world. I hadn't imagined that there were so many of those, and I hadn't known just how dreadful they were. But the trips weren't dreary and depressing, because Farmer and his colleagues were doing something tangible, something meaningful, something that was actually improving those places. This was especially true in Haiti and Peru. I'd say that I learned two things above all. That medicine and public health are a powerful lens for looking at the world. And that a small group of determined people can actually alter some of the pictures seen through that lens. I think that as a very young man Farmer chose to work in one of the most impoverished parts of Haiti because he was moved by the suffering he saw there. But if he'd wanted to prove a point about what is possible in public health, he couldn't have chosen a better site. If you can do a good thing in central Haiti, it stands to reason that you can do it anywhere. And what he and his friends have done and are doing in Haiti — and elsewhere - is nothing short of remarkable.

Q: Has your life or outlook about life changed as a result of spending time with Farmer and writing this book?

A: One of my favorite characters in this book is a woman named Ophelia Dahl. She met Paul Farmer when she was 18 and he was 23. She told me that she remembered, from many years ago, deciding that Farmer was an important person to believe in. Not as a figure to watch from a distance, thinking, Oh, look, there *is* good in the world. Not as a comforting example, but the opposite. As proof that it was possible to put up a fight. As a goad to make others realize that if people could be kept from dying unnecessarily — from what Haitians call "stupid deaths" — then one had to act. I don't plan to give away all my worldly goods and go to work with Farmer in Haiti. For one thing, I'd just get in the way. But I can't tell myself anymore that the great problems of the world, such as the AIDS and TB epidemics, are beyond all hope of amelioration, or of repair. In other words, I don't think I can feel comfortable anymore in this world, by resigning myself to despair on behalf of billions of other people. There's always something one can do. It's not my place to make a fund-raising pitch for Farmer and his organization, Partners In Health. Well, actually, I don't know why it isn't my place. I happened onto something remarkable and I sat down to try to describe it to others. I hope what I've written is artful. I believe it is at least accurate and truthful. And one true fact is that Farmer's organization, Partners In Health, represents a real antidote to despair. A person with a little money to give away can send it to Partners In Health and be certain that it will be

used well. 95 percent of the money that's donated to Partners In Health goes to pay for direct services to people who are both destitute and sick — in Boston, in Russia, in Chiapas, in Peru, and especially in Haiti, where the poorest and the sickest people in our hemisphere reside. A donation to Partners In Health of, say, \$200 will save an impoverished Haitian from dying a horrible death from tuberculosis.

Q: How does this book differ from your other projects?

A: Well, for one thing this book has a pretty large geographical spread, whereas all my previous books are set in New England. And all the others are about what might be called "ordinary people." Of course, no one is ordinary. But Farmer is less ordinary than anyone I've ever met. This is the main reason I wrote this book in the first person, something I'd done in only one other book. After I'd spent a lot of time with Farmer, I began to feel that altruism was plausible after all, indeed maybe even normal. But the sacrifices he's made aren't usual, and I knew that readers of my book would need an everyman, someone a lot less virtuous than Farmer, to interpret him and to make him believable. Someone to testify, in effect, that this guy is for real, and someone who could register the occasional discomfort that anyone would feel in such a person's company. Finally, although I like to think that the subjects I've written about in my other books are important, I don't think there's much question but that the subject of this book is more important. After all, what it's about at bottom is the attempt of one small group of people to heal a sick world.

Q: Farmer doesn't work alone. He is surrounded by some extraordinary people. Can you tell us a little about some of them?

A: There are more than a thousand people working for Partners In Health these days. They range from Haitian peasants who have been trained as community health workers to extremely bright young American epidemiologists, medical students, and doctors, who have enlisted to work in places such as central Haiti and Siberia and the slums of Lima, Peru - some of them work for nothing, some earn much less than they could elsewhere and some raise their own salaries through grants. Ophelia Dahl has been involved in Farmer's work from the start, and she's a crucial member of Partners In Health, the manager, the peacekeeper. She's a warm and charming person, and she knows how to manage Farmer and Farmer's colleague, Jim Yong Kim. Kim is, like Farmer, a Brigham doctor. He joined up only a few months after Partners In Health was founded. He's brilliant, an inspiring speaker, a fountain of ideas, and indefatigable.

Finally, and maybe most important, there's a man named Tom White. He built a small family business into one of the largest heavy construction firms in Boston. He and Farmer met when Farmer was still a doctor in training. He founded Partners In Health along with Farmer and until recently provided most of the money for its projects, millions and millions of dollars over the past 20 years. White is in his eighties now, and has given away almost all of his large fortune. He told me once, "Sometimes I think how much money I used to have before I met Paul and Jim. But that's all right. If I go to a restaurant and they give me a steak, I can only eat half of it anymore." He plans, he told me, to leave this life without a nickel. I think it's accurate to say that White has lifted death sentences from thousands of people, and the organization, the movement, that he helped to start may in the end save millions.

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul Farmer finds ways of connecting with people whose backgrounds are vastly different from his own. How does he do this? Are his methods something to which we can all aspire?
2. Paul Farmer believes that “if you’re making sacrifices...you’re trying to lessen some psychic discomfort” (24). Do you agree with the way that Farmer makes personal sacrifices? For what kinds of things do you make sacrifices, and when do you expect others to make them?
3. Kidder points out that Farmer is dissatisfied with the current distribution of money and medicine in the world. What is your opinion of the distribution of these forms of wealth? What would you change, if you could?
4. Farmer designed a study to find out whether there was a correlation between his Haitian patients’ belief in in sorcery as the cause of TB and their recovery from that disease through medical treatment. What did he discover about the relative importance of cultural beliefs among his impoverished patients and their material circumstances? Do you think that this discovery might have broad application — for instance, to situations in the United States?
5. The title of the book comes from the Haitian proverb, “Beyond mountains there are mountains.” What does the saying mean in the context of the culture it comes from, and what does it mean in relation to Farmer’s work? Can you think of other situations—personal or societal—for which this proverb might be apt?
6. Paul Farmer had an eccentric childhood and his accomplishments have been unique. Do you see a correlation between the way Farmer was raised and how he’s chosen to live his life? How has your own background influenced your life and your decisions?
7. Compare Zanmi Lasante to the Socios en Salud project in Carabayllo. Consider how the projects got started, the relationships between doctors and patients, and also the involvement of the international community.
8. Kidder explains that Farmer and his colleagues at PIH were asked by some academics, “Why do you call your patients poor people? They don’t call themselves poor people.” How do Farmer and Jim Kim confront the issue of how to speak honestly about the people they work to help? How do they learn to speak honestly with each other, and what is the importance of the code words and acronyms that they share (for example, AMC’s, or Areas of Moral Clarity)?
9. Ophelia Dahl and Tom White both play critical roles in this book and in the story *Partners in Health* . How are their acts of compassion different from Farmer’s?

10. Tracy Kidder has written elsewhere that the choice of point of view is the most important an author makes in constructing a work of narrative non-fiction. He has also written that finding a point of view that works is a matter of making a choice among tools, and that the choice should be determined, not by theory, but by an author's immersion in the materials of the story itself. Kidder has never before written a book in which he made himself a character. Can you think of some of the reasons he might have had for doing this in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*?

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