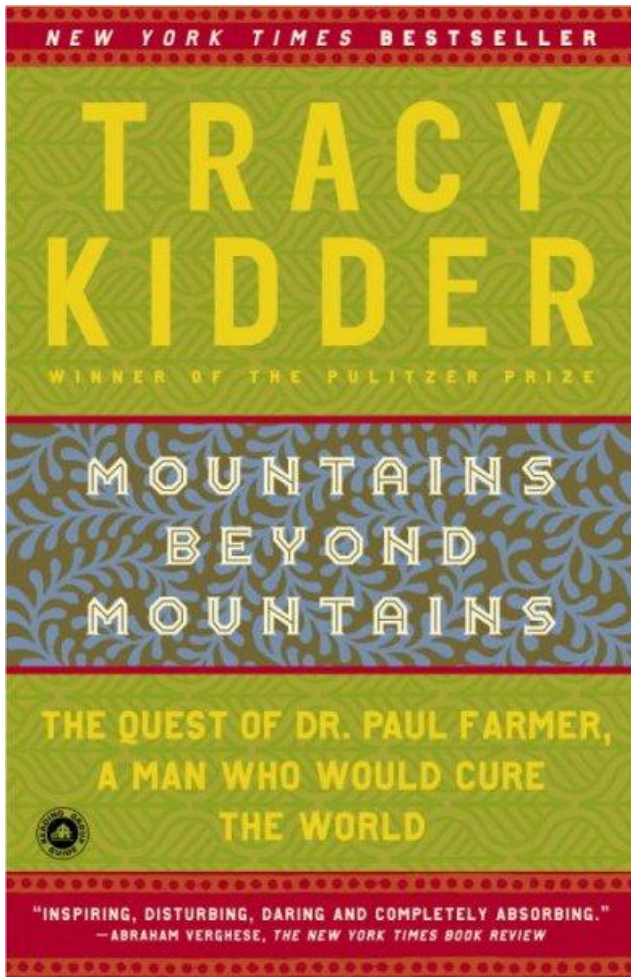


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308883>

### About the Book



Tracy Kidder is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the author of the bestsellers *The Soul of a New Machine*, *House*, *Among Schoolchildren*, and *Home Town*. He has been described by the *Baltimore Sun* as the "master of the non-fiction narrative." This powerful and inspiring new book shows how one person can make a difference, as Kidder tells the true story of a gifted man who is in love with the world and has set out to do all he can to cure it.

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.

*Mountains Beyond Mountains* takes us from Harvard to Haiti, Peru, Cuba, and Russia as Farmer changes minds and practices through his dedication to the philosophy that "the only real nation is humanity" - a philosophy that is embodied in the small public charity he founded, Partners In Health. He enlists the help of the Gates Foundation, George Soros, the U.N.'s World Health Organization, and others in his quest to cure the world. At the heart of this book is the example of a life based on hope, and on an understanding of the truth of the Haitian proverb "Beyond mountains there are mountains": as you solve one problem, another problem presents itself, and so you go on and try to solve that one too. Source: <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375506161>

## **About the Author** *Source:*

<http://www.randomhouse.com/author/results.pperl?authorid=15598>

Tracy Kidder graduated from Harvard, studied at the University of Iowa, and served as an army officer in Vietnam. He has won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Award, and many other literary prizes. He lives in Massachusetts and Maine.

## **Reviews**

### *New York Times Sunday Book Reviews*

*Mountains Beyond Mountains* is inspiring, disturbing, daring and completely absorbing. It will rattle our complacency; it will prick our conscience. One senses that Farmer's life and work has affected Kidder, and it is a measure of Kidder's honesty that he is willing to reveal this to the reader.

### *Publishers Weekly*

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.

### *Library Journal*

Farmer's work is fascinating--as is the author's compassionate portrayal of the lives of the Haitians with whom his subject lives and works; if the book has a flaw, it is that it attempts to cover too much territory.

### *Booklist*

Kidder portrays a genuinely inspired and heroic individual, whose quest for justice will make every reader examine her or his life in a new light.

## **Literary Criticism**

### *Tracy Kidder*

Four celebrated nonfiction books in a little more than a decade--*The Soul of a New Machine* (1981), *House* (1985), *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), and *Old Friends* (1993)--have propelled Tracy Kidder to rarefied heights, revealing a writer of rare intelligence and virtuosity. Not only have critics applauded each of these books, but Kidder was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Soul of a New Machine* and has been heralded as one of the most gifted voices of his generation. Since 1974, when "The Death of Major Great," Kidder's masterful short story about the horror of Vietnam, appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he has often dazzled the literati, crafting exquisite narratives that ennoble and celebrate the daily activities of ordinary people and artfully weaving stories drawn from the rich milieu of common human experience. The polished grace of Kidder's prose reminds one of Joseph Addison's prose in its unassuming elegance. Like Addison and John McPhee, his closest literary kin, Kidder writes with great warmth about the people who inhabit his books, endowing them with

strength and nobility. He unearths nuggets of profound truth in seemingly mundane human endeavors; he clothes the common with dignity, exalting old and familiar ways, as he demonstrated with *House* when he observed carpenters and an architect at work for eight months, and with *Among Schoolchildren*, which required him to sit in a classroom with twenty fifth-graders for another nine months, during which he missed only two days of class. Out of those experiences Kidder produced nonfiction masterpieces, works that rank with the best of this era. In *The Literary Journalists* (1984) Norman Sims characterizes the literary journalist as one who "confirms that the crucial moments of everyday life contain great drama and substance." This is precisely what Kidder does.

Born 12 November 1945 in New York City, the son of Reine Kidder, a high-school teacher, and Henry Maynard Kidder, a lawyer, John Tracy Kidder has fond memories of his childhood. He remembers his mother reciting Charles Dickens and Herman Melville to him, nurturing his early love of reading, which, he says, is "an experience that leaves you in some small way transformed." He began writing short stories at Harvard, where he majored in English, modeling them after the styles of those writers who have most influenced his career: McPhee, A. J. Liebling, and George Orwell. In his work one can find McPhee's meticulous attention to detail, Liebling's stylistic grace, and Orwell's intellectual skepticism.

Kidder admits that he draws freely from the work of each. "I certainly don't mean in any way to compare myself to them," he said in an interview with David Bennett on 3 October 1995. "They're just wonderful. So, too, is another writer I greatly admire, Joseph Mitchell. And I'm also a fan of Richard Rhodes; he's a fine talent. I also read a lot of fiction. . . . I like [John] Updike and [John] Cheever, Peter Matthiesen, and a fellow named Stuart Dybek. . . . And I've always been a fan of [Norman] Mailer, [Truman] Capote, [Herman] Melville, and many others."

Kidder served in the army from 1967 to 1969, becoming a first lieutenant in Vietnam, where he worked in intelligence. Unlike Michael Herr, John Sack, David Halberstam, and Philip Caputo, all of whom were scarred and transformed by the war, Kidder emerged relatively unscathed, both physically and emotionally. He wrote artful stories about Vietnam for the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 1970s, receiving high acclaim, but he admits the war did not affect him the way it did many other writers:

Of course, whenever you're in an experience like Vietnam, it is bound to influence your work; it's inevitable, but I really don't think it greatly shaped me as a writer. I was young and didn't pay much attention to what was going on around me. Certainly the war didn't influence me the way it did others, others who, incidentally, produced superb work about that experience. I guess Vietnam touched me in some way, but it had no lasting influence on my writing. For one thing, I was never in serious danger there--I wasn't in combat. Basically, I was just a kid growing up.

Kidder's stories about Vietnam belie his words; he has produced extraordinary portrayals of his intrigues there and the men he met along the way. "The Death of Major Great" (1974), "Soldiers of Misfortune" (1978), and "In Quarantine" (1980), all

published in the *"Atlantic Monthly"*, are superb essays that resonate with insight and compassion, each ranking among the finest reporting to come out of Vietnam. After returning from the war Kidder married Frances Toland in 1971; they have two children. Unemployed and having little success as a writer at this time, Kidder enrolled in the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, hoping to learn that special magic that makes words come alive on the page. He aspired to be a writer--essentially the only thing he ever wanted to be--but his prose needed polish, and Kidder needed seasoning. The workshop helped: he wrote his first book, *The Road to Yuba City: A Journey into the Juan Corona Murders* (1974), while still a student. He earned a master's degree after three years, finishing in 1974, and gained a deep respect for the magic of language.

"The best thing about that place is that it's a nice refuge," Kidder said in a 1983 interview in *Contemporary Authors*. Kidder, who now lives in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, in the heart of his beloved New England, added about his experience at Iowa that "being there made me realize that there were an awful lot of other people in the world who were trying to do what I was attempting to do. It was good in that way. Humiliating, so to speak. Iowa gave me some feeling of legitimacy. At least I was earning a little money and I could call myself a writer."

Connections he made at Iowa also helped advance his career. He met Dan Wakefield, a contributing editor for the *Atlantic Monthly* who recommended Kidder to the magazine, which commissioned his work on *The Road to Yuba City*, an investigation of Juan Corona, a labor organizer accused of murdering twenty-five migrant farmworkers in California. Kidder immersed himself in the assignment, hopping trains to California, living among the poor and downtrodden in decrepit shanties and boardinghouses, hanging out and eating in seedy missions, mingling with migrant workers. He took a job as a tree thinner, hoping to gain deeper insight into what he calls the "subculture of migrant farm workers, a world of rootlessness, exploitation, and despair."

Kidder came to know the key players in the case well: he interviewed Corona at length, talked daily with Corona's flamboyant lawyer, Richard Hawk, who bungled Corona's defense at critical times, especially during closing arguments when Hawk, who had promised to contradict the prosecution's most damaging evidence, simply rested the case, sealing his client's conviction. Kidder also conversed often with the sheriff's deputies and detectives involved in the investigation and established a rapport with the farmworkers, though he was never able to penetrate their private lives.

Despite Kidder's unabashed enthusiasm, *The Road to Yuba City* suffered because of his inexperience. He failed to develop his characters fully and to paint vivid pictures of the bizarre world into which he had ventured. The writing, stilted and pedestrian, bore little resemblance to the prose in *The Soul of a New Machine* or in any of Kidder's other major works. Critics panned *The Road to Yuba City*, calling it the work of a novice. "In the end, Kidder's book is a sad one, both thematically and stylistically," John M. Coward wrote in his essay on Kidder in *A Sourcebook of American Literary*

*Journalists: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre* (1992). Coward concluded that "In spite of Coronas successful prosecution, the murders were so bizarre, the evidence so disputed, and the major figures so disappointing that the book was bound to leave readers unsatisfied."

Kidder never attempted to defend the work--for the most part, he agreed with the critics. He used the first person awkwardly, as if he were intruding rather than reporting, and wrote a book that was shallow, timid, and transparent. He now uses the first person sparingly; straightforward omniscient narration better showcases his talent, as his major works have shown. *The Road to Yuba City* was "the first piece of journalism I had ever done, and I really didn't know what I was doing," Kidder said in 1995. "I can't say anything intelligent about that book, except that I learned never to write about a murder case. The whole experience was disgusting, so disgusting, in fact, that in 1981 I went to Doubleday and bought back the rights to the book. I don't want *The Road to Yuba City* to see the light of day again."

He quickly rebounded, writing "The Death of Major Great" even before *The Road to Yuba City* hit the bookstands. Kidder recounted the murder of a hated American commanding officer by his own troops, weaving the killing into an account of his travels through parts of Vietnam with a sidekick, Pancho, an enlisted man who hated "lifers" and officers, during which the two encountered a myriad of horrors that included savagery, thoughts of suicide, deaths, and senseless atrocities. In the story Kidder crafted a chilling tale: in three pages, he captured the madness of the war, evoking memories of Ernest Hemingway with terse representation of fact, rigid detachment, and understatement of emotion. After the slaughter of civilians in a village, Kidder and Pancho looked in the doorway of the shack and inside on a straw mat a naked man and woman in intimate embrace lay bleeding. Kidder refused to elaborate; he let the sentence stand on its own, preferring spare description, a literary ploy he used to great effect throughout the story.

Consider his flirtation with suicide: "As we traveled on, my tongue found out a sore inside my lip. When it vanished, nothing. Then my hair began to fall. Despondent, I tried to murder myself, but Pancho caught me and took away my weapons." No affectation, no belaboring the point: Kidder weeded out the unnecessary, the minutiae that would detract from a powerful, riveting story. The reader knows that Kidder is in great despair, though he never says this explicitly; the reader knows, too, that Kidder is deeply disillusioned, though he never says it. He explains in his 1995 interview: "A writer I admire once told me that when you write about time, you never use the word 'time.'" He fashioned a compelling narrative, a gripping account of the insanity in which he found himself, fusing elegant understatement with spare yet precise prose. Critics noticed. Kidder won the Atlantic First Award for best short story, a redemption of sorts after *The Road to Yuba City* failure.

He spent the remainder of the 1970s refining his skills, writing a series of impressive essays for the *Atlantic Monthly*. He explored such diverse subjects as railroads, nuclear power, solar energy, water pollution, and life in the Caribbean while also revisiting his Vietnam experience for two acclaimed pieces, "Soldiers of Misfortune" in

1978 and "In Quarantine" in 1980. He polished his journalistic skills, becoming a consummate reporter, a talent that served him well when he began work on *The Soul of a New Machine*, his first book after the failed experiment with *The Road to Yuba City*. Somberness, melancholy, and a tortured sense of desperation fill Kidder's accounts of his Vietnam service. He writes often about Pancho, a sleazy misfit, an enlisted man who hates the military and everything about it. Drawn together by the war, they are a strange couple, complete opposites: Kidder is elegant, refined, Harvard educated, and dignified; Pancho is short, chubby, foulmouthed, uneducated, and lacking even the most rudimentary social grace. He calls fellow grunts flatdicks, curses first sergeants, and loathes officers. Their relationship is a metaphor for the war, a strange conjoining of disparate elements. Kidder chronicles their experiences in "In Quarantine" as they traverse the jungles and paddies of Vietnam, planning an escape from the war by catching a boat and riding to California. They fail miserably, simply riding around in circles for a few days before they land on the China Sea coast. They wander for several days before encountering a group of soldiers who have been quarantined because of an outbreak of contagious herpes--soldiers who are now *profiles*, a military term for the sick and infirm who are no longer able to fight. Pancho concocts an outrageous plan to rescue the profiles and spread herpes on a global scale. Kidder explains Pancho's scheme: "He paced, drinking beer with one hand and waving the green gun with the other, telling me that he would liberate the 'flatdicks' from the 'big lifer's' tyranny, then lead his profiles back to 'the world,' where the ones who still could would start epidemics, beginning at the homes of the first sergeants and officers whose addresses he had memorized." This raw, primal, insane scheme is, to Kidder, Vietnam in microcosm. Nothing there made much sense; it was a strange, surreal world, a world of madness--and Kidder admits he did not see the worse of it, isolated as he was, away from heavy combat.

Kidder reached back into his Vietnam experiences for another memorable story, "Soldiers of Misfortune." Published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in March 1978, it details the shameful treatment veterans received after the war. Kidder visited Max Cleland, head of the Veterans Administration, a vet who had been horribly ravaged in Vietnam, suffering massive injuries that almost killed him. In a corner of Cleland's office Kidder observed that an "odd bronzed object sits in one corner. It looks as if it might have been some medieval instrument of torture, and I felt embarrassed to stare at it. At its base is a squarish foot. A short, hollow, conical leg, about the size and shape of an inverted wastebasket, rises from it. A few inches above the top there is a medal hoop, wired to the device like a halo. This is one of the prosthetic training legs--he called them 'little stubbies'--in which Max Cleland clumped around for too many months after he got back from Vietnam."

On a hilltop at Khe Sahn, near the end of his tour of duty, during which he had distinguished himself as a signal officer with the First Air Cavalry Division, Cleland reached down to pick up what he thought was a spent grenade. In a microsecond the explosion shattered his world. "Cleland came from Georgia," Kidder writes, adding: He was a pretty good basketball player at Stetson College. When he reached down for the grenade, he was six foot three, a fair-haired, husky youth with the sort of glorious designs on the future that JFK inspired in many well-bred boys. A moment later, even

before he had even touched the fragmentation grenade, an awful metamorphosis took place. He was knocked backward. His ears still ringing from the explosion, he looked at himself and saw that his right hand and wrist were no longer there. His right leg was gone, and he could see his left foot sitting a little distance away in his jungle boot. Eventually the whole leg would also have to come off. He didn't look again. Kidder lamented the sad plight of veterans. He visited them in VA hospitals, crafting moving accounts of the problems they faced, the demons they could not exorcise, and the nightmares they could not escape. He won the Sidney Hillman Foundation Prize for "Soldiers of Misfortune," one of the most passionate and sympathetic pieces ever written about the survivors of Vietnam.

He also tackled highly technical subjects for the *Atlantic Monthly*, writing splendid essays about nuclear energy and solar power. In "Tinkering With Sunshine" (1977) he explored the feasibility of using solar power on a massive scale, concluding that the possibilities appeared limitless. He argued the merits of using natural sources such as the sun and wind for energy, positing that fears of energy shortages would abate because solar energy is "invulnerable to nation-crippling accidents and sabotage." Kidder next turned his attention to the debate on nuclear power, crafting a fine essay, "The Nonviolent War against Nuclear Power (September 1978). He centered the article on a group of antinuclear activists, the Clamshell Alliance, focusing on Sam Lovejoy, "the Trotsky of the no-nuke movement."

His articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* about the environment ("Sludge," 1975), life in the Caribbean ("Winter in St. Lucia," 1976), railroads ("Trains in Trouble," 1976, and "Railroads: Aboard the Ghost Trains," 1978) padded his résumé and expanded his range, preparing him to write clearly about esoteric subjects, a skill he put to great use in the late 1970s when he sat down to compose *The Soul of a New Machine*. Kidder feels the experience he gained writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* was invaluable when he tackled the strange subculture of the computer world, where the jargon is largely incomprehensible to laymen, where engineers deal in geometric schematics, Boolean algebra, binary arithmetic, integrated circuitry, Booth's Algorithm, and microsequencing. Unfamiliarity with the subject matter did not faze Kidder. "I was used to that," he said in his 1983 interview:

I had done some articles for the *Atlantic Monthly* on technical subjects that I previously knew nothing about. If you're a journalist who doesn't cover a single beat, it's a familiar feeling to know nothing about what's going on. So, it wasn't all that unusual. It is a rather painful feeling not to know what the people around you are talking about. But that's also an impetus to figure it out. This topic was a little more forbidding than some things, that's true.

Kidder worked for two and a half years on the book, chronicling the struggle of engineers at Data General Corporation to create a thirty-two-bit supermini computer in eighteen months. He spent eight months at the corporation, watching the "Hardy Boys," the hardware specialists, wire and reconfigure the computer so that it would be compatible with the microcodes developed by the "Microkids," programmers who developed the code that fused hardware and software. Chief project engineer Tom

West and his top lieutenant, Carl Alsing, directed the activities of the young college graduates working under them, relentlessly driving the kids to produce the "Eagle," a supermini computer West thought would capture the market, overtaking Digital Equipment Corporation's "VAX." West's ultimate goal was lofty: he aspired to build a computer that would not only topple the competition but also vault Data General into the Fortune 500.

Intense, driven, and obsessed, West, head of the Eclipse Group, demanded total allegiance to the project, hiring only recent college graduates who would devote themselves body and soul to the assignment. Over and over he stressed what he considered a vital point: the engineers building the Eagle were not just constructing a new computer; they were designing a product that would transform the computer industry, building a powerful new state-of-the-art machine that would make others obsolete. They were involved, West said, in a historic project, one that would revolutionize human communication.

The Hardy Boys and Microkids responded to West's exhortations; they sacrificed hobbies, free time, friends, even family in their zeal to build the machine, working fourteen- to sixteen-hour days, basking in the creative freedom they enjoyed. Kidder described them in 1995 as "eccentric knights errant, clad in blue jeans and open collars, seeking with awesome intensity the grail of technological achievement." Most thrived on the pressure; a few cracked, such as the young engineer who left a note on his computer: "I'm going to a commune and will deal with no unit of time shorter than a season."

West and Alsing at times felt guilty, but never for long. "I felt like one of those old supervisors from the 1800s who used to hire children and work them eighteen hours a day," Alsing said in *The Soul of a New Machine*. The quote contained great truth; even though the young engineers were intelligent, highly skilled, and among the best young graduates in the country, they had acquired an assembly-line mentality, trapped by the orthodoxies and rigidities of a highly structured machine, the corporation. Corporate structure often inhibits creativity, and several of the kids succumbed to the demands imposed on them, simply walking away from the job.

The project consumed West, who, Kidder writes, "was forty but looked younger. He was thin and had a long narrow face and a mane of brown hair that spilled over the back of his collar. These days he went to work in freshly laundered blue jeans or pressed khakis, in leather moccasins, and in solid-colored long-sleeved shirts, with the sleeves rolled up in precise folds, like the pages of a letter, well above his bone elbows." From the project West led, Kidder spun a masterful tale, a story of high intrigue and compelling drama. *The Soul of a New Machine* reads like a fictional thriller with one notable exception: all of it is true. "I don't invent dialogue and I don't use composite characters," Kidder said in his 1995 interview.

Critics raved. In *The New York Times Book Review* (29 November 1981) S. C. Florman wrote that Kidder had endowed the story "with such pace, texture and poetic implication that he has elevated it to a high level of narrative art." Kidder's ability to



render highly technical subject matter comprehensible to laymen drew universal praise. Yet, during his undergraduate days at Harvard, Kidder refused to take courses in science or technology--he felt they were beyond his comprehension and avoided them at all costs. He shed his fears, however, when the time came to research *The Soul of a New Machine*. "Technology seems so forbidding, I suspect, because of all of its trade jargon," Kidder said. "It's a handy shorthand--but it's also a formidable veil. It's possible for almost anyone to understand it once he gets through that veil." Richard Todd, Kidder's editor at the *Atlantic Monthly*, first suggested the book. Ambivalent about tackling such a complex subject, Kidder drew strength from his journalistic models, McPhee, Orwell, and Liebling, reasoning that any of the three would have succeeded masterfully in telling such a tale. He came to understand that a large and complex subject could best be understood by focusing on what he called its "smaller aspects." Critics later compared *The Soul of a New Machine* to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* (1970), Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), and Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* (1979). Other critics wrote that Kidder's sensitive handling of a complex subject evoked memories of McPhee and Mailer, both of whom wrote with great expertise about esoteric subjects.

In 1995 Kidder noted that he had not read *The Soul of a New Machine* in "seven or eight years, probably more." Furthermore, he had read it only once. Over the years he has developed an aversion to dredging up the past; he tends "to kill things off and move on." He prefers not to read past works. "I've always regretted it when I go back and reread," he said. "So I stopped doing it. I see things I could have done a lot better, or things I did well then that I'm having trouble doing now." It's depressing." Despite all the hoopla over *The Soul of a New Machine*--and the subsequent rise in computer sales--Kidder refused to use a computer until the late 1980s when he was working on *Among Schoolchildren*. "I don't need one," he told an interviewer in 1983. He continued:

I have an electric typewriter. I have my own way of doing things, and I'm a little superstitious, perhaps, a little bit set in my ways. I see no reason to change ... if I were a daily reporter, I'd feel very differently about it; if speed were of the essence, you know. Sometimes my deadlines seem excruciating, but when I'm doing articles I usually have a month or more, so I really don't need one of those things. Kidder now admits that even though he uses one, he is still "not so keen on computers. I think they distract from the writing process.... I usually start writing my books in longhand. It's just something I feel comfortable with."

He admits that the timing of *The Soul of a New Machine* was fortunate, coming when computers were just beginning to appear everywhere. "The personal computer market was opening up," he recalled, "and people were making a whole lot of money off them. In fact, the book still has a following; I continue to hear from people who still talk about it." *The Soul of a New Machine* won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. It remains one of the most acclaimed nonfiction works of this generation, a book that gained worldwide praise, vaulting Kidder into literature's stratosphere. Since its success, he has been on a white-hot binge, becoming one of the preeminent voices in contemporary nonfiction.

Kidder is not given to overstatement and refuses to engage in hyperbole. Told that his book helped ignite the "computer revolution," he merely shrugged, then disagreed, saying, "*Revolution* is a funny word: every time anything changes, every time there's anything new, there's somebody around who's willing to call it a revolution." He added: "Revolution implies a great social and political upheaval, and I think that in those terms the computer is a conservative instrument. . . . Like most new things, it's used by the people who are in power to increase their power. I'm not denouncing it on those grounds necessarily, but that's a fact."

The aesthetic of building a house--the initial excitement of prospective owners, the creativity of the architect, the daily grind by carpenters and construction workers to meet deadlines, the give-and-take between members of different social classes working to achieve a common goal--was the next subject that captured Kidder's attention. Few writers would attempt to describe the building of a house; it seems too mundane, too simple--and yet Kidder viewed it as a challenge. Thus inspired, he wrote *House*, which, like *The Soul of a New Machine*, dazzled critics, revealing a writer who could transform the most ordinary human experience into a rich, provocative narrative.

Symbolic realities pervade *House*--the book is as much about social class and class distinctions as it is about building, as Kidder admits. Larger truths and higher meanings emerge as the owners of the home, Jonathan and Judith Souweine, supervise construction of their dwelling on the Holyoke Range, on the outskirts of Amherst, Massachusetts. Kidder avoids talk about symbolic realities, reasoning that they sound like "a coat of paint on a piece of writing, added later to achieve academic respectability"--a belief not shared by Rhodes, also a Pulitzer Prize winner and a friend of Kidder's, who admitted in an unpublished interview with Bennett on 10 May 1995 that symbolic realities are "terribly important" to his work, that "the universe does indeed show forth in a writer's work, whether he's aware of it or not." Kidder thinks more in terms of "resonance." He says the "best works of literature have a close attachment to the particular. You pluck a guitar string and another one vibrates." "Resonances" and "symbolic realities" are essentially the same thing, paths to the same destination separated only by semantic differences.

"*House* is about social class," Kidder said in 1995, adding:

It's about how people from different economic and social backgrounds are able to come together for a common purpose. And it's my favorite book. I enjoyed the research, hanging out with the carpenters, getting outside, watching the construction process from start to finish. . . . You start with this empty piece of ground and wind up with something beautiful. I know it seems mundane, but I found it very enjoyable. Kidder traces the activities of seven people--the Souweines (whose house is being built); architect Bill Rawn; and four counterculturist builders, the Apple Corps--from the first blueprints to finished product. Rawn, a Yale graduate, won a Boston Architects Society Award for the house, the first he ever designed and the first the Souweines ever owned. They had shared a duplex for eight years with another couple;

now they seized an opportunity to buy land from Judith Souweine's parents, purchasing a site with what Kidder describes as:

a deep-looking woods on one edge. On another, there's a pasture, which turns into the precipitous, forested, publicly owned hills known as the Holyoke Range. And to the north and east there's a panorama. Look north and you see a hillside orchard topped with two giant maples locally known as Castor and Pollux. Look a little to the east and your view extends out over a broad valley.

It is a picturesque view, one the Souweines will enjoy. Jonathan is an Ivy Leaguer who received his undergraduate degree at Columbia University before attending Harvard Law School. Judith, with a doctorate in educational psychology, has written books, lectured, and delivered papers at conferences and seminars. The Apple Corps, four equal partners in a small building company that includes Jim Locke, Alex Ghiselin, Ned Krutsky, and Richard Gougeon, are free spirits, talented but not particularly driven, and efficient. They pride themselves on the work they have done around New England--they helped build roughly two hundred houses in a decade. They do not advertise, do not even list their company's name in the phone book. Word of mouth keeps their business alive; they are good, and other builders know it, recommending the Apple Corps to prospective clients. Money does not drive them--each partner averages about \$20,000 a year.

*House* centers on the building of relationships between the architect, the builders, and the Souweines. Kidder crafts masterful portraits of the individuals involved; he paints wonderful pictures, showing clear class distinctions among the participants. The builders understand that they inhabit a different world from that of the Souweines, that their lives are different in profound ways. Yet class differences do not impede the building process, though the builders argue and haggle with the Souweines over costs and chastise Rawn for underdeveloped designs on a staircase. Construction costs eventually hit \$146,000; the Apple Corps and the Souweines dicker over the final payment of \$660, the Souweines claiming they do not owe it, the builders protesting that they indeed do. In the end the Apple Corps clears just \$3,000.

According to Paul Goldberger in *The New York Times Book Review* (6 October 1985) Kidder tells his tale "with such clarity, intelligence and grace it makes you wonder why no one has written a book like it before. In the way that a well-told story of a marriage, or of a love affair or of a child's coming of age fills you with a sense that you are reading about a fundamental human experience for the first time, so it is with *House*."

The most endearing characters are the four builders, whom Goldberger describes as "men in their mid-30's who, more or less by themselves, built the Souweines' house . . . [and] are somewhere between businessmen and what were once called hippie carpenters." Kidder, who became particularly fond of the four men, hanging out with them for eight months and getting to know them well, said, "It was great being outside, watching these guys, talking to them. I really got to like them." With

reviewers praising Kidder's virtuosity, *House* became an instant hit, and critics again applauded, heralding Kidder as one of the most eloquent of the literary journalists. His next project, *Among Schoolchildren*, published in 1989, earned Kidder even greater acclaim. He spent nine months in the classroom of Chris Zajac with twenty fifth-graders at Kelly School, in the "Flats" of Holyoke, Massachusetts, a depressed area beset by unemployment and poverty. Kidder attended school from the first day to the last, missing one day because he was sick, another because he simply played hooky. Like the students, he arrived each morning at eight o'clock and remained throughout the day. He sat in a desk in front of the classroom, next to Zajac's, and observed. He took a staggering ten thousand pages of notes and grew particularly fond of Zajac. "She was thirty-four," Kidder writes in the book, bringing her into focus by adding:

She wore a white skirt and yellow sweater and a thin gold necklace, which she held in her fingers, as if holding her own reins, while waiting for children to answer. Her hair was black with a hint of Irish red.... She strode across the room, her arms swinging high and her hands in small fists. Taking her stand in front of the green chalkboard, discussing the rules with her new class, she repeated sentences.... Her hands kept very busy. They sliced the air and made karate chops to mark off sentences. They extended straight out like a traffic cop's, halting illegal maneuvers yet to be perpetrated.

Kidder wrote the book from Zajac's point of view, sharing with her the triumphs of teaching, the heartbreaks, the joys, and the futility. Passionate, devoted, indomitable, she taught with exuberance, praising when she should, chastising when she had to. So dedicated to her profession that she spent large parts of her free summers preparing for the coming year, Zajac despaired when her students, about half of whom were Puerto Rican, fell short of their potential and worried when they became lax in their preparation. She chided and encouraged, using the means available to her to push students to their best. At times her best efforts, all her preparation and worry, did not work; students simply were too ill prepared to grasp what she taught, as they are in most schools across the United States. Kidder celebrates Zajac's teaching while also indicting the American education system for its many shortcomings.

"I became quite fond of her," Kidder said of Zajac in his 1995 interview. "She was a dedicated teacher who wasn't getting much help, something that happens in schools all over America. The sad thing was that some of these kids never had a chance to begin with; their futures had already been predetermined. And it's sad to see, because these kids can't help it that they were born into poverty or into situations in which learning simply didn't matter, wasn't even talked about." Kidder also confessed that *Among Schoolchildren* became one of his toughest assignments--it exhausted him, frazzled him. He explained: "The research was grueling. I was there each morning at 8, and I'm not used to institutional controls. I'm not good in situations like that; I could never work a 9-to-5 job. It would drive me crazy. And I had a hard time writing the book. All those notes to go through, so much to remember. It was a hard job." After the experience he insists that there must be educational reform: administrators too often ignore the plight of the teacher in the classroom. "Most

efforts at reform usually are conducted independently of the experience, knowledge, wishes of teachers," he said. "And that's a terrible mistake . . . since, for better or worse, education is what happens in these little rooms."

Zajac emerges as a noble figure, a heroine, a symbol of all that is good and rich and honorable in education. Kidder lavishes her with praise. He also shares with the students "their joys, their catastrophes, and their small but essential triumphs." They often test Zajac's will and patience. Pedro, who can barely read, causes her deep concern; Clarence, hyperactive and disruptive, frequently interrupts the daily rhythms of the classroom, forcing Zajac to discipline him again and again. She nevertheless plows ahead, dispensing wit and wisdom, though she knows that she has no control over the parents who never come to conferences, the indifference to education she sees in Holyoke, or the poverty in which some of her students live. She understands that it is terribly difficult for fifth-graders to study in rat-infested apartments, especially if they are hungry, most especially if they have been told that no amount of studying will help them overcome their poverty. Across the nation dismal test scores, crime in the classroom, and escalating dropout rates plague the American educational system, and Kidder urges change, presenting as a good starting point for reform, Chris Zajac, one good teacher in a system plagued by ineptness. Kidder reserves for her devotion to teaching a deep reverence. Critics again lauded Kidder, calling *Among Schoolchildren* his most important work.

Kidder's books read like novels; he infuses them with all the tools of fiction. He bristles, however, when someone suggests that he is a novelist, as an editorialist once did, writing, "Tracy Kidder . . . has won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *The Soul of a New Machine*." Norman Sims, chair of the department of journalism at the University of Massachusetts and a friend of Kidder, explained in *The Literary Journalists* (1984): "Kidder read it and shook his head in disbelief. A *novel*, an invented narrative. It was a little irritating to him after he had practically lived in the basement of Data General Corporation for eight months, and spent two and a half years on the book. Kidder took great pains to get the quotations right, to catch all the details accurately."

Of all contemporary literary journalists Kidder's work comes closest to Tom Wolfe's notion of what literary journalism should be: journalism that, as he says in his introduction to *The New Journalism* (1973), "reads like a novel," journalism that shows "the reader the subjective or emotional life of the characters." By combining such literary techniques as narrative voice, point of view, scene-by-scene construction, and extended dialogue with in-depth, exhaustive reporting, Kidder creates journalism that is virtually indistinguishable from fiction. He acknowledges that he depends heavily on the tools of the novelist, though he argues those tools are not the exclusive property of fiction and never have been. "There are all sorts of tools available," Kidder said in 1995, admitting that:

Point of view, voice and other devices are all important to my work. I never believed those tools belonged exclusively to fiction; they belong to story-telling, and that's what writing is. There is a lot more to nonfiction writing than just taking notes and being honest. I do write a little fiction now and then, and I know that the tools

available to the fiction writer are the same tools available to the nonfiction writer. What it really comes down to is that there is writing that is alive on the page and writing that is dead.

Though Kidder may not be aware of it, a strong proletarian sensibility pervades his work--strangely, it seems, given his background of privilege as a Harvard graduate and the son of a successful lawyer. He seems to distrust large corporations and systems inherently. Perhaps his Vietnam experience touched him far more deeply than is generally known. Perhaps the 1960s shaped him in profound and significant ways. Whatever the reasons, Kidder often aligns himself with working-class people rather than executives and CEOs. Consider, for example, that in his 1983 interview he calls the computer a "conservative instrument ... used by the people in power to increase their power."

His liberal leanings manifest themselves in *Old Friends*, published in 1993, his fourth major hit in a little more than a decade. In this work Kidder writes with grace and sympathy about two strangers, Lou Freed and Joe Torchio, thrust together as roommates in the Linda Manor Nursing Home in Northhampton, Massachusetts, and reminds his reader "of the great continuities, of the possibilities for renewal in the face of mortality, of the survival to the very end of all that is truly essential about life." In this immensely important book about old age in America, Kidder confronts many of the problems faced by the elderly: a sense of uselessness, of abandonment, of being cast aside by a society that devalues age; he again spins a wonderful tale, a paean to the strength and abiding hope in the human heart. Among other things Kidder chronicles the difficulty of finding a suitable nursing home. Too often, he writes, people dump the elderly in:

places where the stench of urine got in one's clothes like tobacco smoke, where four, sometimes five, elderly people lay jammed in tiny rooms, where residents sat tied to wheelchairs or strapped to beds, where residents weren't allowed to bring with them any furniture of their own or to have private phones or to use the public pay phone without nurses listening in. One woman, on a recent tour of a nearby place, had been shown a room with a dead resident in it.

Joe and Lou, Kidder's central characters, forge a strong friendship. Joe, seventy-two, at first has reservations about rooming with a ninety-year-old, but Lou quiets his fears. Lou, in fact, is healthier than Joe; he has glaucoma, cataracts, and occasional angina, and he has trouble negotiating Linda Manor. But his problems are not as severe as Joe's, who suffers from diabetes, has had a stroke, is partially paralyzed, and has undergone a series of operations for various problems. The two meet after Lou's wife, to whom he was married seventy years, dies in the nursing home, leaving Lou alone in deep grief. He and Joe become roommates out of necessity and immediately establish a rapport that grows into love as the months go by. Both had been proud, productive men in their earlier lives. Joe had been a man of influence, the chief probation officer for the district court in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Now, Kidder writes, "he lived in the care of strangers, exiled by illness from his family and friends."

Lou worries about Joe's swearing. Joe worries about the Boston Red Sox, who have not won anything worth mentioning in decades. Kidder details their day-to-day activities, weaving a powerful narrative that comments eloquently on the plight of the aged in American society. The book is profoundly redemptive, a poignant testament to the resilience of the human soul. Kidder nevertheless found the book difficult to write. "It was an almost impossible project," he said in 1995. "The research was very hard because basically nothing goes on in a nursing home most of the time. But I'm happy with the book; I achieved most of what I set out to do."

Critics again applauded. Kidder had now written four consecutive highly acclaimed books, enhancing his stature as one of the premier talents in contemporary American literature. The books came at four-year intervals: in 1981, 1985, 1989, and 1993. Kidder, an inveterate researcher, researches each book tirelessly, taking great pains to "get it right." And though he is not as prolific as many other nonfiction writers, what he writes dazzles, as critics have long agreed. Kidder is happiest while composing prose, unlike many other writers who find the actual writing process an excruciatingly painful ordeal. Kidder realized how much he liked the aesthetic of daily writing when he accepted a position as visiting professor-writer in residence at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in 1995. Although he enjoyed teaching, the fact that it did not leave him enough time to write helped confirm how vital the writing process had become.

Except for his one critical failure, *The Road to Yuba City*, all of Kidder's books have been set in Massachusetts, near his beloved Williamsburg. Like William Faulkner in Yoknapatawpha County and John Steinbeck along the California coast, Kidder does not venture far for material. His portraits of everyday life have vaulted him to the front rank of American literary journalism. Writing of hope and sorrow, love and despair, he has, along the way, elevated reporting to a high art, clothing the common with dignity and the familiar with nobility.

*Source: Bennett, David. "Tracy Kidder." American Literary Journalists, 1945-1995: First Series. Ed. Arthur J. Kaul. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 185. Literature Resource Center.*

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

### **Discussion Questions** *Source:*

[http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading\\_guides/detail/index.cfm?book\\_number=1298](http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm?book_number=1298)

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 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*?

## Multimedia



***Dartmouth First Year Lecture: Mountains Beyond Mountains (Video Clip)***

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qs0w1e\\_Z\\_LU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qs0w1e_Z_LU)

As part of their orientation to Dartmouth, members of the Class of 2013, were assigned a summer reading project. The subject of the assignment: Tracy Kidder's "*Mountains Beyond Mountains*," which chronicled the work of now-Dartmouth President Jim Yong Kim, Dr. Paul Farmer, and Ophelia Dahl, the founders of Partners in Health and their work for global health. Kim, Farmer, and Dahl held a panel discussion with the '13s on September 16, 2009 as the culmination of their summer reading project.

***Tracy Kidder: Author: Mountains Beyond Mountains The Quest of Doctor Paul Farmer - A Man Who Could Cure the World (Filmed Lecture)***

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1305764>

(Call number: DVD 025 Ki)

Recorded at the Ann Arbor District Library on January 25, 2007.

**Further Reading**

***Sick: the untold story of America's health care crisis - and the people who pay the price*** by Jonathan Cohn

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1286157>

(Call number: 362.109 Co)

Drawing on his travels across the U.S. through major cities and small towns, Cohn (senior editor, the New Republic; Demos think tank) presents historical context on and examples of how the sorry state of the country's health care system affects real people. Reporting on how lack of affordable health care and the dysfunctional system can result in economic ruin, health complications, and even death, he concludes by arguing for universal health care coverage though realistic about such existing systems' flaws.

***Waking up in America: how one doctor brings hope to those who need it most*** by Pedro Jose Greer

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1159902>

(Call number: 610.92 Gr)

*Waking Up in America* is the compelling, inspirational autobiography of a man who has emerged as a pioneer in the field of caring for the growing population of impoverished and homeless Americans, and as a force for social change. Dr. Pedro Jose Greer, the son of Cuban immigrants and the founder of Miami's Camillus Health Concern, has traveled from the trash-littered, drug-infested streets of one of America's toughest neighborhoods to the offices of corporate and political power brokers. Throughout his odyssey he has become known for his tireless efforts to bring health care to society's "untouchables" -- homeless drug addicts, hookers, alcoholics, runaways, or people who have simply lost their way. Many of them are in need of medical care, but all of them are in need of compassion, and "Dr. Joe" dispenses both for free.

***Author's official website***

<http://www.tracykidder.com/>

News, information, and resources.

## Read-Alikes

***The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*** by Anne Fadiman

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1128669>

(Call number: 306.461 Fa)

When three-month-old Lia Lee Arrived at the county hospital emergency room in Merced, California, a chain of events was set in motion from which neither she nor her parents nor her doctors would ever recover. Lia's parents, Foua and Nao Kao, were part of a large Hmong community in Merced, refugees from the CIA-run "Quiet War" in Laos. The Hmong, traditionally a close-knit and fierce people, have been less amenable to assimilation than most immigrants, adhering steadfastly to the rituals and beliefs of their ancestors. Lia's pediatricians, Neil Ernst and his wife, Peggy Philip, cleaved just as strongly to another tradition: that of Western medicine. When Lia Lee Entered the American medical system, diagnosed as an epileptic, her story became a tragic case history of cultural miscommunication.

***Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance*** by Atul Gawande

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1285251>

(Call number: 616 Ga)

The struggle to perform well is universal: each one of us faces fatigue, limited resources, and imperfect abilities in whatever we do. But nowhere is this drive to do better more important than in medicine, where lives are on the line with every decision. In his new book, Atul Gawande explores how doctors strive to close the gap between best intentions and best performance in the face of obstacles that sometimes seem insurmountable. Gawande's gripping stories of diligence, ingenuity, and what it means to do right by people take us to battlefield surgical tents in Iraq, to labor and delivery rooms in Boston, to a polio outbreak in India, and to malpractice courtrooms around the country.

**\*Book Club To Go!\* *Three Cups of Tea: one man's mission to fight terrorism and build nations-- one school at a time*** by Greg Mortenson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1262228>

(Call number: 371.822 Mo)

The inspiring account of one man's campaign to build schools in the most dangerous, remote, and anti-American reaches of Asia In 1993, following a failed attempt to ascend K2, Greg Mortenson was inspired by a chance encounter with impoverished mountain villagers in Pakistan and promised to build them a school. From that rash, earnest promise grew one of the most incredible humanitarian campaigns of our time--Mortenson's one-man mission to counteract extremism by building schools, especially for girls, throughout the breeding ground of the Taliban. Award-winning journalist David Oliver Relin has collaborated on this spellbinding account of Mortenson's incredible accomplishments in a region where Americans are often feared and hated.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*