

HOPE

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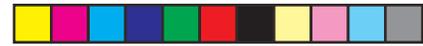
How a children's librarian and his donkey-drawn
bookmobile are saving the world, one kid at a time

By Melissa Fay Greene Photographs by J Carrier



200 GOOD HOUSEKEEPING October 2007





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

The donkeys turn right, plod into a neighborhood of small houses, and stop under a wide-spreading acacia tree. Carts hauling produce or passengers are common here; but ours, pulling a brightly painted yellow metal trailer, is unique. My walking companion, Yohannes Gebregeorgis, unhitches the animals and props open the flaps of the trailer to display not vege-

tables or tools, but children's books. This is the Donkey Mobile Library, the first of its kind in Ethiopia and one of only a few in the world.

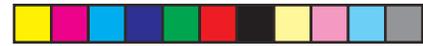
Yohannes Gebregeorgis [geb-RAY-gee-OR-geez] is a children's librarian from the San Francisco Public Library who returned to his homeland five years ago after more than two decades in America. He lives now in Addis Ababa, the capital, and circuit-rides with the donkey bookmobile across a landscape of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

The yellow trailer is filled with used picture books



Mascot Queen Helina leads the eagerly awaited Donkey Mobile Library through a village outside Awassa, Ethiopia





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

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

Bright-eyed, dusty, barefoot, they circle the shelves hungrily. Until the Donkey Mobile Library began its bimonthly visits, many of these children had never seen a book. An estimated 72 percent of Ethiopian children can't go to school because their families are too poor to send them, according to UNICEF reports. Only 43 percent of Ethiopian adults can read and write.

"How is the Queen, *Ato* [Mr.] Yohannes?" one of the children asks.

"She is very well, thank you," he replies. Queen Helina, the Most Beautiful of All Donkeys in Ethiopia, is the third of Yohannes's donkeys and a special friend to the children. She leads the bookmobile rather than hauls it,

appearing in public only on special occasions, like the day last year when the Donkey Mobile Library was introduced to the world by Ethiopia Reads.

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

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

I am hoping to read to the children, too. I'd been pleased to receive an invitation from Yohannes and Ethiopia Reads to walk about with the Donkey Mobile Library. I love children (I have nine, four of them from Ethiopia), I love children's literature, and I like donkeys, so what could be better? Browsing the cart for the right



Far left: The Shola Children's Library dancers perform in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Left: Eager readers in a village served by the Donkey Mobile Library. Below: Yohannes Gebregeorgis in Shola Children's Library, which he founded



“My friends told me, ‘Come quickly, there is a library!’” says 7-year-old Leah. “And I said, ‘What is a library?’”

book, I consider *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, but doubt it will translate well. I love *Make Way for Ducklings*, but what sense will it make in a village where all chickens and ducks range freely? *Snow Day* by Betsy Maestro? Forget it! I settle on *The Berenstain Bears and the Truth*, with Yohannes translating.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this drought-prone region of East Africa, where children suffer every day for lack of clean water and nutritious food, of medicine and mosquito nets, aren’t books a luxury? Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. Half of all children under 5 suffer the stunting



effects of malnutrition. There are 4.8 million orphans in the country. Are books really an answer?

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

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

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

“I thought always of Ethiopia. In summer, when the American children made long lists of the books they were reading, I knew that Ethiopian children were playing with rag balls and tin cans. Ethiopia has an ancient history of literacy, but no modern culture of literacy. I thought, How do you bring the little characters of



An estimated 72 percent of Ethiopian children can’t go to school because their families can’t afford to send them

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

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

After putting himself through college and earning an

children’s literature into a country without libraries?”

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

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

Jane Kurtz was born in Oregon *continued on page 286*