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Book Review: Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese

For readers who like the length, depth, and strength of a true saga, *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese is your story. Time wise, this absorbing novel covers a period of at least 25-30 years. It covers the time period when Dr. Thomas Stone, an expert physician surgeon, *except for obstetrics*, leaves India for a small two-doctored clinic in Addis Ababa, Africa. There, with the help of a devoted nursing Carmelite nun who travels with him, he becomes the third surgeon miracle worker for all who come under his care.



But nature and love intervene. The dutiful Catholic sister becomes impregnated with Stone's seed. Beneath the fullness of her sister's habit, pregnancy is secretly hidden until an abnormal labor pattern occurs. Delivery becomes monumental. Dr. Stone cannot pull forth his own child from Sister's womb. He is weak on obstetrics. Fearing for his loved companion's life, he decides to kill the unborn by crushing its skull so that his beloved may live.

Dr. Hema, a second physician surgeon, arrives at the hospital seconds before Stone completes his life taking procedure. She recognizes that Sister is having twins joined by a navel-like tube at their brows which prevents their singular birth. With no other choice, Hema completes an emergency Caesarian and slices the conjunctive tube. In spite of all preventive measures by her lover Dr. Stone, the boys' holy mother/nun dies yet her identical twin infant sons, Marion and Shiva, live.

Feeling pathologically at fault, severely depressed, and wholly love-shattered, Dr. Stone rushes from the lethal delivery table; he

dashes from the room; he leaves the hospital premises; he disappears from Addis Ababa; he escapes Africa altogether. He becomes part of a surgical team in New York City where, within a short time period, once again he receives notoriety as an extremely skilled surgeon.

Back in Addis Ababa, Dr. Hema and her surgeon husband, Dr. Ghosh, assume the responsibility of raising Dr. Stones' gifted twins. As these boys grow and mature, their beloved stepparents involve them in every way at the hospital clinic where help is always in short supply. The two youths become expert surgeons long before they actually earn their practicing diplomas. *But they remain ever wary of the physical attraction and agonized death that brought about their very being.*



Now, in *Cutting for Stone*, this portion of Africa is in constant political upheaval. Coup follows coup. Anyone connected with the Addis Ababa hospital is easily accused of cooperating and aligning with the enemy side and condemned. Hangings become a sight witnessed by many. In due course, Hema, Dr. Ghosh, and both twin boys try to save the lives and heal the wounds of top coup officials, on conflicting political sides and their loved ones, who become sick, diseased, or injured.

Now, remaining practicing at the Addis Ababa hospital puts surgeons Marion and Shiva in a perilous situation. Through Hema and Dr. Ghosh, they follow an “underground railroad” and eventually fly to America where they soon become practicing physicians in their own rite. Like their father many years before them, they cannot understand the greed of the American medical system: at one and the same time a system overwhelmed with the convenience of testing procedures and testing equipment, but on the other hand, a system fraught with problems where the better insured have the best chance for the finest care.

But what kind of reunion will occur when the twins eventually meet their renowned surgeon father? Is it by happenstance? Is there any possible way to forgive his abandonment when they were twins just out of the womb? And what is the real story between their revered father and their hallowed Carmelite mother?



These are the questions and answers I leave to the readers of *Cutting for Stone*. Granted, this is a long tale, 667 pages; but book length is necessary for a true saga. How else can an author make you feel the passage of time to include so many critical events, huge and small, that shape the lives of so many characters in *Cutting for Stone* over a period of 25+ years?

It is impossible to read this book quickly, so descriptive is the medical jargon of Doctor Abraham Verghese. When doctors in this saga operate, you will stand beside them; you will see the incisions, the blood, the hemorrhaging; see the frantic hassle to save limbs, organs, and lives; see the look on struggling surgeons' faces. From a physician's point of view, you will come away with a better understanding of an appendectomy, labor and birth, the decision to amputate a limb, remove a cancerous tumor, perform a vasectomy, and a host of other surgical conditions.

Best of all, you will have a better understanding of what happens when one crucial member of a family, *a father*, betrays his sons in the harsh reality of

guilt, doubt, sex, and love.