

Abraham Verghese: The Healer's Art, and the Writer's

Writer-Physician Discusses Two Professions with Director Mira Nair

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NEW YORK, February 11 - Filmmaker **Mira Nair** and writer and physician **Abraham Verghese** sat down together at the Asia Society to discuss Verghese's debut novel, *Cutting for Stone*. The central topics of conversation featured the transition from nonfiction to fiction, the nature and meaning of home, and the challenges facing American medicine.

Nair and Verghese first came into contact 15 years ago when she made a film version of Verghese's bestselling memoir *My Own Country*. Nair was impressed by their parallel experiences as South Asians, travels to Africa, and experiences settling in the US. And while reading *Cutting for Stone*, Nair was struck by Verghese's seemingly effortless switch from fiction to nonfiction, especially since she herself began her career making documentaries. Verghese explained that his first love had always been fiction and he was anxious to return to it after the success of *My Own Country* and a subsequent memoir, *The Tennis Partner*.

"If something really happened, there is an inherent interest in it," he explained. "If you're making it up, you have to work so much harder to get the reader to forget ... this is a made-up story. You are liberated, but you are also held to a much higher standard." Nair expressed similar sentiments about the rich possibilities of fiction, adding that, like Verghese, she tried to use her own experiences to create vibrant moments in her feature films.

When Nair asked Verghese how, as a practicing physician, he found the time to write such a lengthy novel, Verghese stressed the parallels between writing and medicine, proposing that physicians should approach patients, especially difficult patients, as "stories that need a resolution." That resolution may not always be a cure. "Because of AIDS ... a whole generation of us began to understand the difference between healing and curing," he explained. "All illness has a physical side that we are very good at handling, but we've gotten less and less good at handling the devastation."



Nair and Verghese also discussed how their personal experiences have shaped their work. Like the characters in his novel, Verghese was born and raised in Ethiopia. During a military coup he was told that as an "expatriate," he should leave. "I had never heard that term before, 'expatriate,'" he recalled. "It meant I didn't really belong, even though I thought I did." He believed his experience as a perennial outsider, however, gave him great advantages as a writer, able to "see things no one else had ever seen." Nair, who came to the US at age 19, felt similarly disconnected from her surroundings, but has since learned to "feel at home in the present" through the practice of yoga and by sublimating her feelings in her films.

Questions from the audience turned to what can be done about the "fractured" state of American medicine. Verghese answered that his greatest fear was that "doctors are not examining patients well enough." Careful examination and an attentive bedside manner are important trust-building rituals between patient and doctor, he said, whereas an overreliance on tests and a cavalier bedside manner objectify and offend the patient. "Patients are bearing their heart and their body to you," Verghese told his listeners. "The least you can do is treat them like human beings."

Reported by Terasa Younker