

BOOKS

Abraham Verghese's 'Cutting for Stone': masterful

A medical family's sprawling saga jumps back and forth between India, Ethiopia and New York City

By W. Ralph Eubanks

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"Why St. Teresa, mother?" the narrator of Abraham Verghese's masterful first novel asks longingly. Marion Praise Stone wants to understand his long-dead mother and her devotion to the 16th-century mystic. But the circumstances surrounding his birth complicate that quest: Marion and his identical twin brother, Shiva, were born from a secret union between a beautiful Indian nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, and a British surgeon, Thomas Stone, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1954. Now 50 years old, and a doctor like the father who abandoned him, Marion sets out to piece together his personal history, both as a spiritual exercise and as an act of reconciliation.

Marion's question, "Why St. Teresa?," is prompted by one of the few remnants of his late mother's life: a print of Bernini's sculpture of Teresa of Avila, depicting her enraptured by the love of God. He senses that his mother's beauty must have been like that of St. Teresa, a woman known to be so attractive to men that her confessor not only fell in love with her but also wound up confessing his own sins to her.

Verghese's gripping narrative moves through decades and generations from India to Ethiopia to an inner-city hospital in New York, describing the cultural and spiritual pull of these places. Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Dr. Thomas Stone meet during the young nun's voyage from India to a missionary post in Yemen. Sister Mary Joseph saves Stone's life on the tempestuous passage, one filled with typhoid and other dangers. Impressed by her skills as a nurse, Stone asks the nun to join him in Addis Ababa at a mission hospital known to natives as "Missing Hospital." She declines his invitation, noting her commitment to her order in Yemen.

Later while serving in Aden, a Yemeni city that is "at once dead and yet in continuous motion," Sister Mary Joseph confronts an evil man and an act of violence that she never discusses or reveals to anyone. Yet what happened leaves its mark on her like a stigmata. She flees from Yemen and finds her way to Addis Ababa and Missing Hospital. When she recovers, she and Stone become an inseparable team in the operating room. After seven years of working together and more, Stone learns of Sister Mary Joseph's pregnancy when he is called to the hospital and finds her in a distressed labor. When she dies giving birth to their twins, he disappears.

"Cutting for Stone" then moves to the story of Marion and Shiva, as well as their adoptive parents, Stone's fellow physicians, and the world of Missing Hospital. Until their teens, the twins share a bed, sleeping with their heads touching each other just as they did in their mother's womb. Yet as young men, an act of sexual betrayal — they share a passion for the same woman — spirals out of control and separates them for many years. Both men become doctors, and eventually the division leads Marion

to an internship at a New York hospital. But then an illness leaves Marion's life in the hands of the brother who betrayed him as well as the father who abandoned him.

Even with its many stories and layers, "Cutting for Stone" remains clear and concise. Verghese paints a vivid picture of these settings, the practice of medicine (he is also a physician, until recently residing in El Paso) and the characters' inner conflicts. I felt as though I were with these people, eating dinner with them even, feeling the hot, spongy injera on my fingers as they dipped it into a spicy wot. In "The Interior Castle," St. Teresa's work on mystical theology, she wrote, "I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions." "Cutting for Stone" shines like that place.

Abraham Verghese

What: Reading and signing

When: 7 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 19

Where: BookPeople, 603 N. Lamar Blvd.

Information: 472-5050, bookpeople.com