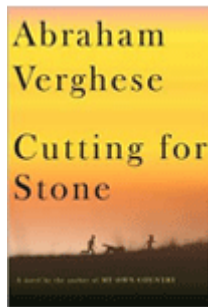


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Between the Lines

An Exclusive Authorlink Interview
with AIDS clinician and writer Dr. Abraham Verghese,
author of *Cutting for Stone*
(Knopf, February 2009)
by Karen Heise
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[*Cutting For Stone*](#)
by Dr. Abraham Verghese
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Karen Heise is a regular columnist for Authorlink. She has edited online and print media and published fiction, poetry, essays, and academic articles in *Nebula*, *Wazee*, *Janus Head*, *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*, and elsewhere. Watch for her interviews on Authorlink.

Verghese talks about medicine's role in writing, treating AIDS, his first novel and its enigmatic title, and more.

" . . .the whole point of the novel is to show that in essence, they've always thought of themselves as one, not as two."
—VERGHESE

Spend any amount of time talking to Abraham Verghese, and two attitudes come clear: he has a passion for writing and compassion for the patients he treats--many of them suffering from AIDS. Verghese, who grew up in Ethiopia and began his medical studies there, blends medicine and mentoring, writing and healing in a way that is perhaps uncommon to the medical profession in the West. These abilities have served him well not only in his medical practice and earlier books, but in his third book and first novel, *Cutting for Stone*.

The novel spans continents and generations as two twin boys, Marion and Shiva, find themselves caught in the tangled bonds of love and betrayal as each struggles to make a career in medicine and reconcile broken relationships with their father and each other. "On one level," Verghese says, "there's Marion who's formally, properly trained, and the other level is this untutored, yet brilliant twin who doesn't have formal training and yet is an expert in the particular thing he does. . . . They're almost polar opposites of each other, but I think the whole point of the novel is to show that in essence, they've always thought

of themselves as one, not as two."

Vergheese is well known for his two non-fiction works *My Own Country* (Simon and Schuster, 1994) and *The Tennis Partner* (HarperCollins 1998). *My Own Country*, which was nominated as a "Best Book of the Year" by *Time* magazine, chronicles his intense experiences treating those with AIDS in rural Johnson City, TN in the late 1980s. Sometimes called the "second wave" of the AIDS epidemic, those men and women moved from cities back to rural areas. *The Tennis Partner* is Vergheese's memoir of his friendship with a struggling, drug-addicted medical student while Vergheese practiced medicine in El Paso, Texas. Both books were well received and highly acclaimed, and the first was made into a movie directed by Mira Nair.

"...to have the presumption to call yourself a writer requires a deeper act of leaping off a bridge."
—VERGHEESE

In addition to serving as Professor for the Theory and Practice of Medicine at the Stanford University School of Medicine and Senior Associate Chair of the Department of Internal Medicine, Vergheese continues to see patients, write, and juggle the responsibilities of parenthood.

"I'm not sure I'm any busier than anyone else who's trying to make a living and sustain a family and write. I think it's very hard to write full time for a living. Few can do that successfully, I suspect. In that sense, I'm glad I don't have to pay the rent by counting on the writing money because it takes me too long to write a book. I'm probably just as busy as any father of three who has a full-time job and increasing responsibilities. But having said that, I think there's still a lot of time that one has. I think it's just a question of how one uses it."

Vergheese says when he's working on a project, "I fit it in when I can, and as the book comes together more I can stack a few days together, and that's very precious to me. It's not that I'll write the whole [span of] days, but the continuity of being immersed in the novel or whatever I'm writing is quite precious. I have a feeling that if I had a lot more time, I'm not sure I would write as efficiently. There's something precious that comes to the effort of writing when you have to fight for the time to do it."

But nothing taught him how better to use his

writing time than the Iowa Writers Workshop. Nearing burnout in what he characterizes as a “very intense experience taking care of rural HIV patients,” Vergheese quit his tenure-track academic position in Johnson City, Tennessee, where he was an assistant professor of medicine, and decided to devote more time to writing--a passion he'd always had but rarely had the time to indulge in.

“I think at that moment I was forced to acknowledge that this was serious. I had been writing for several years . . . but to have the presumption to call yourself a writer requires a deeper act of leaping off a bridge.”

Vergheese adds, “I knew that I wanted to keep doing [AIDS] work, but I felt it was important to take breaks. I also wanted to chronicle it, so that’s when the writing became more serious.”

Vergheese found the atmosphere at Iowa Writers tough and challenging in several ways. “I had been an educator in medicine, myself, and had studied medicine, so here I was entering another field, this time as a student. There were some very interesting contrasts. At one level, it seemed as though, compared to medicine, where you’re very busy [and have] lots of structured experience, [at IWW] once a week was all you met to discuss two stories. The rest of the time was gloriously free, but the fact was that the rest of the time was free deliberately for you to immerse yourself in finding your voice and reading voraciously. I think that was the intention, that you should have a lot of time to develop your voice, and also, to periodically have your peers look at your stuff. I made good use of that.”

***“I tried to really ask myself
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While at Iowa Writers, Vergheese condensed four semesters into one and a half years and worked at the University HIV clinic once a week. These strategies brought him satisfaction, lower tuition, and a stipend, but he still had to sacrifice savings and time to pursue this new passion. And he felt like a bit of a newcomer with the roles reversed.

“I remember feeling very intimidated by my fellow students because they were very smart, younger than me--I was probably in my mid-thirties, and they were straight out of college for the most part--and they were straight out of English programs. So they were dropping

the names of writers whom I had never heard and they were talking about 'deconstruction' and John Barth. I think I spent a good part of that first semester voraciously reading all the writers being mentioned, but I also gradually realized that such knowledge had no direct correlation with the ability to write a good story."

So Verghese read and read some more, checking out stacks of books from the library every week. And in his self-made crash course on literature criticism, he learned some valuable lessons along the way. "I remember feeling as though I had a great advantage at being somewhat older and knowing how precious this time was since I'd never had a period like this. I think some of the younger students, looking back, might think 'Well, I wish I'd made better use of the time.' For them, it might not have been as much of a novelty as it was for me."

Verghese recalls with a certain fondness even the critique of his own work by his peers. "Mine certainly didn't hold up. I got really knocked around, but it was all good. I can't say I enjoyed it, but it was exactly what I was there for."

And when his peers hesitated to offer up stories for critique, Verghese leaped into the breach. "I wasn't shy," he says with a quiet laugh. "I couldn't see why people were being coy about this. A few people, believe it or not, never showed a story or wrote again after coming to Iowa."

Iowa Writers Workshop also provided, almost inadvertently, the springboard for Verghese's writing career in a direction other than what he expected. His agent, Mary Evans, came across one of Verghese's short stories, "Lilacs," that he planned to have critiqued. "The next thing I know," Verghese says, "over the phone she's already shown that story and basically asked if she could represent me."

"Lilacs" was subsequently published in *The New Yorker*. Verghese's voice still carries a sense of wonder. "It was a wonderful break, and I felt at that moment that the sacrifice had really been worth it, and that maybe this is going to be how things work--I'll continue submitting short stories and publishing them,

and I'll have a novel one day."

But not so fast. As those editors and agents became interested in Verghese's background as an AIDS doctor, another kind of book--what would become *My Own Country*--began to take shape. He pitched for a lengthy piece on his experiences treating AIDS patients in Johnson City, Tennessee to *The New Yorker*, but the magazine declined. Nevertheless, Verghese's career took a turn.

"My agent said, 'Essentially, that proposal you made for them is a book proposal.' And so we took that and shopped it around at various publishers." He adds, "There was a moment in time when there was a tremendous interest in HIV in publishing--particularly a heterosexual, foreign physician telling the story of AIDS in rural America. It pushed a lot of different buttons. So suddenly, I had a contract for a non-fiction book, when I thought that I would write short stories."

Verghese attests to the value of veracity when it comes to non-fiction proposals. "With non-fiction, I think that's the key--it's not even you--it's the very fact that something really happened--it means everyone has an inherent interest in it. You can point to some authority with which you're going to write about this thing that really happened, and you can give them some hint of it. That's enough for a contract."

But because he assumed he'd be writing fiction, Verghese had to give himself another crash course into non-fiction authors and craft. "I tried to really ask myself and others, Who are the best non-fiction writers? What is the standard? It was very clear to me that it was a different genre, and yet, the best things about writers I admired were evident in that genre just as much as they were in fiction--the ability to dramatize, the organization, the individual sentences."

"I didn't want to spend another three or four years only to find that nobody wanted this."
—VERGHESE

He is thankful for the unexpected, even difficult times in his life and the opportunity to pull it all together. "I look back on my life, and I've been very, very lucky. And many of the things I thought were terrible things to have happened to me were, in retrospect, great blessings--I just didn't know it at the time. To be in the middle of that AIDS experience at the time it was happening--it certainly wasn't

why I went into infectious disease. My whole world changed, and yet it became the most important thing I did in my life in some ways."

"Everyone assumed this would be an urban disease," he adds. "That's certainly where it first popped up. There seemed no reason to think that this 'big-city plague' as people called it would show itself in the hinterland. But what I stumbled onto, and that really is the heart of [*My Own Country*] is that there was this paradigm of migration." Gay men left rural areas for cities, hoping for opportunities just as we do, he says. "But in their cases, they were also leaving because they were gay, so they left as part of this quiet exodus. Then, some years later, they were returning because either they were sick or they were hoping that by coming back to some simpler existence they would be spared this thing that had killed so many of their friends."

Despite the upstaging of his first, hoped-for novel by *My Own Country*, the seeds were nevertheless being sown at Iowa Writers. In *Cutting for Stone*, he explores parts of himself as well as ideas and people he couldn't have foreseen. "I went to Iowa with a great desire to write a novel, which is what everybody goes to Iowa for, and I thought that the novel I wanted to write would have to be something where I called on my very different life experience . . . to be populated from the people of the world I knew well, which is to say, the world of medicine, the world of Africa, the world of medicine as viewed from my perspective--which is, it's not a business, it's a calling, it's a ministry. So I knew that was the substrate that I would bring to it, and I wasn't much more clear than that."

Verghese continues, "But some of those ideas that are now in *Cutting for Stone* were clearly things I was thinking about there . . . In some ways, following the trajectory of my life, in terms of the geography if nothing else. Then when I actually sat down to begin it, what kept recurring to me was an image of a beautiful, south-Indian nun who suddenly and precipitously goes into labor in a mission hospital in Africa. That act of her going into labor throws everyone for a loop and causes utter confusion at the hospital. That's all I had to begin with. I saw her succumbing in that labor, and I saw one of the twins becoming the narrator of the story and looking back in

somewhat of an antique voice.”

Vergheese kept writing, developing the ideas, themes, and characters. When he reached about two hundred pages, he convinced his agent “against her better judgment” to tentatively shop a portion of the book around--an unusual and risky approach for fiction. But Vergheese says he “wanted some affirmation that this was interesting to anybody. I didn’t want to spend another three or four years only to find that nobody wanted this. My writing time is too precious to spend on something that isn’t of interest.”

The gamble paid off, and Knopf took the (as yet) unfinished manuscript. At one point, some years into it and almost halfway through the novel, Vergheese realized there were too many possibilities as to what might happen. He sat down with his editor, and the two of them “hammered out more or less how this was going to end in the next 200-300 pages. It was very liberating. Even then,” he adds, “there were lots of discoveries along the way That’s what I find utterly fascinating: writing is such a mysterious process, and the mystery of it is that when you sit in the chair thinking you know what you’re going to write today, things emerge from God knows where. That’s what makes writing so attractive and mysterious.”

***“‘The Devil is in the details’
(I prefer ‘God is in the details.’”
—VERGHEESE***

Speaking of mysterious, Vergheese sheds some light on the novel’s unique title, taken from a line in the Hippocratic oath. “In that big oath, as long as it is, there used to be a line there that said, ‘I will not cut for stone.’ It stems from the fact that in medieval times, and perhaps more recently than that--Victorian times--bladder stones were epidemic. The population suffered . . . little kids and adults were in agony because they had stones that were blocking the bladder. People in Victorian times used to walk around with catheters in their top hats. What else could you do if you couldn’t pee? You couldn’t do that forever--you’d get infection and quickly die.”

“So there were these people who traveled from city to city who would ‘cut for stone’-- obviously without anesthetic and using the same knife again and again. They were expert at doing it and they would relieve your suffering, but of course, that would cause infection, and you’d be dead the next day, and

they would leave town. So I think that's where the proscription came, 'Thou shall not cut for stone.' It's always seemed a curious thing for us to be saying since it really doesn't have applicability now, and yet I liked saying it--I thought it was a nice line. And the characters in my book are surnamed Stone, so I was hoping that the title would resonate on many different levels. And I include the actual quote in the third section as an epigram."

The linking of medicine and writing is organic for Verghese--seamless--and one leads, or should lead, to the other. "In my particular specialty, internal medicine--and this is true of medicine in general--you're taught to observe details. The expression 'The Devil is in the details' (I prefer 'God is in the details.')--that expression is something I heard both in medical school and writing school. So I think being a physician, perhaps I bring an intense focus on observation, on things that perhaps somebody else wouldn't notice."

"I walk through the lobby and I almost can't help it--I'm making diagnoses left and right, noticing a slightly sagging eyelid on one side, and a thyroid swelling on another side--these are things I'm trained to pick up, and I can't turn it off. That sort of attentiveness to the smallest things that make up the whole is good training. And in medicine, you're often looking for patterns, you're looking for ways to synthesize things, and I think those are also useful."

He continues, "All that said and done, I don't think that [medicine] presents you any great advantage. In fact, I see a lot of physicians who send me manuscripts who have this sense that since they've got this position where they have this great insight into human nature and have observed extraordinary things . . . that the manuscript must be good. My contention is that the writing is judged by the standards of writing, and your training--whether it's a J.D. or M.D. or geology degree is really kind of irrelevant. It's relevant to *me* that I'm a physician--that's the stance from which I see the world, that's the stance from which I write--but it should not be relevant to the reader who's trying to judge this strange book they've picked up."

"So . . . I think that medicine provides you some material and abilities that are not

unhelpful to you as a writer, but it doesn't give you a pass from having to do the hard work to make your sentences be alive and make the whole image take place in the reader's mind. . . . I think the challenge for physician writers is clearly to go one level beyond [description], to transcend what you've just seen into some higher level, and have an explanation that satisfies at a larger, more human-than-disease level. I think there's a lot of doctor writing out there that doesn't transcend that level, that doesn't engage me quite as much."

"Be very conscious of what the reader is willing and not willing to take. "
—VERGHESE

Verghese's advice runs much further than just to fellow physicians. He believes all writers must bring a "great respect for the reader's attention" to the page and they must not "try the reader's patience."

"Be very conscious of what the reader is willing and not willing to take. I find myself putting down books that are probably very good, well reviewed, and critically acclaimed because the writer is asking me to do too much in the first few pages--more than I was used to, comfortable with, or more than I had time to."

"The other key ingredient for writers is stamina. Lots of people have great vocabularies, lots of great ideas, so what distinguishes one from another? It's persistence, stamina, wanting to do it for its own sake, and not giving in to discouragement."

Making that human connection--not only in his writing, but also in medicine's practices--is at least as big a passion for Verghese as medical care and treatment. There are problems that need solving urgently, one of which, he says, is an over-reliance on science and technology instead of cementing doctor-patient relations. "There's a subtext in our interaction with physicians where we also want them to say, 'Don't worry, it'll be alright.' Or 'Don't worry--this is not your fault.' Or "Don't worry, I'll be with this through the end--no matter what it takes."

"One of the things I hope this book does, among other things, is to portray that very well. Because I think people stop seeing it. They assume, 'I guess that's how medicine is: you show up and somebody sees you here and orders seventeen tests and sends you

somewhere else, sends you somewhere else, and pretty soon you've seen all these people and you have no idea who you really belong to."

"This profession is a ministry of healing, it is a calling," he says. "That sense has become greatly threatened."

“. . .having written both genres, they're very much related. They're both methods of trying to get at the truth. . .”

—VERGHESE

Verghese hopes this is just the beginning of a flourishing writing career. He plans to write more fiction if his current work is received well--and most reviews have been positive--and certainly isn't ruling out more non-fiction "if the right story comes along."

"I've come to feel now, having written both genres, they're very much related. They're both methods of trying to get at the truth. . . . If fiction works, it doesn't work because it diverted your attention for five hours or three days. It should work as if you got into a space capsule and you lived another life, and you came back and it's only Tuesday, and you're carrying all the lessons with you from that other life. That's the grand ambition and the opportunity fiction has. So I'd love to continue in that vein."

To check out more of Dr. Abraham Verghese's work, including articles, interviews, features, and reviews as well as a touring schedule, visit his Web site at

<http://www.abrahamverghese.com/default.asp>

**About
Karen Heise**

*Karen Heise has edited online and print media and published fiction, poetry, essays, and academic articles in *Nebula*, *Wazee*, *Janus Head*, *The Journal of Lesbian Studies*, and elsewhere. In addition to freelance editing and writing, she currently teaches online writing and literature classes for Paris Junior College, Paris, Texas. She received an M.A. in English from the University of Northern Colorado and lives in Buena Vista, Colorado. E-mail: kheise2000@yahoo.com*