

The Advocate

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA

ENTERTAINMENT

Characters, plot, writing all top notch

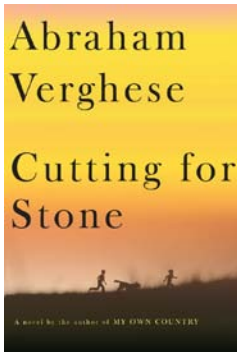
CUTTING FOR STONE

By Abraham Verghese

Knopf, \$26.95; 541 pp.

Clearly Verghese paid attention in English Lit 101. He begins this entrancing novel with an opening sentence that is so full of implication it's practically Dickensian.

"After eight months spent in the obscurity of our mother's womb, my brother, Shiva, and I came into the world in the late afternoon of the twentieth of September in the year of grace 1954. We took our first breaths at an elevation of eight thousand feet in the thin air of Addis Ababa, capital city of Ethiopia."



Try to stop reading after that. You probably can't, which is good because if you did, you'd miss one of the best books to come along in the past year. The narrator is Marion, the other twin in the pair. The babies are born in a hospital called Missing (the name is explained later as are many other things, all in due time.) In Marion, Verghese creates one of the unique voices in recent fiction, someone who sees both the matter-of-fact nature of life and the equally important mystical implications of every event. For instance, the twins have an unusual mother. Marion imparts this rare information in a sentence laden with the everyday (albeit exotic) data of life in Ethiopia.

"When our mother, a nun of the Diocesan Carmelite Order of Madras, unexpectedly went into labor that September morning, the big rain in Ethiopia had ended, its rattle on the corrugated tin roofs of Missing ceasing abruptly like a chatterbox cut off in midsentence."

A nun? Yes, that is what he says. This nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, has come to Ethiopia from India in the 1940s. As Verghese builds his story front-to-back, he also builds his characters in sharply drawn, believable individuals.

Verghese himself is a doctor — the book title refers to a medieval surgical technique — and the plot of the book centers around medicine. After the twins are born, it seems at first they will grow up orphans. Their mother has died, their father, famous British surgeon Thomas Stone, disappears after their birth. But Dr. Kalpana Helatha — "Hema," an Indian woman who is Missing's obstetrician, adopts the babies. Eventually, Hema weds (in a interesting year-at-a-time contingency arrangement) her longtime suitor, Dr. Abhi Ghosh, an internist at Missing. Ghosh becomes a surrogate father to the children much as he becomes a surrogate surgeon to Missing when their real father disappears.

As the tale of the twins progresses through the years, Verghese incorporates the turbulent history of coups and intrigues that plagued Ethiopia during this period. Even as the very, very poor patients who are treated at Missing provide the twins with perspective, the boys live a life of privilege, sons of two doctors who are at the top of the social scale in this beautiful but backward country. Almost inevitably, they are drawn to medicine. Equally inevitable, they are drawn to the same woman

whose life choices affect both Shiva and Marion.

The story tracks across the ocean to America where Marion eventually comes to study medicine and become a surgeon. Readers who have read John Irvin's work will detect similar themes in Verghese's plot. The one overriding thing about Verghese's work is his storytelling. He seems almost incapable of writing a dull sentence or one that is not relevant to the story. He is focused and talented. Every little detail is fascinating. Here he describes the simple task of digging a grave:

"The barefoot coolies were jovial men. Told by Ghosh what their task would be, they made clucking sounds of condolence. The big fellow with the prognathic jaw shed his fraying coat; his shorter companion pulled off his tattered sweater. They spat on their palms, hefted the pickaxes, and set to it; happened-had-happened and be-will-be as far as they were concerned, and though it was a grave they were digging, it guaranteed the night's bottle of tej or talla and perhaps a bed and a willing woman. Sweat oiled their shoulders and forehead and dampened their patchwork shirts.

"The sky had started off bluffing, convoys of gray clouds scurrying across like sheep to market. But by afternoon a perfect blue canopy stretched from horizon to horizon."

The medical descriptions are just as well done and riveting. In fact, it's hard to find a weakness in this book — maybe too much reliance on coincidence in the plot. But it's a work of fiction after all, so why fret about that? Just enjoy.