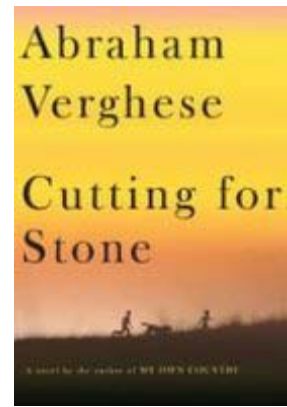


Book Review: *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese

Posted on February 6, 2009 by Rebecca @ The Book Lady's Blog
Recently published February 3, 2009 by Knopf (a division of Random House)

I've been finished with this book for almost a week, and for almost a week, I've been trying to figure out how to describe how wonderful this book is and somehow manage to do the story even a little bit of justice. But every time I try to write or talk about it, I am reduced to a babbling, incoherent mess, so in awe am I of Mr. Verghese's myriad literary talents. It's not often that I'm rendered virtually speechless, but *Cutting for Stone* has done it.



Since my many attempts to write a summary have failed, here's an excellent description from the publisher:

A sweeping, emotionally riveting first novel—an enthralling family saga of Africa and America, doctors and patients, exile and home.

Marion and Shiva Stone are twin brothers born of a secret union between a beautiful Indian nun and a brash British surgeon at a mission hospital in Addis Ababa. Orphaned by their mother's death in childbirth and their father's disappearance, bound together by a preternatural connection and a shared fascination with medicine, the twins come of age as Ethiopia hovers on the brink of revolution. Yet it will be love, not politics—their passion for the same woman—that will tear them apart and force Marion, fresh out of medical school, to flee his homeland. He makes his way to America, finding refuge in his work as an intern at an underfunded, overcrowded New York City hospital. When the past catches up to him—nearly destroying him—Marion must entrust his life to the two men he thought he trusted least in the world: the surgeon father who abandoned him and the brother who betrayed him.

An unforgettable journey into one man's remarkable life, and an epic story about the power, intimacy, and curious beauty of the work of healing others.

Now, I am generally suspicious of the glowing adjectives that appear in publishers' descriptions and in blurbs on the back of books, but in this case, the description is right on. In fact, I was going to use the words "sweeping" and "riveting" in my review because there really is no other way to say it. Verghese's writing is intense, detailed, and precise but in no way cold or detached. His characters are fully realized, and their relationships with each other ring of truth. There are moments of tension, surprise, delight, pain, betrayal, confusion, and loss, and every last one is beautifully done.

Readers will gasp in recognition as Verghese deftly captures the universal experiences of hope and despair, love and loss, and they will wonder at his ability to bring their innermost thoughts to light. So many elements of this book—an affair between a nun and a doctor, conjoined twins, love triangles, war—could be (and have been) made melodramatic and sentimental by a less skilled writer, but Verghese presents them with a matter-of-fact-ness that allows us to focus on and identify with his characters' humanity.

I love-love-loved this book. I hated having to put it down, and I missed it when I was away from it. I found myself daydreaming about the characters and wondering where their roads would lead. It very nearly brought me to tears, and it definitely made me hold my breath. This is a sprawling, expansive novel for which I cannot find enough superlatives. It has the perfect mix of character- and plot-driven elements and is a fantastical contemporary example of true literary fiction. Hands down, this is absolutely one of the best books I've read in the last several years.

When I finished *Cutting for Stone*, I wanted to turn right back to page one and begin again. This book is good. Really good. Go-out-and-pay-full-price-for-the-hardback good. I'm sure it will be in my favorites of 2009, and I wouldn't be at all surprised to see it end up in my all-time favorites as time goes on. 5 out of 5.

Don't miss the author's website and the reading group guide.