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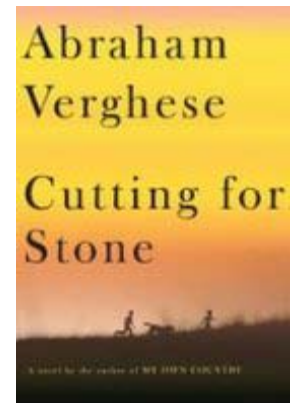
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2009

REVIEW: *Cutting for Stone*, by Abraham Verghese

Published February 3, 2008 by Knopf.

If you've been following me on Twitter or read last week's Friday Finds, you know that I've been reading Abraham Verghese's debut novel *Cutting for Stone*. The author of two nonfiction works and a practicing surgeon, Verghese shows himself here to be a magnificent creator of fiction as well. *Cutting for Stone* is one of the best novels I've read in quite a while.

Checking in around 500 pages, the story centers on twin boys, Marion and Shiva Praise Stone, children of a dead nun and her lover, raised in a threadbare hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The narrative flows effortlessly from the story of the nun, Mary Joseph Praise, to that of her children, as told by Marion, the eldest. Three love stories stand at the center of the book and form the basis of the boys' destiny- that of Mary Joseph Praise and Thomas Stone, a surgeon; Hema and Ghosh, the boys' adoptive parents; and Marion and Genet, the daughter of a servant, who grows up with the boys.



Verghese weaves disparate threads into the story - the love stories, the political turmoil of Ethiopia, stories of immigration, coming of age, and above all, medicine. Sister Mary Joseph Praise meets Thomas Stone aboard ship and saves his life so he can save the lives of fellow passengers after an outbreak of disease; later, she joins him in Ethiopia and works by his side in surgery. Their sons grow up to be doctors, raised by Hema and Ghosh, a gynecologist and surgeon respectively. The novel's climax is a medical miracle enacted by their erstwhile father, a venerable surgeon as well as a complicated and deeply troubled man. The beauty of Verghese's writing isn't just the amount of detail and minutiae, medical and otherwise, he's able to pack in, but how he does it without sacrificing the action or losing the reader's attention; urgent and gripping, he makes the details as important (and as fascinating) to the reader as they are to Marion.

There's so much that I admire about *Cutting for Stone*. The characters are richly drawn, each one with his or her own backstory and place in the landscape. Ethiopia itself is practically a supporting character- its landscape, its cities, its politics and its culture. I love the section detailing Marion's time as an intern in an inner-city hospital, as well as his culture shock on arrival in New York and his contacts with other Ethiopian immigrants. Thomas Stone is a fascinating character, and Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Hema are strong, tough women with their own mysteries and secrets. Shiva, withdrawn and distant, is an enigma; Genet's transformation is heartbreaking and all too real.

Cutting for Stone is an incredibly moving story about people, and about a family, and about lovers- and about cowardice and bravery, anger and betrayal and forgiveness. I was amazed by *Cutting for Stone*, by how it held my attention and by how it moved me and by how it surprised me. It's a show-stopper for sure; you have to read this book!