



BOOK REVIEW

## A family's odyssey of love and healing

**CUTTING FOR STONE** By Abraham Verghese

Knopf, 541 pp., \$26.95

By [Julie Wittes Schlack](#)

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Spanning three countries and 50 years, nonfiction writer and physician Abraham Verghese's debut novel has already been described as an epic. While I quibble with that definition, "Cutting for Stone" is certainly a long book, and a generally engrossing one; not a great work of fiction but an interesting one. More important, it is a passionate, vivid, and informative novel, and those qualities compensate for its shortcomings.

Sister Mary Joseph Praise is a Carmelite nun born in Madras. En route by ship to a missionary hospital in Yemen, she meets and saves the life of a violently ill surgeon, Thomas Stone. Though they separate when the ship comes into harbor, they meet again many months later when the good nun, fleeing Aden, makes her way to a mission



hospital in Addis Ababa, where the now famous doctor rules Operating Theater 3. For the next seven years, she works in silent harmony as his assistant, until the day she goes into labor with conjoined twins, Marion and Shiva. After a frantic but futile attempt to save her life, Thomas, the distraught father, abandons his sons and disappears for the next several hundred pages.

The two boys, joined at the head, are separated, revived, and raised by the hospital's Indian obstetrician, Hema, and Ghosh, her eventual husband and fellow physician. The book's long middle passage paints a colorful, fact-filled, and loving portrait of this family, their household, and their adopted country of Ethiopia. Here, Verghese is at his best, describing the landscape, the genial wisdom of the man who raises them, the political upheavals that rupture the land he loves, and frequently, often at the cost of the narrative flow, the medical and surgical challenges that confront this family of doctors. Indeed, these discursive, graphic sections about typhus, fistula, bowel obstructions,

and the mechanics of vasectomies are what make this novel so choppy, so instructive, and so endearing (unless, of course, you're too grossed out to read them).

As they grow up, Marion and Shiva, who shared a bed and slept head to head throughout their childhood, begin to drift apart, and when Genet, the beautiful and wild-hearted Eritrean girl who has been their childhood playmate, matures into a beautiful young woman and awakens a rivalry between the brothers, this natural separation turns into a full-blown rift. Their emotional distance turns into a physical one when, after a series of misunderstandings and political events, Marion is forced to flee the country.

He eventually makes his way to New York City, and his tenure there as a surgical resident at an understaffed hospital in the Bronx provides the context for the final third of the book. Predictably - because unlikely coincidences are, alas, a major driver of plot in this novel - he is reunited with his biological father, and eventually with his brother as well. His quest to heal and unify what has been broken is ultimately satisfied.

Despite its somewhat labored plot and alternately flat and overwrought characterizations, "Cutting for Stone" is worth reading. Abraham Verghese is clearly a compassionate man in love with words and the subject matter to which he applies them. He's not a bad novelist, but I suspect he's a better doctor, and while this book is not the one I'd turn to in times of illness or pain, its author is.

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