

## 'Cutting for Stone' by Abraham Verghese

By Art Winslow  
February 21, 2009

The classical Hippocratic oath includes the avowal that "I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men as are engaged in this work." This, assumedly, is the allusion the physician and writer Abraham Verghese had in mind when titling his first novel "Cutting for Stone." Four of his principal characters—a father who abandoned his twin sons, the twins themselves and the man who became their surrogate father—make the life choice to become surgeons.

There are questions of bravery and ethics, and betrayal and forgiveness as well, bound up in this enterprise, which as Verghese twists the tale is partly one of Indian and Ethiopian diaspora. His narrator, a trauma surgeon named Marion Stone, was born a premature twin weighing 3 pounds and had to be cut from his conjoined brother, Shiva, at their birth in a hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Marion, now 50, is eager to relate his brother's story—he used to consider them a single being, ShivaMarion—which requires that he relate his own story, and that of their parents as well. Marion's life brought him from Africa to exile in America, and then back to Africa, a path which leaves him claiming he is "proof that geography is destiny," although much of "Cutting for Stone" can be read as illustrating the opposite.

Like other recent novels that deal in part with immigrant experience in America (Ha Jin's "A Free Life" comes to mind), Verghese's vignettes show globalism at work, whether behind the counters of convenience stores or in the staffing of hospitals. "In America you begin at zero," is how Tsige, an Ethiopian woman from Marion's youth whom he is astonished to encounter in greater Boston, expresses it.

Readers of Verghese's memoir, "My Own Country," will recall his account of foreign medical students doing residencies at hospitals that are in "urban war zones," and here he renders the idea fictionally, as Marion becomes a resident with other extra-nationals at a hospital in the Bronx named Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

Our Lady, at the bottom of the medical food chain, is an institution from which more affluent hospitals harvest donor organs.

Marion concedes that he became a physician less with an intent "to save the world as much as to heal myself." The twins' mother died in childbirth, and their grief-stricken (or shamed) father disappeared the same day, leaving residual anger strong enough in Marion for him to observe at one point that "a child's ability for reprisal is infinite, and can last a lifetime."

The vagaries surrounding the twins' upbringing at the Addis Ababa hospital compound, parented by other doctors, meant that Marion's African childhood "imparted lessons about resilience, about fortitude and about the fragility of life. I knew better than most children how little separated the world of health from that of disease, living flesh from the icy touch of the dead." That separating curtain is drawn prominently in the novel, in which two vibrant women are instrumental to the boys' and the hospital's survival: the gynecologist Kalpana Hemlatha, known as Hema, who becomes a foster mother to Marion and Shiva (and named them as well), and Matron Hirst, the hospital director. Because of a clerical error caused by local pronunciation, it is known as Missing Hospital rather than by its intended name, Mission Hospital.

Political terror is also part of Verghese's mix, as events under Emperor Haile Selassie include an attempted coup and rebellion by Eritrean freedom fighters, both of which are to affect Marion and Shiva's lives, Marion's most prominently. When doctor Abhi Ghosh, who had taken on a paternal role for the twins, is seized by the military and imprisoned—he had attended as a physician to one of the coup leaders—Marion says, "my childhood ended."

"Cutting for Stone" is a big, wandering, novel that moves from childhood and adolescence in Ethiopia forward to America for a few of the characters (including the twins' missing father, Thomas Stone, an India-born Englishman), and backs up in time to India and the youths of several as well. Marion's troubled relationship with Shiva, the fracturing of their onetime singularity, looms large to him, in addition to his attempts to discover his mother's history and eventually come to terms with his biological father. Shiva "never understood the need to subscribe to convention," Marion says; in Ethiopia, Shiva was able to operate as a doctor without attending medical school, and to Marion's competitive chagrin, was even written up in The New York Times as the world's expert on repair and treatment of a specialized gynecological injury.

Suffering, in medical and psychological senses, is the armature of much of the action and character in "Cutting for Stone," but there is heroism as well, some of it steady forbearance, some of it carried out as specific acts. "The world turns on our every action, and our every omission, whether we know it or not," Marion concludes as he wraps up his story, but it reads like Verghese's starting point.