

THE PLAIN DEALER

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Cutting for Stone' is solid writing over a shaky plot **Book review**

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John Repp

At its best, the first novel from physician Abraham Verghese displays the virtues so evident in his best-selling and much-lauded memoirs: "My Own Country" and "The Tennis Partner."

Verghese has a knack for well-structured scenes, a passion for medicine and a gift for communicating that passion. He gives readers clear, sensory and intricately detailed description, and he uncovers the unexpected significance of mundane actions and objects.

Many of the most important scenes in "Cutting for Stone" take place in operating rooms, and no reader will come away wondering how it feels to "venerate the sight of the abdomen or chest laid open," to dig in with both hands while intellect, training, and fierce curiosity barely hold terror at bay.

"Cutting for Stone" is the saga of Marion Stone, son of a brilliant, though psychologically damaged, British surgeon and a nun who dies giving birth to Marion and his conjoined twin, Shiva. Two-thirds of the novel takes place at Missing, a fictional hospital founded and run by Indian Carmelites "in the thin air of Addis Ababa, capital city of Ethiopia."

Undone by Sister Mary's death, unable to accept the twins' existence, Thomas Stone disappears immediately after the birth. Care of the infants falls to Hema and Ghosh, the other two doctors in residence, who soon marry and then adopt Marion and Shiva.

Drawn to a life in medicine, Marion narrates a childhood and young adulthood full of incident and atmosphere, culminating in his estrangement from Shiva and his eventual escape from Addis during the 1960s struggle for Eritrean independence. After a harrowing journey, he finds a second home as a surgical resident at a cash-strapped hospital in Queens. The inevitable reappearance of Thomas Stone -- he has become a renowned liver specialist -- helps drive the plot to its climax.

"Cutting for Stone" is almost Victorian in its eagerness to say everything that can be said about Marion's life from womb to this confrontation, but it is made of a ramshackle plot. The book's first half, especially, consists of episode after episode, a relentless chronology that seems deaf to narrative logic and the intimated theme of its opening chapter: the pain of abandonment and how it creates a lifetime's hunger for meaning.

Thomas Stone's murky entanglement with Sister Mary and his disappearance ought to have propelled the story. Instead, the lost father is largely absent from the imaginations of the main characters -- robbing the narrative of purpose and momentum.

To succeed, a novel must persuade readers to suspend disbelief by creating what John Gardner called "a vivid and continuous dream in the reader's mind." Again and again, "Cutting for Stone" set me dreaming its dream only to break the spell:

Marion Stone is a first-person narrator who claims to remember his own birth, dramatizes the inner lives of his adoptive parents before that birth, and reports other characters' actions and dialogue during a grave illness that has rendered him unconscious.

Actions get skillfully dramatized then unnecessarily explained. Dialogue drifts past the point where it reveals character and becomes exposition. The love triangle on which a crucial subplot depends culminates in a scene that would be merely cliché were it not so lurid, unnecessarily violent and blithe about Marion's behavior.

All the attributes of a terrific novel exist here, so it's all the more frustrating to be absorbed in "Cutting for Stone" only to be repeatedly reminded that it's only a fragmented dream.

Repp is a poet and critic in Erie, Pa.