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## 'Cutting for Stone' by Abraham Verghese: Compelling characters inhabit saga of conjoined twins

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By ANNE MORRIS / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

After two highly successful nonfiction books, Abraham Verghese has written an enthralling debut novel set largely in Ethiopia, the country where he grew up.

Verghese creates a saga grand enough for the movies, yet sensitive in its explorations of character, purpose and place. Only occasionally does it seem to try too hard.

The title comes from the original Hippocratic oath, for the book is about medical doctors. Verghese was a practicing physician himself when he decided to attend the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Afterward, he served on the faculty at Texas Tech University and the University of Texas Health Sciences Center in San Antonio. He is a professor at Stanford University School of Medicine.

*Cutting for Stone* tells the fictional story of conjoined twin boys born to an Indian nun mother and a British surgeon father at "Missing" (Mission) Hospital in Addis Ababa. The mother dies in childbirth, and the father leaves the country, abandoning the twin boys, Marion and Shiva Stone. They grow up in the household of two dedicated physicians who become their mother and father. It seems a foregone conclusion that both sons will one day work in medicine.

Verghese creates in the adoptive parents, Hema and Ghosh, marvelous characters that readers come to know well. Ghosh may be the book's best creation. His robust affection for life fills the page, even as he deals day to day with death. Ghosh sees his patients as people, not just problems to be solved. Marion Stone will grow up to be such a doctor himself, and he is the twin who narrates the novel. Marion is 50 when he begins the story of their dual birth. By telling it, he hopes to heal the psychological wound that has long separated him from his brother.

The novel encompasses the childhoods of the two identical, but very different, boys. It describes well their young manhood, and the woman they both desire, as well as political upheaval within Ethiopia, an accidental killing and Marion's eventual forced emigration to New York. There is drama in the various operations and treatments, all presented from the perspective of a doctor and in a physician's language.

Fascinating in its detailed depiction of the sights and sounds of its Ethiopian setting, the novel holds your attention throughout, for you care about the characters, both male and female, old and young. But when Verghese has Marion remembering his birth, such a feat stretches the imagination:

"After labor stalled, I dragged my brother back into the womb and out of harm's way as lances and spears came at him through our only natural exit," Marion recalls.

Another problem with the book is the large number of coincidences that bring characters together against heavy odds. The novel works because the reader is so invested in the fate of the characters. Plus, Verghese writes beautifully. Marion's day-to-day observations are fresh, as when on first coming to New York he notices that the cars were "nearly silent like a school of fish," compared to the noise of traffic in Africa.

Verghese has written short stories. For his first great, sweeping novel, readers will likely forgive him his coincidences for the pleasure of seeing everything work out, more or less, well.

*Anne Morris, a member of the National Book Critics Circle, lives in Austin.*