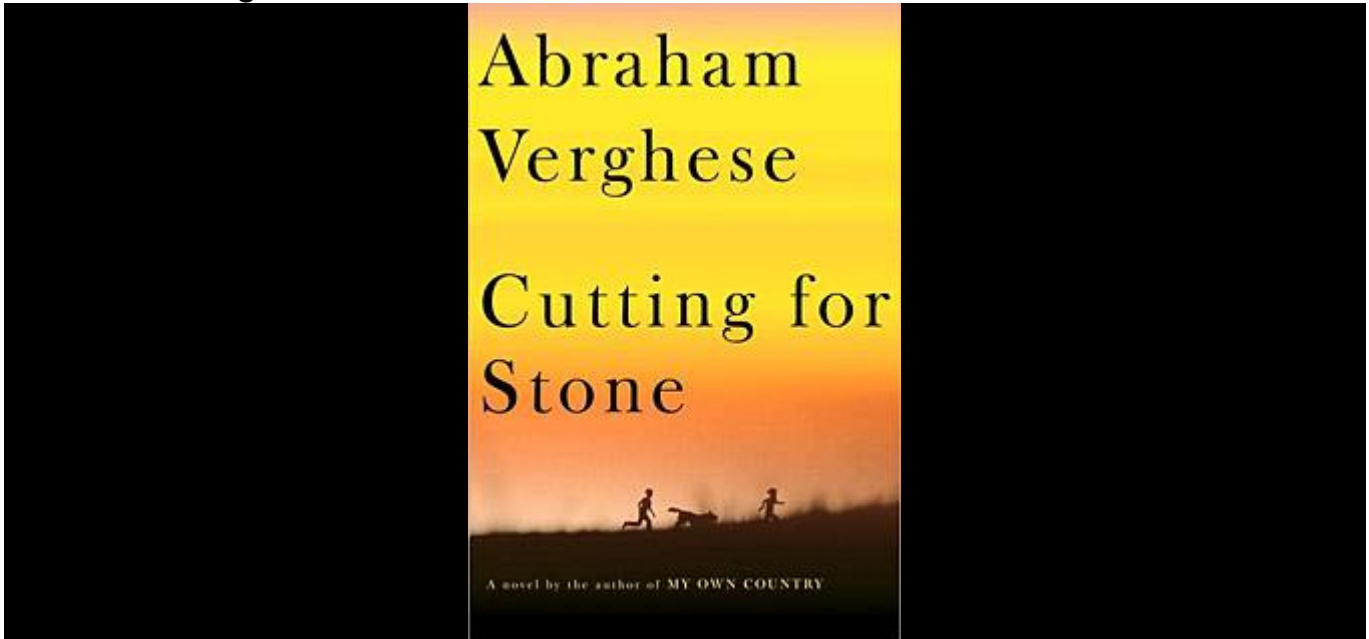


BOOK REVIEW

Cutting for Stone (2009)

Abraham Verghese



CUTTING FOR STONE by Abraham Verghese

Credits

Writer: [Abraham Verghese](#); Genres: [Drama](#), [Fiction](#); Publisher: [Knopf](#)

By [Jennifer Reese](#)

Any doubts you might (reasonably) harbor about a 534-page first novel by a physician in his 50s will be allayed in the first few pages of this marvelous book. Abraham Verghese has written two graceful memoirs — the first about his experiences with AIDS patients in Appalachia, the second about his friendship with a drug-addicted medical student — but **Cutting for Stone**, his wildly imaginative fictional debut, is looser, bigger, even better.

The serpentine narrative begins as Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a nun on staff at a charity hospital in Ethiopia, dies giving birth to twin boys. No one on staff had known she was pregnant, least of all her surgeon lover, who promptly decamps. Just when you think you're holding a grim epic of abandonment, Verghese changes keys, launching a buoyant tale of family happiness. Newborns Marion and Shiva Stone are adopted by Hema, the hospital's gynecologist, and her physician husband Ghosh. Introduced as a cheerful buffoon, Ghosh emerges as Verghese's most achingly soulful creation, a man as wise as he is tender. Verghese has the rare gift of showing his characters in different lights as the story evolves, from tragedy to comedy to slightly implausible melodrama, with an ending that is part Dickens, part *Grey's Anatomy*.

The novel works as a family saga, but it is also something more, a lovely ode to the medical profession. Verghese can write about the repair of a twisted bowel with the precision and poetry usually reserved for love scenes. The doctor in him sees the luminous beauty of the physician's calling; the artist recognizes that there remain wounds no surgeon can mend. "Where silk and steel fail, story must succeed," Marion muses. This one does. **A**