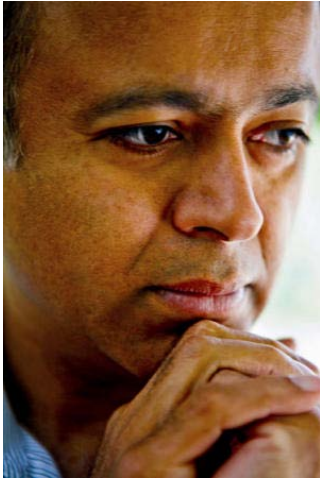


VIBRANT VERGHESE: Ex-El Pasoan to revisit for book signing

By Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times
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Abraham Verghese is returning to El Paso for a book signing. His book, "Cutting for Stone," is based on interplay between a nun and a doctor who meet on a ship bound for Ethiopia. (Courtesy of Joanne Chan)

EL PASO - For the record, Abraham Verghese does not have a split personality.

"To me, the writing seems to come out of the love of medicine," Verghese said in a phone interview from Stanford University, where he teaches. "Medicine is really about life. Out of that richness, I write."

The former El Paso physician is riding another wave of literary success, this time for "Cutting for Stone," his 534-page major fictional debut, a critically acclaimed novel that will be out in paperback in 2010.

"As they say in the business, it has a good (buzz). This has been going strong and steady," Verghese said. "It speaks well for the prospects of the paperback in February."

Set in Ethiopia, "Cutting for Stone" is billed by Verghese's publicists as "a sweeping, emotionally riveting first novel - an enthralling family saga of Africa and America, doctors and patients, exile and home."

Verghese, 54, a former professor at then Texas Tech Health Sciences Center, is returning to El Paso July 31 for a book signing and reading at The Percolator sponsored by Adair Margo Fine Art.

Verghese will travel to Scandinavia at the end of summer to promote the novel, now translated into 16 languages.

He also wrote two widely acclaimed nonfiction works, "My Own Country" (1994), a memoir recounting his experiences treating AIDS patients in rural America, and "The Tennis Partner" (1998), the story of his complicated friendship with a drug-addicted physician.

"When I was in El Paso, my first book was on the front page of the *New York Times* Book Review. It was wonderful, but this book is doing even better," Verghese said. "The reading public really picked up on it and the word of mouth is excellent."

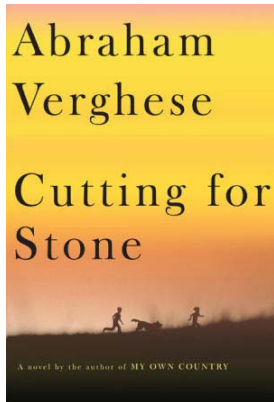
Adair Margo, a friend of Verghese and his wife Sylvia, arranged Verghese's event in El Paso after learning he had been invited to address the first students at the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine.

"I've long admired Abraham's gifts as a writer and he has a strong following," Margo said.

One of those followers is El Paso native, writer and poet Marian Haddad of San Antonio, who has been known to call friends around the United States and read excerpts of Verghese's work on the phone.

"Through his work, Verghese is able to teach, to make you laugh via his wit, and to make you cry with his poignant deliveries," Haddad said. "His work is large. It is not hyperbolic to say Abraham Verghese is the William Carlos Williams of our time."

Williams, a New Jersey native, was a pediatrician and general practitioner of medicine who also excelled as a poet.



For Verghese, part of the mission of "Cutting for Stone" is to convey to future physicians that medicine is still a noble pursuit.

"Writing has become a major part of what I do, sort of my research equivalent, but it's done to promote medicine and to help us all understand the nature of the practice and how it's changing," Verghese said. "If I succeed in bringing students to medicine with the right spirit, that to me is the greatest measure of success, more than sales and more than prizes."

Verghese acknowledged that he started writing "Cutting for Stone" in El Paso, here he met his wife and where he still maintains close ties to friends and family. The novel took seven years to complete.

"I tell my wife that the hospital where I learned the most and to which I feel most emotionally attached is Thomason (now University Medical Center of El Paso)," Verghese said. "We did so much with what we had. I have fond memories of working there."

Is there any chance that Abraham Verghese may return to El Paso someday?

"It's possible," he said. "I never left because I was unhappy there. I left largely to pursue different opportunities."