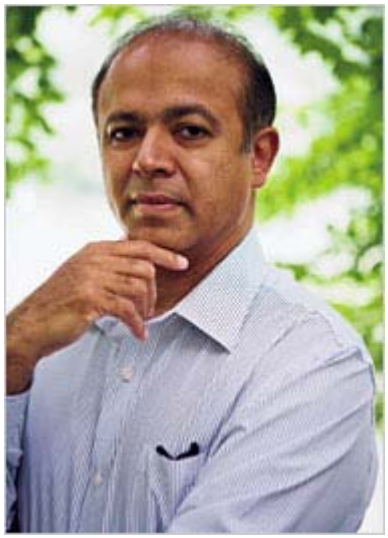
Doctors and Sons: Abraham Verghese Reads from his Debut Novel, Cutting for Stone in DC.



Make Sure That You Join the Extraodinary Ethiopian-Indian-American Novelist on Monday, February 16, 7:00pm, Politics & Prose, 5015 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, D.C

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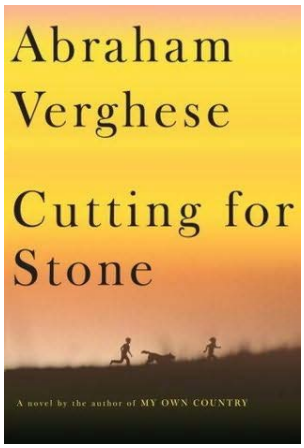
In 1994, an Ethiopian-born doctor named Abraham Verghese published a breathtakingly beautiful memoir called "In My Own Country," about dealing with the AIDS epidemic in a small Tennessee town. A second memoir titled "The Tennis Partner" followed, establishing Verghese's impressive literary reputation.

Now, Verghese has published "Cutting for Stone" (Knopf, 560 pp., $26.95), an epic debut novel of his native Ethiopia. Twin boys are born in 1954 to an Indian nun who had an affair with a tortured British surgeon. When the mother dies in childbirth and the father flees Africa, the twins, Marion and Shiva Stone, are raised and loved by two Indian doctors in Addis Ababa on the grounds of an overwhelmed mission hospital that provides care to the impoverished community — and where Marion becomes bewitched by the medical world. Marion's harsh betrayal by Shiva over a woman, and the impending collapse of the Emperor Haile Selassie's brutal regime, forces him to go abroad to a rough inner-city New York hospital during the 1980s crack wars, where a thin red line of foreign doctors try to hold back medical catastrophe. A medical emergency then forces Marion to confront his absent father and brother. In his exhilarating debut novel, Verghese melds the turbulent, tragic history of Ethiopia with the passion of a young doctor for the humane practice of his craft.



Abraham Verghese is a physician whose nonfiction books *The Tennis Partner, My Own Country* received rave reviews. Now appears his much-anticipated first novel, *Cutting for Stone*. Set primarily in an Ethiopian hospital called Missing (a misprint of "mission") in the capital of Addis Ababa, it's a contradiction of sorts — half literary novel, half soap opera, an exhausting and fantastic evocation of the life of a pair of twins whose mother was a nun and father an English surgeon.

The twins both grow up to be doctors and become patients in a ground-breaking live organ transplant, performed by their estranged father, which is both the tragic and triumphant end of the novel. Written with a lyrical flair, told through a compassionate first-person point of view, and rich with medical insight and information, it's a novel that transcends its weaknesses and makes for a memorable read.

Spanning the half-century between the boys' birth in 1954 to the discovery of a lost letter that solves a plot mystery in 2004, the story touches the edges of history. Primarily it's an indictment of the cruelty of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. As the boys grow up they both come to fall in love with a young African woman named Genet, the love interest of the plot, who is the daughter of a rebel figure, Zemui, and who later becomes an Eritrean rebel herself. Deplorable poverty and vicious dictatorial rule are what these people fight against.

Here's an example of that viciousness: At one point the twins, Shiva and Marion, see the emperor pass by; he waves to them graciously. "It was 1963, the year Kennedy was assassinated. ... Of the twenty-six cars at His Majesty's disposal, twenty were Rolls-Royces. One was a Christmas present from the Queen of England. ... An old woman waving her paper must have caught the Emperor's eye. The Rolls stopped. The old woman, bowing, thrust her paper to the window with both hands. She seemed to be speaking. The Emperor was evidently listening. The old woman became more animated, gesturing with her hands, her body rocking, and now we could hear her clearly. The car moved on, but the old lady wasn't done. She tried to run with the Rolls, fingers on the window. When she couldn't keep up, she yelled, 'Leba, leba' — 'Thief, thief.' She looked around for a stone, finding none, took off her shoe and bounced it off the trunk before anyone could react. I saw only the rise of the policeman's club and then she was slumped on the ground, like a sack. The palace gates swung shut. The old woman, motionless, nevertheless got a vicious kick to her ribs."

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Cutting for Stone's most melodramatic element is its plot, which is supercharged by a series of mysteries that include the dire fate which befell their mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, the less-than-immaculate conception of the twins, the unknown existence of a letter that explains all, and how and when the beautiful Genet will tear apart the bond between the brothers. The novel is a bit of a potboiler, full of minor characters who have significant roles in plot twists, and that fuels in part its excessive length and numerous digressions.

Verghese's first book described working at an AIDS clinic in Tennessee, and his medical expertise informs and enlivens much of this story. He describes the death of Sister Mary Joseph Praise while giving birth to the twins in lavish and queasy detail — the introductory section of the novel spans 166 pages. After their mother dies, the twins are adopted by two other doctors, Hema and Ghosh. These two doctors become the pillars of their world, guiding them through entanglements with Ethiopian resistance to Selassie and toward a life as surgeons.

All through the novel Shiva and Marion struggle with their cursed history, trying to unravel the mystery of their conception and their abandonment by their father, Thomas Stone. He's a good man with a troubled past: a dominant father and a mother who died of syphilis complications, contracted from her husband.

Why did Thomas Stone abandon his sons? How did he and Sister Mary Joseph conceive them? (The old-fashioned way, an easy guess.) Which of the sons will live and which will die? All of these central mysteries are presented early in the novel. Ultimately all are answered.

Contemporary literary comparisons are not easy with Verghese. At times he seems to be reaching for the magical realism of Gabriel Garcí a Márquez, but with a more pragmatic bent. He is of Indian heritage but does not have Salman Rushdie's satiric tendencies. He glorifies doctors but does not possess the irony or levity of John Irving's sick physician in *The Cider House Rules*.

Ultimately, he is a particular hybrid creature, both novelist and physician, and like a mythical beast, has a style and magic all his own.

Verghese, 53, was educated in Ethiopia and at the Iowa Writers Workshop, and is a practicing internist at the Stanford University School of Medicine. He spoke by telephone from his office in Palo Alto, Calif., with freelance writer Dylan Foley.

Q: Your lifetime aspiration to write fiction was delayed by two successful memoirs. How is it different writing fiction?

A: My two memoirs were a good diversion because they were compelling stories. Returning to fiction has been lovely. One of the liberating things with fiction is that you are not confined to what happened. The great difficulty in making things up is you don't have the reader's inherent interest in a story they would know is true. You have to work so much harder to get them to suspend their disbelief.

Q: Did you set out to write a sweeping tale of both Ethiopia and medicine?

A: I did set out to write an epic medical story. I would have all of medicine in it if I could. The analogy I use is of the French writer Emile Zola. His novels had all of Paris in them. Nothing was left out. I wanted to capture all of medicine — the romance of being a student, and the contrast of poverty situations in medicine and upscale medical environments. I wanted the book to grab the reader in the same way that certain books brought me to medicine.

Q: Did your family history as Indian immigrants to Ethiopia and your own path to becoming a doctor influence the novel?

A: I took a lot of liberties and I made up a lot of things, but I did use a geography that I knew well, and I used the time periods I knew well by being a similar age to Marion. Otherwise, it is completely not autobiographical. My medical pet peeves, the things I celebrate and don't celebrate, are in there.

Q: Addis Ababa, the capitol of Ethiopia, is so richly drawn that it becomes a character in the novel. What was your process for illuminating your native city?

A: It wasn't difficult. Even though the images may seem exotic for American readers, these images were as commonplace for me as Sesame Street would be for someone here — the maid and the guard at hospital gate, the contrast of expatriate life and the normal functioning of the Ethiopian lower-middle class. All I had to do was hark back to the characteristics of people I knew. They emerged as composites, but then became real for me.

Q: Throughout the novel, Marion compares his personal baggage to the parable his stepfather told him about a pair of ratty slippers that an old man can't seem to discard. What interests you in these slippers as a metaphor?

A: Maybe it's because I am at an age where I am looking at things I've done. You may look harshly at your stupidity, the terrible mistakes and tragic choices you've made, but they nevertheless led you to the next thing in your life. They are you. It's your karma, and it's acknowledging that your karma has included all these things, as well as an old pair of slippers. The slippers are yours.

EthioSun was established in May 2005, in exile, to echo the voices of Ethiopians, promote democracy, protect human rights and freedom.