



## Cutting for Stone

Review by Simon Schama

Published: May 11 2009 06:06 | Last updated: May 11 2009 06:06

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By Abraham Verghese

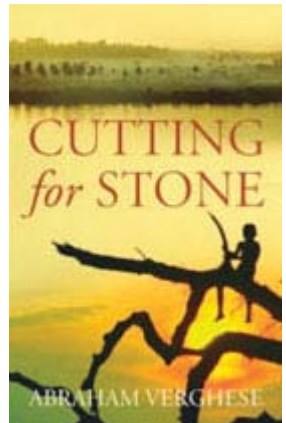
Chatto & Windus £17.99, 560 pages

[FT Bookshop](#) price: £14.99

In 1954 in Addis Ababa, an Indian nun, a nursing sister with a thing about Bernini, gives birth to identical twins who are attached at the head. This happens despite the best efforts of their father, the attending clinician, to crush their skulls in the birth canal with a cephalotribe, a fearsome instrument bristling with retractable spears and lances. This is just the beginning of Abraham Verghese's stupendous first novel, *Cutting For Stone*. Too squeamish to read on? Heard it all before? Rushdie, John Irving, carnival redeemed by mysterious love of humanity? Cumin and cinnamon feature, do they? Well, yes they do, but to pass this one by would be a mistake – it's the best novel to come along so far this year.

Much of the action takes place in Missing Hospital, its name garbled from its origins in a Christian mission. But it's Verghese's book that seems to have gone missing from the literary landscape this past winter and spring. Reviews on both sides of the Atlantic have been lukewarm.

The dread words "baggy" and "loose" have been bandied around as though its author had been caught parading in unfashionable dress. Allusions have been made to the portmanteau epic style of the long-dead 19th century. The general tone has been one of superior head-patting encouragement to the novice whose forte might still be the kind of memoir he published 15 years ago, *My Own Country*, about his time as a doctor in eastern Tennessee. Nice try; juicy characters; plot a bit OTT; could use a hard edit – that has been the general verdict.



Well, lucky us if Verghese manages to give us something even better in the future. But for the time being, *Cutting for Stone* is quite enough. And for all the invidious comparisons with contemporary fabulists, the book doesn't really belong to any familiar genre. Rather, it has invented its own: the epic medical romance, surgery meets history.

The author may be professor of the theory and practice of medicine at Stanford University but he's also a graduate of the Iowa University writing programme. These credentials might have got in each other's way but in this case they have somehow produced an original talent; a writing that can deliver with both pen and scalpel. Marion, the twin through whose voice the long, rich story unfolds, is himself an elated devotee of what Verghese practices: clinical poesy. The "scent of starvation" gives off a "fruity odor". A "narrowed aortic valve" has a "slow heaving plateaulike pulse ... *pulsus parvus et tardus*". "I loved those Latin words for their dignity, their foreignness and the way my tongue had to wrap around them."

Dr Ghosh, who becomes father to the abandoned twins, shares his own sense of literary glee: “A treasure trove of words! That’s what you find in medicine. Take the food metaphors ... the nutmeg liver, the sago spleen, the anchovy sauce sputum ... or how about the strawberry angioma ... ”

Verghese can limn the townscape of Addis Ababa, “at once dead and in continuous motion like a blanket of maggots animating a corpse”, a street scene full of vendors of lemons and chillis and roasted maize where a solitary man, a bleating sheep slung around his neck, struggles to see the road along which he trudges. But he can also, presumably from direct experience, convey the precise look of the interior of the peritoneum, opened to emit “a straw coloured fluid” or the obstructed colon, liberated from its constricting loop “like a zeppelin escaping its hangar ... boggy dark, and tense with fluid”.

And there is another sense, too in which Verghese’s eye is acutely diagnostic. Like Tolstoy (the comparison is not completely far-fetched), he spots the symptomatic, involuntary tics and twitches of body language and nails something bigger: the rough force of politics with which the twins Shiva and Marion – or, as they prefer, the indivisible organism ShivaMarion – have to deal as they grow to maturity in embattled Ethiopia.

An executioner and his prisoner exchange courtly bows on a makeshift scaffold before assuming their roles and going through the fatal business; a sign of the culture that encloses them both, notwithstanding their formal enmity. Haile Selassie is glimpsed in his Rolls, perched on the built-up seat that allows him to wave to his subjects; his chihuahua Lulu on his lap, the dog in perfect scale with the diminutive Lion of Judah. An old woman has the temerity to attempt a petition. As the car begins to move off, with nothing else at hand, she throws a show at its window in an effort to catch the ruler’s benevolent attention, and is immediately clubbed to the ground by his guards.

In *War and Peace*, the field hospital was a place of last resort for Tolstoy’s antagonists, Bolkonsky and Kuragin, to discover the point of the life from which they are about to exit. For Verghese, the hospital is the world itself, laid out in a state of extreme emotional exposure – for *Cutting for Stone* is also, at its core, a story of erotic upheavals and familial betrayals.

Its action takes place within the arc of the two terrifying procedures that form its beginning and end, and in this sense it reaches for the ambitions of Greek tragedy. Verghese may not quite make it all the way to Aeschylus on the cutting table. But there’s still no doubt at the end of his beautiful and deeply affecting novel that the place where the drama of bodies and souls plays out is both a theatre of operations and an operating theatre.

*Simon Schama is author of ‘The American Future’ (Bodley Head) and a contributing editor of the FT.*