

# The Free Lance-Star

## BUT WORDS WILL NEVER HURT ME

Review of 'Cutting Stone' by Abraham Verghese

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ALLOW ME ONE literary confession: I have been waiting for Abraham Verghese's debut novel for a long time.

I picked up a copy of his nonfiction work "The Tennis Partner" out of pure curiosity. I wasn't expecting to be captivated by its intimate prose or the compelling story about addiction and enduring friendship. Instead of merely coming away with a topic of conversation, I had new respect for the author and his talent of balancing insight and narrative.



Flash forward to the present day and his new fiction work, "Cutting for Stone." The novel follows the lives of Marion Praise and Shiva Praise Stone. The circumstances of their birth are extraordinary.

They are Siamese twins born to a nun working in a mission hospital in Ethiopia. Their mother dies in childbirth and their father flees in shame. Marion and Shiva are left to be raised by the doctors and other caretakers at Missing Hospital. They grow up amid the poverty and social tribulations of Ethiopia, eventually becoming doctors themselves.

"Cutting for Stone" is an ambitious novel. Following in the footsteps of "Sacred Games" by Vikram Chandra and "Cavedweller" by Dorothy Allison, Verghese tries to capture a spectrum of history and culture with a particular voice. The focus is very fine, while the amount of backstory seems daunting.

There are times when the effort comes off beautifully. The author skillfully captures 1950s Ethiopia under the rule of Haile Selassie. The ties and hierarchies of the unconventional "family" at Missing Hospital are intriguing and accessible. One of the novel's most interesting conflicts lies in how Shiva and Marion struggle to uncover their own personalities despite the tendency of others to see them as one.

Even though Verghese excels at establishing the world of the twins, there are some weaknesses to the narrative. The opening chapters presage a struggle between the absent father and his sons, but this subplot gets pushed back until the last section of the novel.

Also, Marion's strength as a narrator is inconsistent. While at Missing Hospital, he seems connected to events happening around him. However, once he flees to America, some of the steam goes out of his story. He seems to be marking time until his past resurfaces, forcing him to act.

"Cutting for Stone" is still a welcome addition to Verghese's works. He continues to beautifully trace the ambiguities of the human heart.

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