

Publishing guru prepares to turn Indian doctor into a literary star

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Abraham Verghese's stunning story of Siamese twins in Ethiopia could top the paperback charts on the back of TV endorsement.

A novelist, even a well-reviewed one, may sell just a couple of thousand books. It is no way to make a living, unless of course you catch the attention of Britain's biggest literary star-maker, the television producer Amanda Ross.

Novels that find favour with Ross can be expected to achieve much, much more. The film *The Lovely Bones*, to be released at the end of this month, is based on the novel of the same name by Alice Sebold which shot up the bestsellers list after it was featured on the programme Ross devised, Channel 4's *Richard & Judy*. Cecilia Aherne's *PS I Love You* followed the same route to the cinema, while Victoria Hislop's *The Island* was plucked from relative obscurity by the show's regular book review slot.

Now the most powerful book club in the land is coming back to our screens with new presenters and a new tip for the top.

"My favourite book that I have found this time, I think, is *Cutting for Stone*, sent to me by Gail Rebeck at Random House," said Ross this weekend as she announced the 10 titles to be featured on the new *TV Book Club*. "I was very pleased I found that one. I have always loved *ER* and it is set in a hospital. It is written by Abraham Verghese, an Indian doctor, and it is quite quirky and nothing like any book we have had on the programme before."

Cutting for Stone is Verghese's first novel. Set in Ethiopia, it begins with an attempted abortion and ends with a liver transplant, so, although it has been lauded by critics, with the director Richard Eyre comparing it to Chekhov, it is not the kind of book to be promoted as an airport read. But all that could be about to change.

"We do make millionaires on this show, so these days I do choose authors who are really nice people," said Ross, who selects the list with a team of three assistants from more than 800 submitted books. "The writers we pick often stay part of the family around the programme. It has quite an impact on their careers so they send us all their new books. I love that."

With Aherne and Hislop, Ross feels she helped establish reputations. "We made a difference. Although Victoria is married to Ian Hislop, the broadcaster and editor of *Private Eye*, I don't think that helped with the wider public and she didn't play on it anyway. *The Island* had already come out in hardback and hadn't sold that many. Her publishers, Headline, think it may have ended up selling only 5,000 if we hadn't picked it up and sent it over a million."

Verghese, who works at Stanford University in California and is an expert in the treatment of AIDS, has had non-fiction success in *The New Yorker*, *Granta* and *The New York Times Magazine*, and has written two published accounts of his life. But *Cutting for Stone* is his first novel.

He grew up in Addis Ababa and the book tells of abandoned twins, born at a mission hospital in the city 50 years ago. They grow up in the hospital then move to America, as many Ethiopian refugees did. The book title is a phrase from the doctors' Hippocratic oath.

If Verghese becomes a bestselling author in this country it will be testament to Ross's gift for understanding her audience. She believes the key to the new show, once again produced by her company, Cactus TV, is the choice of presenters. Instead of the husband and wife team Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan, Ross will field the comedians Jo Brand and Dave Spikey on a panel alongside the style consultant Gok Wan and the actors Laila Rouass and Nathaniel Parker.

"When you are in a book club you feel confident to talk when the people in it are on the same level as you," said Ross. "With some of these other television book programmes, the panellists are completely intimidating. They make me feel I am not qualified to read."

"The great thing about Richard and Judy was that people felt they were on their level. This time it is a stand-alone show, rather than a 12-minute segment and I hope people will feel, 'Oh well, it is a group of actors and comedians and my opinion is just as good'. There is a presenter for everybody. Sometimes it will be funny, but for other books the treatment will be quite straight-talking."

Over the past decade, celebrity endorsements of books have become hugely valuable to the market. When a title was featured by Oprah Winfrey in the book club segment of her American chat show it was guaranteed a boost of more than a million sales, now known as "the Oprah effect", while in Britain Jonathan Ross's Twitter recommendation of *The Men Who Stare At Goats*, by Jon Ronson, sent sales soaring.

The *TV Book Club* list includes titles by Sarah Waters and Nick Hornby, as well as by the former television presenter Sarah Dunant and by George Pelecanos, one of the creators and writers of the hit American TV drama, *The Wire*. "What has been great in the past is that, as well as making new names, we have broadened the readership of established writers such as William Boyd and Julian Barnes," said Amanda Ross, who is happy to be described as the Simon Cowell of the book world. "I would love to be him. I have got an amazing amount of respect for what he has done, but the main difference would be that he makes money out of the talent that he finds and I am not allowed to."

"We have got to show the same sort of integrity now about how we choose the books as we always did. We have self-imposed rules that we should never choose more than three books from one publisher. I always think about the book first before I look to see who the publisher is. For me it is just about keeping people talking about books."

■ **The Little Stranger, by Sarah Waters** Supernatural tale that examines class prejudices in postwar Britain. ■ **Blacklands, by Belinda Bauer** A 12-year-old boy plays cat-and-mouse with a serial killer. ■ **Sacred Hearts, by Sarah Dunant** Set in a convent in Renaissance Italy; a teenage girl and a woman in her 30s are compelled to take holy orders. ■ **Juliet, Naked, by Nick Hornby** Hornby returns to his favourite theme, the psychology of obsessive fandom. ■ **The Rapture, by Liz Jensen** Intelligent, apocalyptic thriller set in the near future, with eco-disaster looming. ■ **Brixton Beach, by Roma Tearne** Examination of the Sri Lankan civil war begins with the 2005 London bombings. ■ **The Way Home, by George Pelecanos** A young criminal is tempted to steal when he goes to work for his father. ■ **Wedlock, by Wendy Moore** The richest heiress in Georgian England is tricked into an abusive marriage. ■ **The Silver Linings Play Book, by Matthew Quick** An ex-teacher, recovering from long treatment in a mental hospital, hopes for reconciliation with his wife. ■ **Cutting for Stone, by Abraham Verghese** The story of Siamese twins born in an Ethiopian mission hospital.