

CUTTING FOR STONE

by Abraham Verghese

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It is unlikely that you will come across such a sentence even in a novel that unravels man's innermost mysteries: "If the beating heart is pure theatre, a playful, moody, extroverted organ cavorting in the chest, then the liver, sitting under the diaphragm, is a figurative painting, stolid and silent." Then Abraham Verghese, a professor of medicine at Stanford University, USA, who uses Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* as a textbook on end-of-life, is not just another storyteller; it is the intercellular drama of human anatomy that creates the frisson in his stories.

And so far, those bestselling stories were not fiction. His first book, *My Own Country*, which has been made into a film by Mira Nair, is a personal narrative of his years caring for the HIV-infected in rural Tennessee. *The Tennis Partner*, his second, too, is a memoir that turns the game of friendship into a meditation on loss and relapse. *Cutting for Stone* is Verghese's first novel, a love story whose most poignant moments are played out in an operation theatre, an arena where the seared emotions of human intimacies are laid bare.



Abraham Verghese

Inhabited by exiles and refugees from their own worst secrets, spanning three continents and half-a-century, it is a saga in which the power of passion has the rawness of the Old Testament and the sweep of a vintage Russian classic. Verghese choreographs the volitions and violations, the temptations and transgressions, of the displaced and the orphaned to a terrifying but redemptive finale.

It begins with a voyage across the Indian Ocean, aboard the cargo ship *Calangute* sailing toward Aden in the year of India's independence. The ship carries, among its few passengers, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a 19-year old novitiate from Cochin, who is on her way to take up her first nursing assignment in Africa, and Thomas Stone, a young English surgeon, who is leaving the Indian Medical Service for better opportunities elsewhere. Death and seasickness bring the nun and the hawk-eyed doctor together for a while in the first flash of forbidden love.

Later, at Missing Hospital in Addis Ababa, the nun, already violated by a godless Africa, and the surgeon, a genius with his nine fingers but almost Heathcliffian in his torment, turn their secret relationship into a romance sustained by death, birth and atonement. The bride of Christ dies in the operation theatre of Missing giving birth to conjoined twins, "obstetric miracles". The woman who brings them to this world and who will become their mother for the rest of their lives, Dr Hemalatha, names them Marion, after the patron saint of obstetrics and gynaecology, and Shiva, after the dancing god.

The novel, told in the grand strokes of a Victorian realist, mainly anatomises three relationships. Sister Mary and Stone, lovers deprived of the powers to express themselves, form the foundation on which Verghese, a portraitist of castaways, builds his story of separation and salvation. Then there are the infallible Hema, the best gynaecologist in Addis Ababa and the one who can overpower a rogue pilot by locking his spermatic cord with her surgeon's fingers, and Dr Ghosh, another physician of the hospital.

Their love story too doesn't have a happy ending, but there is fulfillment when they, the foster parents of the twins, become part of the transcontinental evolution of the Mary-Joseph story. Still, it is the twins, biologically separated by a wound that lingers in their shared memory, who restore the beauty of their parents' lost lives. The twins' life began in an operation theatre in Addis Ababa. In another in Bronx, they restore the beauty of their own oneness in an act that is more than a leap in surgical science. It is redemption. Like Scheherazade, Marion, the narrator, has to keep telling the story. It's about being alive. About living the lives of others as well.

The novel is mostly set in Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, which also happen to be the birthplace of Verghese, whose parents came from Kerala. It is not the Ethiopia immortalised by Ryszard Kapuscinski in *The Emperor*. It is a much more beautiful place where the good-time girls of Addis drift in to the Hilton lounge, trailing perfume. And

history gatecrashes into Missing, shattering the programmed lives of its inhabitants. It is the rebellion against the regime that allows Verghese to take the story to America.

Still, the finest set pieces in this novel take place in an operation theatre; specifically, in the deep recesses of the human body. Verghese's pages smell of Dettol and carbolic acid. Medicine is not a metaphor here. In a conversation with *India Today*, he says: "I wanted the whole novel to be of medicine, populated by people in medicine, the way Zola's novels are of Paris." Is it then the only world that sustains his creativity? "No," the novelist protests, "I think medicine itself is very creative both in the science and in the everyday practice. Patients present you with the ghost of a story and it is your job to take that fragment and imagine the rest from your repertoire of stories. Hence the term the art and science of medicine."

So how far has his own life story gone into the making of this novel? "The parts that resonate with my own life have to do with geography and history. There is a sense of loss when you leave your birthplace after so many years, even if it was not your land per se. So it turned out that the book portrays Ethiopia in the kind of detail and truth that allows people to see what an extraordinary country and people we are talking about." That said, his parents were not physicians; he did not grow up in a mission hospital; and he has no twin brother. "I suppose I wanted to pay tribute to the wonderful teachers I have had in surgery and in medicine, and to expose them to the pitfalls of medicine, the danger of losing yourself in the profession and not keeping a handle on your personal life, or as Yeats said, balancing 'perfection of the life with the perfection of work'."

How does he himself achieve that perfection—the fine balance between the doctor and the writer? "I think there is no separation. My identity beyond that of being a father, husband, a son, a citizen and so on is completely that of being a physician, of having the privilege to serve not only patients but to serve the profession, to honour its ideals. So I see all writing, whatever form it takes, as being a function of that grand privilege of being a physician which in my case is everything." The art of the novel will be indebted to the grand privilege of this physician.