

'All my writing is a function of that grand privilege of being a physician'

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Abraham Verghese is the Professor and Senior Associate Chair for the Theory and Practice of Medicine at Stanford University, USA, and the author of two best-selling books, *My Own Country* and *The Tennis Partner*. *Cutting for Stone* (published in India by Random House) is his first novel, a sprawling love story set in three continents—India, Africa and America--and spanning five tumultuous decades.

The novel's most dramatic moments are played out in an operation theatre. Medicine is more than a metaphor for this physician-storyteller. Excerpts from his conversation with *India Today* Editor-at-Large **S. Prasannarajan**.



Abraham Verghese

Q. You were a wonderful storyteller in non-fiction too, as in *My Own Country* and *The Tennis Partner*. Why did you need the fictional form now?

A. Fiction is truly my first love. To paraphrase Dorothy Allison, fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about how the world really lives. It is why I use Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to teach about end-of-life, and *Bastard out of Carolina* to help students really understand child abuse. A textbook rarely gives them the kind of truth or understanding achieved in the best fiction. I always set out to write fiction and got sidetracked to non-fiction.

One of my first published short stories was "Lilacs," an AIDS story, which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1991. That is what led to my getting a contract to write *My Own Country*, a memoir of my years of caring for persons with HIV in rural Tennessee. While writing that book I found myself living through an intense personal story of friendship and loss which led to the second non-fiction book, *The Tennis Partner*. After that, I passed up on an offer to write a third non fiction book. I was keen to get back to fiction, to explore that kind of truth.

I do think it is easier in the grand sweep of a novel to get at the nature of medicine, the dangers and rewards, and to search ultimately for meaning.

Q. How far your own life story has gone into the making of this novel?

A. I borrowed a familiar geography and history, and the parts that resonate with my own life have to do with geography and history. It made it easier I suppose to authentically describe an era and a place. There is a sense of loss when you leave your birth place 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 with the kind of 'truth' that allows people to see what an extraordinary country and people we are talking about, far different from whatever notion we might have had in my head.

That said, my parents were not physicians, I did not grow up in a mission hospital, I have no twin, and I never worked in the Bronx. The characters are all imagined, though I must say that after living with them all these years, they now seem more real to me than people I know.

I suppose I wanted to pay tribute to the wonderful teachers I have had in surgery and in medicine, and also to the wealth of characters and characteristics I admired in my peers and students and others. 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 perfection of the work."

Q. The story is set in the world of medicine, spanning across continents. How has imagination enriched this world?

A. It is all imagined and yet not far from reality. If I begin with a mission hospital in Africa, a place redolent with Dettol and carbolic acid scents, it is because I think that in a place so basic, so unadorned, nothing separates doctor and patient, no layers of paperwork, technology or specialists, no disguising of the nature of the patient's experience or the raw physician experience. It's a setting where the nature of the suffering, the fiduciary responsibility and moral obligation to the patient and society are no longer abstract terms.

In that setting I wanted to put very human, fallible characters-people like Sister Mary, Joseph Praise, Thomas Stone. To take it to America was to contrast this world with Western medicine, its power and beauty, but also its failings. Contrasting an inner city underfunded non-academic center with a "Mecca" of a tertiary referral center was also I think a good way to point out the strengths and weaknesses of both and also to highlight the very different people who inhabit such places. In short, I wanted the whole novel to be of medicine, populated by people in medicine, the way Zola's novels are of Paris.

Q. Is it the only world that sustains your creativity?

A. No. I actually think that medicine is itself very creative both in the science and in the everyday practice. Patients present 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.

Q. Structurally, Cutting for Stone is a grand narrative. Are you a classicist?

A. I am not sure that I am classicist, but I certainly enjoy the grand sweeping narratives of a Dickens, a Tolstoy. What appeals to me is entering a book and by doing so entering a full life over some generations and then emerging from it 5 days later with all the lessons of a lifetime having been delivered to you without actually costing you a lifetime! Kind of like space travel!

Q. How much of Ethiopia, or the Ethiopia of Selassie, you continue to carry within you?

A. It was my birthland, the source of my earliest memories, so it is indelible. Time has caused much of it to fade, and having gone back a few times, I have a much clearer sense that as much as I want to, I can't truly claim the place anymore because so little of my life is connected to that now. This is in contrast to India where my sense of connection is vibrant and palpable, a continuing source of identity with a dense web of friends and family.

Q. Are you a writer defined by the ancestral memories of migrations and displacement?

A. I think we all are. Looking at it objectively, in my novel I seem to have recreated (perhaps even subconsciously) the path of my parents' migrations and peregrinations, and my own. It is a kind of migrant existence that I don't think my children will ever know.

Q. Have you abandoned non-fiction for good?

A. I don't think so. I do think that if my publishers will let me, it is fiction that I want to keep writing. I can however see myself writing non-fiction pieces, say for magazines or even at book length if I find the right topic.

Q. How do you achieve such a fine balance between the two selves--the doctor and the writer?

A. 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, the honour, the calling to serve, and to serve not only patients but to serve the profession, to honour its ideals, to celebrate its grand history, to profess my belief (to use Loeb's term) in the Samaritan function of being a physician.

So I see all the writing, whatever form it takes-fiction, non-fiction, reportage, obituary, op-ed-as being a function of that grand privilege and that stance of being a physician which in my case is everything. So I resist the definition of the writer as being a separate entity.

That said, I have never put MD behind my name on a book (other than one on infections in nursing homes where I thought it appropriate). I felt that the writing (no different than say the music if you are a musician or your art if you are a painter) had to stand on its own, had to work on the terms and by the standards of the generous but not infinitely patient literate reader for whom I write.

Q. Do you in anyway stay connected with your ancestral place?

A. My grandparents ancestral places are both sold now, gone and probably subdivided. While they were alive and those places were intact I had a sense of being really connected to those locales in Kerala. But as mentioned above, I still feel very wedded to India.

These days that bond is strongest to Madras (I still struggle to say Chennai) where I attended Madras Christian College and later Madras Medical College. My parents are retired in Trivandrum but it is not a city I know well otherwise. I have dear friends and cousins in Bangalore so that is now a city I have become very familiar with.