

Cutting for Stone

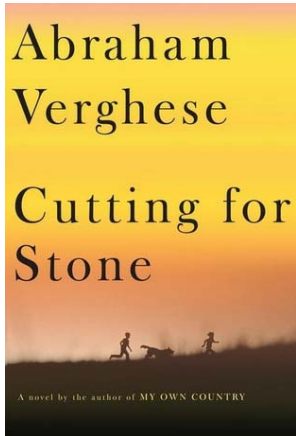
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By Abraham Verghese (Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95)

A novel set in Africa bears a heavy burden. The author must bring it home, that continent, into the reader's more defined existence: To help the reader sit in a chair and imagine Africa; vast, ancient, sorrowful, beautiful Africa.

Abraham Verghese's "Cutting for Stone" is the first straightforward quotidian novel set in and largely about Africa that I've read in a long time -- the kind that shows how history and landscape and accidents of birth and death conspire to create the story of a life.

Marion Stone, the narrator, reconstructs his half-century with a child's wonder: "I believe in black holes," he thinks, now many years a surgeon in New York and miles from the clinic in Ethiopia where he and his twin brother, Shiva, orphaned not by war but by one man's internal, ancestral war, grew up. "I believe that as the universe empties into nothingness, past and future will smack together in the last swirl around the drain."



The twins are orphaned when their mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a saintly young nurse from India, dies in childbirth, and their father, a British surgeon named Thomas Stone, runs away from the clinic after the birth, full of despair. Shiva and Marion are raised by the clinic's gynecologist, Hema, and her husband, a kindly doctor named Ghosh.

The childhood years, until the twins are 12 and Ethiopia's emperor Haile Selassie is overthrown, are richly written.

The intimacy of the twins, who sleep most nights with their heads touching (heads connected in utero that were separated at birth by their father), the ghostly purity of their mother and the rhythms of the hospital create an inhabitable space, on and off the page.

In lesser hands, melodrama would be irresistible; the peace is vulnerable and, yes, it is shattered, but Verghese has already created characters with integrity that will not be shattered by any event.

The girl both brothers love is given a violent clitoridectomy by her mother. That violence does not shatter the purity that shelters the twins. In this and other scenarios, Verghese makes the point in his way that violence begets violence, fanaticism is born from pain.

Verghese creates "Cutting for Stone" so lovingly that it is actually possible to live within it for the brief time one spends with this book. You may never leave the chair.

--- Susan Salter Reynolds, *Los Angeles Times*