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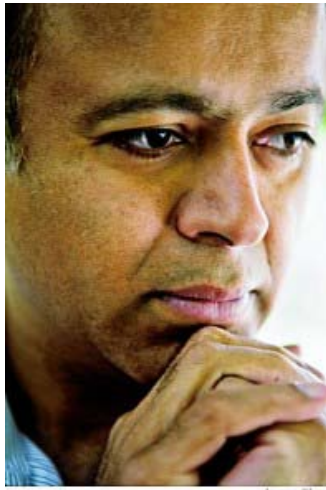
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Cutting for Stone

A doctor/author creates “characters who are larger than life yet painfully human.”

By Nalini Iyer

Many readers know Abraham Verghese as the author of the memorable “My Own Country” about working as a doctor in eastern Tennessee. My Own Country was an NBCC finalist and 1994 best book for Time; his second work, “The Tennis Partner” was a New York Times Notable Book. “Cutting for Stone” is his first novel. Like his non-fiction, the central focus of this work is also the practice of medicine. The novel’s heroic and compassionate doctors bring to mind W. Somerset Maugham’s “Of Human Bondage”, a work that Verghese acknowledges as having influenced him.



The novel is long and has a complex yet clear plot that spans several decades. The central character and narrator of some sections is Marion Praise Stone, the child of an English surgeon and an Indian nun who meet on board a ship bound to Ethiopia and eventually work at Missing (Mission) hospital in Addis Ababa in the 1950s.

Marion and his twin, Shiva, arrive precipitously when the resident obstetrician, Hema, is in the midst of an air crash on her way back from India. Sr. Mary Joseph Praise, the mother, had managed to keep her pregnancy secret even from the father of the children until she went into labor. The absence of the other resident surgeon, Ghosh, compels the father, Thomas Stone, to try and deliver the babies. Even as he is botching the birth and nearly kills one of the babies, Hema arrives, the children are born but their mother dies and their father leaves the hospital never to return.

Abraham Verghese

The children are raised by Hema and Ghosh, who eventually marry for one year at a time, and are raised in a household supported by two women—one Eritrean with a daughter of her own and a childless Ethiopian woman. In this gloriously cosmopolitan, eccentric, and multilingual home, the twins grow up each with his own talents but connected by that mysterious ability of twins to communicate. Through the lives of the children, we learn of Ethiopia’s colonial history, the rise of Emperor Haile Selassie, the problems of Eritrea, the crisis of poverty and health care that haunts the people, and the heroic and compassionate abilities of two doctors to serve a people whom they have adopted as their own. The twins both develop a passion for medicine and while Marion studies medicine formally, Shiva apprentices himself to Hema and becomes an excellent surgeon who specializes in fixing fistulas. Both brothers are attracted to Genet, their Eritrean nanny’s child, and their rivalry splits them just as Eritrea rebels against Ethiopia. Marion is falsely accused of treason and escapes with the help of Eritrean guerillas to America where he trains at an impoverished Bronx hospital. The plot wends its way in near Dickensian perfection to a father–son reunion, a twins reconciliation in a moment of medical glory (an event worthy of tabloid journalism), and the novel ends with some sorrow, some joy, and a lot of plot twists.

A plot summary does not do justice to the wealth of characters and the dense details that make this novel such a wonderful read. The author creates characters who are larger than life and yet painfully human; in a world often short on heroes, this novel offers us a plethora of admirable characters. A word of caution to the skittish reader—if you were a fan of the TV show “ER” and follow the medical details of surgeries on “Grey’s Anatomy” and enjoyed high school biology lab, you will enjoy the gory details of fistula surgeries and effects of volvulus. If not, proceed with caution—the author is a doctor who loves the practice of medicine and makes medical details readable and comprehensible to the ordinary reader, but there is occasionally a little too much realism!

Nalini Iyer is Associate Professor of English at Seattle University where she specializes in Postcolonial Studies with an emphasis on South Asia. She has written numerous scholarly articles and book reviews on South Asian literature and her upcoming book, co-edited with Bonnie Zare is Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India (Rodopi, 2008).