

Dr Abraham Verghese headed for UK literary stardom

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London: An Indian-origin doctor is headed for celebrity status after Britain's biggest literary star-maker announced plans to back his debut in fiction.

Abraham Verghese's 'Cutting for Stone' - a story of Siamese twins in Ethiopia - could top the paperback charts on the back of TV endorsement by television producer Amanda Ross, considered the most influential figure in British publishing.

"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 her programme.

"I was very pleased I found that one?. 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," she was quoted saying by The Observer.

Verghese, who grew up in Ethiopia born to parents from Kerala and works at Stanford University in California in the field of HIV/AIDS, has had non-fiction success in The New Yorker, Granta and The New York Times Magazine and has also written two published accounts of his life.

Ross was the producer of a popular television book club called 'Richard & Judy', and is about to launch a new Sunday evening programme on Channel 4 called 'The TV Book Club,' where Verghese's book will be flagged.

Books on the show will be reviewed by a panel of celebrities, including actress Laila Rouass, comedian Jo Brand and fashion guru Gok Wan.

Successful novels endorsed by Richard & Judy include Alice Sebold's 'The Lovely Bones', whose film version is to be released at the end of this month; Cecilia Aherne's 'PS I Love You', also made into a film; and Victoria Hislop's 'The Island', which became a publishing phenomenon after being plucked from relative obscurity by Ross.

Ross said the publishers of 'The Island' estimate they may have sold only 5,000 copies of the book if her book club "hadn't picked it up and sent it over a million".

"We do make millionaires on this show, so these days I choose authors who are really nice people. 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," she added.

Verghese's first novel, named after a phrase from the doctors' Hippocratic oath, has been lauded by critics, with the noted British film director Richard Eyre comparing it to a work by Chekhov.

"If Verghese becomes a bestselling author in this country it will be testament to Ross's gift for understanding her audience," The Observer said.