

Times Book Club: For Abraham Verghese, writing and medicine can't be separated

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The author of the very literary, sweeping "Cutting for Stone" sits in his office at Stanford Medical Center, surrounded by medical books. That should come as no surprise to anyone who's read this first novel, which is chock full of doctors and surgeries.

In Abraham Verghese's mind, there was never any chance of separating the writing and the medicine.

"To me, the writing comes organically from the medicine," he says. "I love medicine; if I ever had medicine taken away, I'm not sure I'd have anything to say."

The novel, which took eight years to write is called "Cutting for Stone," from a line in the Hippocratic oath: "I will not cut for stone." Verghese explains the line comes from the medieval times when a golf ball-size kidney stone or gallstone could kill a person. Itinerant monks or priests would cut into the sufferer and remove the stone, then wipe the bloody knife on their cassock before tending to the next patient.

"Basically, (the oath) means don't do surgery unless you are skilled, no matter how much the patient is suffering," he says. "I just like the ring of the phrase. Every year the most moving part of my year is when my students graduate, and I hear them recite that oath. This line moves me to tears."

Verghese, 53, says the title for the book could mean many things, but he chuckled about one of the more obvious conclusions, regarding the surgeon Thomas Stone, who fathered the twin boys at the center of the tale.

"I hate to confess this, but his name was Thomas Pickering for the longest time. Then one morning I woke up and thought, if I call him Thomas Stone, I will seem so much more clever! It's wonderful symmetry! But, that's how writing happens."

Route to America

Verghese, who lives in Menlo Park with his wife and the youngest of his three sons, began his medical studies in Ethiopia, where he was born to Indian schoolteacher parents. After Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed, the young man had to leave the country (although not secretly or on foot, as did his narrator in "Cutting for Stone"). He finished his degree in India and eventually moved to the United States. One of the first doctors to work with AIDS patients in rural Tennessee, he chronicled his experiences in his highly regarded 1994 memoir, "My Own Country: A Doctor's Story."

"Cutting for Stone" is equally lauded, currently rising up the bestseller lists.

Verghese's idea for "Cutting for Stone" began with "the preposterous proposition" of a nun giving birth. Then it became twins. "I just had the image and the voice and a very strong sense that I wanted it to be imbued with medicine. I knew it would take place on two continents. But I really didn't know where it was going."

Characters revealed

His characters slowly revealed themselves to him. There were the abandoned twin boys, of course, who were raised by two doctors at the Mission Hospital after their mother died in childbirth. Marion, the narrator, was named for groundbreaking obstetrics surgeon Marion Sims. The other twin was Shiva, named for the Hindu god who is both creator and destroyer. Verghese says it is a common name, though readers have wondered if there was purpose to calling the boy this name.

"It's amazing how readers credit me with having thought up all these things. I'm not always conscious of them," he says, smiling. "But later I might do things to magnify that effect."

A favorite character of his (and many readers) is Ghosh, who became the surgeon out of necessity for the small Ethiopian hospital after Thomas Stone abandoned his post after the surprise birth of his twin sons. In an early version, Ghosh was a less sympathetic character, more of a rake.

"Ghosh's decision to stay with the boys and marry Hema was very reflective of who he was. Whereas the Thomas Stones who float around this place" — he gestures at the hospital building through his office window — "they are seductive because they are incredibly hardworking, very single-minded, and so skilled. We are willing to forgive them often their social ineptitudes and inadequacies because that's not what we want from them. We want their great skill. But part of us wonders what their private lives are like."

The book is populated by all the types of people one meets in medicine, Verghese says, "which in turn is all the types one meets in life. I often think of medicine as 'life plus.' It's all amplified in this setting where we are encountering people in great moments of decision where character is revealed. I think that's the joy of writing about medicine. Life plus."

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