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FICTION

A quest to piece together the past

A doctor's search for his beginnings takes the reader back in time and all over the world.

BY W. RALPH EUBANKS

CUTTING FOR STONE. Abraham Verghese. Knopf. 541 pages. \$26.95.

"Why St. Teresa, mother?" the narrator of Abraham Verghese's masterful first novel asks longingly. Marion Praise Stone wants to understand his long-dead mother and her devotion to the 16th century mystic. But the circumstances surrounding his birth complicate that quest: Marion and his identical twin brother, Shiva, were born from a secret union between a beautiful Indian nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, and a British surgeon, Thomas Stone, in Addis Ababa in 1954. Now 50 years old, and a doctor like the father who abandoned him, Marion sets out to piece together his personal history, as a spiritual exercise and as an act of reconciliation.

Marion's question is prompted by one of the few remnants of his late mother's life: a print of Bernini's sculpture of Teresa of Avila, depicting her enraptured by the love of God. He senses that his mother's beauty must have been like that of St., known to be so attractive to men that her confessor not only fell in love with her but also wound up confessing to her his sins.

Verghese's gripping narrative moves over decades and generations from India to Ethiopia to an inner-city hospital in New York, describing the cultural and spiritual pull of these places. Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Dr. Thomas Stone meet during the young nun's voyage from India to a missionary post in Yemen. Sister Mary Joseph saves Stone's life on the tempestuous passage, one filled with typhoid and other dangers. Impressed by her skills as a nurse, Stone asks the nun to join him in Addis Ababa at a mission hospital. She declines his invitation, noting her commitment to her order in Yemen.

The novel moves to the story of Marion and Shiva, as well as their adoptive parents, Stone's fellow physicians, and the world of the hospital. Until their teens, the twins share a bed, sleeping with their heads touching just as they did in their mother's womb. Yet as young men, an act of sexual betrayal -- they share a passion for the same woman -- spirals out of control and separates them for many years. Both become doctors, and eventually the division leads Marion to an internship at a New York hospital. But then an illness leaves Marion's life in the hands of the brother who betrayed him as well as the father who abandoned him.

Even with its many stories and layers, *Cutting for Stone* remains clear and concise. Verghese paints a vivid picture of these settings, the practice of medicine (he is also a physician) and the characters' inner conflicts. In *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa's work on mystical theology, she wrote, "I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions." *Cutting for Stone* shines like that place.

W. Ralph Eubanks reviewed this book for The Washington Post.