

Debut is a successful operation

A sprawling first novel about an Ethiopian doctor and his escape to the United States.

By **LAURA C.J. OWEN**, Special to the Star Tribune, March 6, 2009

CUTTING FOR STONE

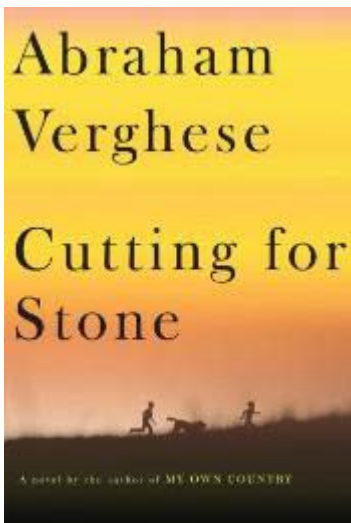
By: Abraham Verghese.

Publisher: Knopf, 541 pages, \$26.95.

Review: Verghese has more in common with 19th-century writers than 21st-century ones, as he packs his 541 pages with scenes, action, melodrama and characters.

It's easy to resent Abraham Verghese, author of the debut novel "Cutting for Stone," as an overachiever. He's a doctor as well as a writer, for starters. "Cutting for Stone" may be his first novel, but he's also the author of two well-received memoirs.

Jealous single-careerists could point out that in "Cutting for Stone," Verghese has not strayed too far from medicine. Most of his characters are surgeons, and medicine often takes center stage.



Our narrator is Dr. Marion Stone, born to a nun (yes, a nun) in 1950s Ethiopia. Marion tells us the entirety of his story, starting with his parents' first meeting. Unlike the narrator of "Tristram Shandy," who tries to tell the story of his life but barely gets to his birth, Marion authoritatively tells us the story of his delivery and life.

Marion is born conjoined at the head with his twin brother, Shiva. Their birth is, to say the least, difficult. The delivery scene, involving an insanely complicated Caesarean section, is the book's most gripping scene.

The surgical descriptions are admirably accessible, as Verghese takes every opportunity to make the language of medicine fascinating to the outsider: "A treasure trove of words! That's what you find in medicine," Marion's father-figure says to him early on.

That said, the book is not for the squeamish: More than 500 pages, "Cutting for Stone" starts with a typhoid outbreak and ends with a risky liver transplant.

In fact, the book accumulates quite a bit of melodrama, medical and otherwise. As Marion tells the story of his young adulthood in Ethiopia and flight to a surgical residency in the United States, he is affected by a political coup, a murder, an attempted plane hijacking, his estranged father, various medical breakthroughs ... you get the idea. The heightened drama leaks into the characters, as well. When characters fall in love, they fall irrevocably and forever. All of the surgeons are extremely brilliant or extraordinarily kind.

Yet it's refreshing to read a first novel that doesn't shy away from incident. Verghese's novel has more in common with the large, ambitious, action-packed novels of the 19th century than with any more recent models. References to George Eliot's "Middlemarch" are layered into the book, perhaps as an indicator of the kind of sweeping social novel Verghese is attempting.

What's most memorable about "Cutting for Stone," however, is Verghese's compassionate authorial generosity toward his characters, particularly in his medical scenes. Verghese's doctors never forget that they are operating on human beings. *What treatment is offered by ear in an emergency?* is a question repeated several times throughout the novel. The answer being, of course, *Words of comfort*.

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