

# The Gazette

## **A passion for healing**

By Barbara Black, The Montreal Gazette  
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A good novel by a physician is a rare thing, perhaps because medicine is such a demanding mistress. Abraham Verghese is a triple threat: a fine writer with an unusual background and a passion for healing.

Born in Ethiopia, Verghese studied medicine there and in his ancestral home, India. Like many such graduates, he fulfilled his internship in a less-favoured hospital in the United States. Now he's a professor of medicine at Stanford University.

He also found time to attend the prestigious Ohio Writers Workshop and publish two non-fiction books. *My Own Country* was about becoming an HIV/AIDS expert in East Tennessee in the 1980s. *The Tennis Partner* was about the disintegration of his first marriage and the struggle of a physician friend with drug abuse. Both books were highly praised. This is his first time out as a novelist.

It's an absorbing story told by a boy who, like Verghese, grows up in Ethiopia and becomes a surgeon. Marion Praise Stone and his twin brother, Shiva, are born to an Indian nun in a bare-bones Ethiopian hospital. Their mother dies in childbirth. Their father, a British surgeon called Thomas Stone, has a breakdown and disappears, but the boys find a loving home with a couple of doctors and their faithful staff.

Dramatic events ensue, including the Eritrean uprising against the Ethiopian government, in which Marion is ensnared through his love for a Genet, a childhood friend who has become a student rebel. Years later in the United States, Marion encounters, quite by accident, his biological father and his lost love.

These would seem to be absurd coincidences were it not for the author's skill at drawing us into the story. The seven main characters come alive as individuals, and medical procedures and conditions as various as breech birth, vasectomy, twisted bowel, vaginal fistula and female genital mutilation are vividly described.