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Doctors and Sons

By ERICA WAGNER
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“I will not cut for stone,” runs the text of the Hippocratic oath, “even for patients in whom the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by practitioners, specialists in this art.”

Abraham Verghese: Photo by Joanne Chen

CUTTING FOR STONE

By Abraham Verghese

541 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $26.95

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Those words provide an epigraph partway through Abraham Verghese’s first novel, “Cutting for Stone,” and also explain the surname of its narrator, Marion Stone, along with his twin brother, Shiva, and their father, the almost entirely absent surgeon Thomas Stone. Absent in body only: in spirit, Thomas’s disappearance after their birth haunts and drives this book.

Yet until the reader comes across the oath, well into the novel, the title may seem pleasing to the ear but puzzling to the mind: it tries to do too many jobs at once. It neither suggests the book’s action — as, say, “Digging to America” does — nor evokes its mood, as “Bleak House” does. Still, Verghese strives for the empathy of Anne Tyler and the scope of Dickens. If he doesn’t quite manage either, he is to be admired for his ambition.

Verghese is a physician and an already accomplished author. His two nonfiction books, “My Own Country,” about AIDS in rural Tennessee, and “The Tennis Partner,” a moving and honest memoir of a difficult, intimate friendship, are justly celebrated. His commitment to both his professions is admirable: currently a professor at the Stanford University School of Medicine, he also holds an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. But why mention qualifications? What do qualifications matter where fine writing is concerned? Not at all, is the correct answer, and yet qualifications like Verghese’s are tribute, at the very least, to his stalwart effort. This effort is both the making and the unmaking of “Cutting for Stone.”

The plot of this big, dense book is fairly straightforward. Marion and Shiva Stone are born one dramatic afternoon in 1954 in Addis Ababa, the same day their mother — a nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise — dies of complications from her hidden pregnancy. The boys are conjoined at the skull, yet separated at birth; they are raised by Dr. Kalpana Hemlatha, a forceful woman known as Hema, and Dr. Abhi Ghosh, both immigrants from Madras and both doctors at the hospital where the boys’ natural parents also worked. Missing Hospital, it’s called: “Missing was really

Mission Hospital, a word that on the Ethiopian tongue came out with a hiss so it sounded like 'Miss*ing*.' " They grow up amid the political turmoil of Ethiopia (its actual chronology altered slightly by Verghese to suit his fictional purposes), and in 1979 Marion flees, first to Nairobi and finally to New York, where he qualifies as a surgeon. Shiva, too, goes into medicine, specializing in treating vaginal fistula, for which work he is acclaimed in this very newspaper, a sure sign of his renown. Almost supernaturally close as children, the brothers become more and more distant as the novel progresses; they are dramatically reunited at its end — through the mysterious agency of the long-vanished Thomas Stone.

As a novelist, Verghese looks to models like Salman Rushdie and John Irving: the novel is capacious, not to say baggy, in the way those writers' novels can be, and it is tinged, albeit lightly, with a sense of magic, though one senses that Verghese in his soul is too much a realist ever to be quite convinced of his own attempts in this department. (The brothers' being joined — but only briefly — at the head is an example of this slightly half-hearted effort.) Much more forceful are his vivid descriptions of surgery, vivid enough that those with weaker stomachs may find them disturbing. One would, I suppose, be ill advised to use this novel as a textbook for liver transplantation or bowel surgery, but it might almost be possible. The trouble is that for all the author's passion, this kind of writing periodically stops the book in its tracks: "Hema smiled, as if to say, *Very little escapes me, my dear man.* And then she was thinking of . . . rugaeform folds, of the median raphe that separated one bollock from the other, of the dartos muscle, the cells of Sertoli." Hema's mind, as the author then says, is racing: but the reader's goes into a stall.

The novel is crippled, too, by the use of back story. There is a feeling of Greek drama about the narrative: a lot of the real action happens offstage. We finally learn, toward the end of the novel, what made Thomas Stone the man he is, with all his strengths and deficits, yet by then the tale seems curiously belated and less than fully integrated into the novel. The same is true for the later events in the life of Genet, Marion's childhood sweetheart, the daughter of his nanny, who joins a band of Eritrean guerrillas but reappears fleetingly in Marion's life to devastating effect.

Verghese's weakness is the weakness of a writer with too much heart: it's clear he loves his characters and he just wants to cram in every last fact about them, somehow. Great novels are not built merely on the agglomeration of detail.

This is a first novel that reveals the author's willingness to show the souls, as well as the bodies, of his characters. In Verghese's second profession, a great surgeon is called an editor. Here's hoping that in the future the author finds stronger medicine in that line.
Erica Wagner is the literary editor of The Times of London and the author, most recently, of the novel "Seizure."