

The Nelson Mail

Cutting for Stone

By Abraham Verghese (Chatto & Windus (Random House), 534 pages, \$37.99)

Reviewed by Tracy Neal - Nelson
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African-raised and Indian-trained doctor Abraham Verghese has subscribed to the fail-safe formula of writing a good story - write about what you know.

Cutting for Stone traces the lives of conjoined twins Shiva and Marion Stone, abandoned at birth by the grim death of their mother, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, and the sudden disappearance from the remote Ethiopian hospital of her paramour, British surgeon Thomas Stone.

Verghese, who was born and brought up by Indian parents in Ethiopia and is now professor of medicine at Stanford University in California, has written an epic political drama based loosely on his own career and country. The story is told mainly through the eyes of Marion, the more sensitive of the twins and who suffered the most from the void left by his father and the pre-adolescent actions of his more gregarious brother.

The culturally exotic setting in "Missing" (phonetic derivative of Mission) Hospital in Ethiopia's Addis Ababa in the years following World War II and leading up to political revolution would present many surprises to readers unfamiliar with the era and country. A strong European influence, particularly Italian, busts the notion that Ethiopia has been a poverty-stricken and starved nation all its existence.

The Indian nun and "hawk-eyed" English surgeon forge an unbidden bond during the 1947 passage across the Indian ocean from Madras to Aden. Stone almost dies of seasickness on the storm and disease-stricken steamship Calangute and the God-fearing nun, ignorant to her sensual power, nurses him back to health.

Impressed, he convinces her to change plans about staying in Aden, and she heads to Addis Ababa.

What follows, and continues through the story, is the mystery surrounding the twins' existence, because Sister Mary Praise lived an apparently chaste life.

Stone writes in medical terms, which is sometimes confusing to the lay reader, but descriptions of the surgical procedures in the primitive Missing Hospital are engrossing, including that surrounding the twins' brutal and shocking delivery.

The twins, who throughout much of the book are known singularly as ShivaMarion, were joined at the head, but successfully delivered by the heroic and brilliant female obstetrician at the hospital, Hema.

After the life-threatening operation to separate them soon after birth, and the rapid departure of Stone, Hema and the loyal Ghosh - Missing's other surgeon, whom she finally gives in to - become a strong focus of the story.

Vergheze writes in the beautifully lyrical form that is peculiar to many Indian writers, but the style is lost once his central character, Marion, escapes to the United States and an internship in a large New York hospital.

The scholarly nature of its central characters is softened by a deep understanding of the human condition, which makes it a book that is hard to put down at night.

Tracy Neal is a reporter on *The Nelson Mail*.