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Interview with Dr. Abraham Verghese

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Why did you choose Ethiopia and not any of the regular places that mark diaspora fiction?

I chose Ethiopia for the simple reason that I was born there and spent my childhood there, so I was following the old adage of “write what you know.” I knew the geography well, and it is a land I always thought was easily stereotyped and therefore as a writer if you succeeded in showing the true diversity and richness of life there, you could surprise a reader.

Reading your novel, I was reminded of John Irving. Is he an inspiration?

He and his kind of storytelling certainly inspires me, as does Gunter Grass, Marquez, or reaching back further Dickens, Tolstoy and others. I am partial to the epic and multi generational story — a life or several lives playing out on a large canvas. It is what I look for in a novel, not just entering a world, but entering a world and a story whose sweep covers a much longer time than a regular life allows. As a reader, such writers give you the luxury of spending just a few days in the real world, while covering decades in the fictional world.

I was surprised in several places: a nun mothering twins; a feisty Indian woman doctor, a brahmin at that, grabbing a French pilot by the balls and so much more. Why does constructed reality have to be so tongue-in-cheek?

Well, I am not sure about tongue-in-cheek reality. You might accuse me of the same thing if I made up a story of a Kenyan man marrying an American woman and having a child who is brought up in Indonesia and America and aspires to go to Harvard and to become President . . . and does! In other words, I think real life is much more dramatic than most novelists conjure up. And frankly, if novels were all pyrotechnics and surprise, or as you say ‘tongue-in-cheek’, the reader would or should drop the book in a flash. What one aims for is more than verisimilitude: we really want truth to emerge, whether it be (as in Marquez) from A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings, or from Kafka’s Gregor Samsa waking up to find he is a cockroach. Fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about how the world lives.

I find too many Indian writers using the convenient metaphor of twins in their novels. But no other pair of twins have been so catastrophic to each other, or this self-sacrificing either. Your comments on Shiva, Marion, ShivaMarion.

I am not familiar with all those examples. I think twins are tempting for the reasons you state, but also because their dual existence is really more a physical construct than a mental one, and their destinies are

always intertwined. My twins happened organically, and I can't quite remember the moment of their conception in my mind.

Why did you juxtapose a story about the human body, with a story about ethnicity?

Not sure, I understand. Isn't ethnicity a function of the skin and attributes and gene pool of the human body? Again, these were far from conscious decisions. I will admit to my sense (and it is one that Marion in the book also feels) that all explanations, all that human beings achieve or perpetrate, have their origins in the body, and it is that combination of genes and geography, nature and nurture that makes each of us unique and quite unpredictable.

Work appears to be a sedative within the novel: if there is something all the doctors in this novel share, it is this dedication to duty. Do you see medicine/medical practice as essentially that sincere and single-minded?

No, I don't think so. I think the aim of the novel was to show just how medicine and the magic word 'work' can both heal and cripple, how it is a trap and yet a balm and, as Yeats would say, the challenge is to find that balance between the, perfection of the life or of the work and in the book there are characters who exemplify both ends of that spectrum.

One often hears famed accounts of indigenous medicine that could set almost everything right: but, in the Ethiopia that you have portrayed, people are clamouring to be treated by allopathy. Why did people start disbelieving their traditional remedies?

Oh I don't think they disbelieve. They use traditional medicines for the great majority of ailments. When the ailments are trivial and self-limited, it works well. It is only when that fails that they seek a more potent form of magic that allopathy offers.

This book also appealed to me because within the rather clinical concerns of medicine, or surgery, you deal with political issues that centre on the woman's body. What made you choose this road?

I love medicine and the study of medicine. I do see it as a passionate and romantic pursuit. Sometimes the most elemental struggles are often first encountered by physicians. They are medical problems at one level, but they are really political and social problems at another level. It would be tough to write a novel about medicine that does not engage with these issues, unless the novelist turns an eye to the nature of suffering.

What remains after the reading is the ease with which love, hurt and betrayal, transform into life, disease or death. Here, medicine transcends all, where love does not. How have your many years as a physician contributed to this?

I think my years as a human being are really the experience I draw on; that is what I bring to the story. Being a doctor does allow one to see the disastrous consequences of loving or of not loving; it does allow one to see the carnage that can result from careless action, and sometimes the bad things that happen for no reason at all. So medicine only qualifies you to testify that ultimately only love endures. The art is long and the art is endlessly instructive. But life is short, the moment fleeting.
