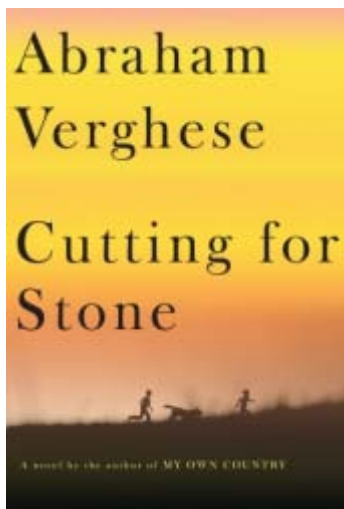


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Signs of friction and fissures: A review of “Cutting for Stone”

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Cutting for Stone

By *Abraham Verghese*

Publisher: Random House

Pages: 541

Price: Rs 595.

Marion Stone, son of Sister Mary Joseph, an Indian nurse-nun and Thomas Stone, a British surgeon tells the story of his life for the sake of his conjoined twin brother Shiva. Born in Missing Hospital in Addis Ababa where his parents worked, Marion and his twin come into this world as abandoned children: their mother died in childbirth, their father vanished without a trace. Brought up by two of the hospital's doctors Hema and Ghosh (who eventually marry), the twins share a special bond with each other.

But growing up involves growing apart, and soon their relationship experiences the first signs of friction and fissures. A love triangle involving their childhood sweetheart Genet, and Shiva's betrayal of Marion changes their lives forever. Genet is punished by having her clitoris cut off and her mother Rosina commits suicide soon after. Marion's foster-mother Hema holds him responsible for the tragic course of events, and he refuses to even defend himself.

In the midst of family melodrama, Verghese has portrayed how the social context of Ethiopia on the brink of a revolution affects the life of every character. Whether it is Marion's harrowing experience with a man from the army, or Ghosh's imprisonment, the skill of story-telling shines through. Genet's proximity with Eritrean liberation fighters gets her involved in the hijack of an Ethiopian Airlines plane. As her close friend, Marion finds himself in the middle of a muddle not of his own making, and is left with no other option but to flee Ethiopia. Normalcy continues to elude this novel; Marion, as the intern in an understaffed Bronx hospital, gets to meet Thomas Stone, his biological father. He demands details of the letter that Sister Mary Joseph wrote to him on her dying day, but his father is as unaware of its existence as he is. Disappointed, he seeks out Genet (who has also sought refuge in America) and fulfils his promise of “losing his virginity” to her. In return he is infected by the deadly hepatitis virus. On the verge of death, his life depends on the generosity of two people whom he reviles the most: his twin-brother and his father. An astonishing climax is played out at the end of this epic saga. In terms of

themes, *Cutting for Stone* shares a great deal with John Irving's novels: a main character searching out an absent parent, severing and amputation of body parts, deadly accidents, prostitutes with STDs, and sexual relationships between young men and older women.

Though they lend a peculiar charm and impart wisdom, the many lengthy digressions hinder the narrative flow. One can also harbour valid objections to the representation of almost all African women as easily "available". In this novel, such generalisation perpetuates an oppressive stereotype. Despite these limitations, this novel about suffering and healing, love and redemption succeeds in leaving an indelible impression.