

Newsday

CUTTING FOR STONE, by Abraham Verghese. Knopf, 541 pp, \$26.95.

'Call me unwanted, call my birth a disaster, call me the bastard child of a disgraced nun and a disappeared father, call me a cold-blooded killer who lies to the brother of the man I killed.'

By the time Dr. Marion Praise Stone, the narrator of "Cutting for Stone," delivers this peroration to the reader (on page 284, to be exact), his spellbound audience knows better. Call him a little miracle, a fictional character so richly imagined and situated that neither he nor the book he lives in will ever be forgotten. Abraham Verghese's first novel is a whopper, illuminating the magic and the tragedy of our lives, brimming with wisdom about the human condition. Such fun to read, too - with a huge cast, a sweeping multi-continental, 50-year plot arc, a zillion lovely moments along the way: sharp descriptions, recurrent jokes, cultural observations and medical asides both witty and profound. (Wait 'til you get to the vasectomy.)

Almost every character in the book is a doctor or nurse, and its major setting is an institution called Missing Hospital (once "Mission," now misspelled by official license) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Here, Marion and his conjoined twin, Shiva, are born to an Indian nurse named Sister Mary Joseph Praise. She dies in childbirth and Thomas Stone, the English doctor who is their presumptive father, disappears after botching the delivery. The hospital's internist, Dr. Ghosh, has to take over as chief surgeon, and the staff gynecologist, Hema, steps in to take care of the children.

In a typical scene from the early part of the book, a young patient with a wretched affliction called Madura foot has traveled for days to get to Missing. "No place ever came off well when a disease was named after it: Delhi belly, Baghdad blues, Turkey trots," the narrator explains. "Madura foot began when a fieldworker stepped on a large thorn or nail. Their livelihood gave them no choice but to keep walking, and slowly a fungus overran the foot, invaded bone, tendon and muscle. Nothing short of amputation would help."

But Dr. Ghosh's first amputation is interrupted for a naming ceremony - Marion and Shiva have turned 2 months old and the time has suddenly come. By the act of whispering their names into their ears, Ghosh becomes their father. Hema has already become their mother, and soon this pair will admit their love for one another. In charting the destiny of this arbitrary family - twins born attached at the head, adoptive parents whose devotion is a force of nature, biological parents whose absence is a wound, a servant's daughter who becomes a semi-sibling - Verghese tells the brightest and darkest truths of what it means to be connected to another human.

At the heart of "Cutting for Stone" lies an African folk tale which Ghosh retells after he returns from a stint in Kerchele prison, where he has been incarcerated with other innocents after the coup against [Haile Selassie](#). The story concerns a miserly merchant who won't throw away his beat-up pair of slippers, even though everyone makes fun of them. When he finally does decide to pitch them, not only does it prove to be impossible to do so, but every attempt causes a disaster of some kind, from a pregnant woman's miscarriage to a flood.

"I hope one day you see this as clearly as I did in Kerchele," Ghosh tells his family. "The key to your happiness is to own your slippers, own who you are, own how you look, own your family, own the talents you have and the ones you don't. If you keep saying your slippers aren't yours, then you'll die searching, you'll die bitter, always feeling you were promised more."

In "Cutting for Stone," we get all we were promised and then some. Verghese's previous two books, "My Own Country" and "The Tennis Partner," established this writer as a gifted memoirist, a devoted doctor whose skillful storytelling transformed sad stories into fine reading. Yet, these books gave no hint of the incredible imaginative power found in this first novel, a power that recalls contemporary fabulists like [Salman Rushdie](#) and [John Irving](#).

Like Rushdie, he takes us wholly away, to a foreign place, culture and history. (It seems intentional that Marion Stone has a gift of smell similar to Saleem Sinai's in "Midnight's Children.") Like John Irving, he invents characters whose eccentricities are both mythic and adorable. To these achievements, Verghese adds his ability to dramatize matters of biology, medicine and surgery, allowing him to get to the heart, the brain, the liver and the Madura foot of things as few other writers can.