

The Oregonian

Fiction review: "Cutting for Stone"

by John G. Rodwan Jr., special to The Oregonian
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In "Cutting for Stone," Abraham Verghese's ambitious first novel, a surgeon experiences what he calls ecstasy. After several years in New York, Dr. Marion Stone is returning to Addis Ababa accompanied by the obstetrician who delivered and raised him and his twin brother.

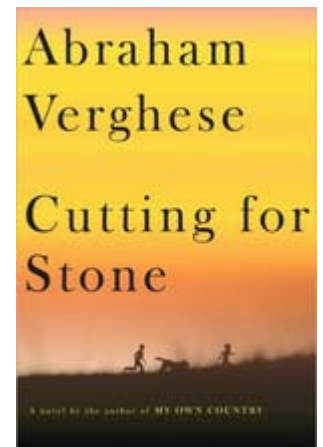
During a layover in Rome, the doctors -- two of many in a book written by one -- serendipitously find the statue of St. Teresa that had been a favorite of Stone's birth mother, a nun, who displayed a photograph of it above her desk at Missing Hospital (as Mission Hospital in Ethiopia's capital is called). At the moment of "the sudden intrusion of the sacred into the ordinary," Stone has not yet learned that a long-looked-for letter from Sister Mary Joseph Praise to Marion's biological father, another doctor, had been hidden behind the framed picture of the sculpture.

This incident only hints at the eventfulness of Verghese's sprawling tale. The multigenerational Stone saga traverses Africa, Europe, the United States and India, the latter being the birthplace of Marion and Shiva's biological mother and of the physicians who acted as the brothers' parents. It includes numerous vividly rendered deaths. Sister Praise dies bloodily during labor at Missing, where she worked as a nurse. Dr. Ghosh, director of the hospital and half of the medical couple that cared for the Stone twins, dies painfully of leukemia. Tuberculosis, syphilis, aneurisms and hepatitis kill others in a story that also includes an attempted military coup, hangings, an airplane hijacking, genital mutilation and the disposal of a body in an unbelievably convenient pit of quicksand.

Though Verghese (who was born in Ethiopia to Indian parents) writes about the fundamental physical facts of life -- birth, sex, sickness and death -- he inserts mildly fantastic mystical elements. Marion, the possessor of a hyperactive sense of smell, and his brother, named for the Hindu deity considered the Destroyer, were born attached at the head. Even after separation, they feel an enduring connection that allows each to know the other's thoughts. A literal bond of sorts is restored years later when Shiva donates part of his liver when Marion's organ fails. Thomas Stone -- the man who impregnated Sister Praise during a drunken binge, nearly killed the babies no one at Missing knew she had been carrying, and then immediately abandoned the conjoined twins -- performs the risky transplant. Marion believes Ghosh (who before dying of cancer concealed Praise's mysterious letter) subsequently directed him to the chapel housing Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Teresa.

Such contrivances strain credulity. Yet through them Verghese attempts a synthesis of the everyday and the extraordinary in a style that could be called ecstatic realism. Verghese sees an intimate connection between medicine and narrative in doctors' attempts to diagnose conditions through the stories patients tell.

Although firmly grounded in medical science, he treats the intercession of the dead into the lives of the living as though it were as natural and normal as the physical conditions he recounts. The author of "My Own Country," a highly praised memoir of treating patients with AIDS (which is conspicuously absent from "Cutting for Stone"), Verghese writes most sure-handedly when describing ways human bodies can collapse and the efforts medical professionals make to forestall the inevitable end to every person's story.



Details: *CUTTING FOR STONE*

Abraham Verghese, Knopf
\$26.95, 560 pages

Reading: Vergheze reads from "Cutting for Stone" at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 25, at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St