

His Own Country

By Peter D. Kramer on February 09, 2009 in In Practice

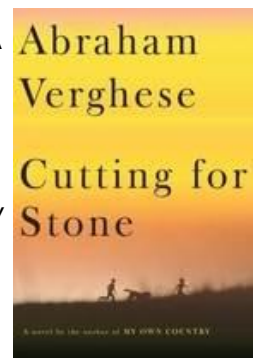
It's hard when a good friend doesn't get his due. Abraham Verghese's first novel, *Cutting for Stone* is out, and the prominent reviews have been grudging. The *New York Times* complains about too much medical complexity and a baggy plot. That review isn't unperceptive. It sees the novel as related to the work of John Irving (Abraham's teacher at the University of Iowa) and, looking back further, Charles Dickens. But the analysis fails to take that line a step further and so mistakes the intention and the genre of the book.



First, a disclaimer. One of the major outlets asked me to review *Cutting for Stone*, and although I had already read the book in galleys, I had to decline. Abraham and I have been friends for (can it be?) almost twenty years. In the late 1980s, as a birthday present my wife gave me childcare leave sufficient for me to attend what was then called the Iowa Summer Writer's Workshop for a week.

As I got off a plane in Cedar Rapids, I saw another fellow carrying a large, puffy, cubical shoulder bag - that was how Macintoshes then traveled, before laptops were common. I said, "I'm guessing we're headed to the same place," and we shared a cab. It turned out that my companion, Abraham, was also a doctor, and that we were enrolled in the same fiction class, taught by W. P. "Bill" Kinsella, a Canadian-born "Iowa product" who had written *Shoeless Joe*, the novel on which the movie "Field of Dreams" is based. Abraham and I became good, if physically distant, friends, meeting sporadically at book and medical events.

From the start, I admired Abraham's writing. Raised in Africa and of Indian descent, he arrived at Iowa with short stories written in an impeccable American southern dialect, à la Flannery O'Connor. He could capture any voice. Abraham went on to attend Iowa for real and to earn his MFA in Writing. He then wrote two extraordinary works of nonfiction, *My Own Country* and *The Tennis Partner*.



To the book at hand: I won't review it, but I want to say something about its ambition. When I was sent the galleys, I expected work (like Abraham's short stories) fit for the *New Yorker*, quiet, subtle, and attuned to life's disappointments. But like Irving, like Dickens, Verghese in this book, refers to an older model of fiction, prior to the distinction between high and low culture. The novel intends to say something serious about callings, in love and in work, and along the way to provide insights into the histories of medicine and of East Africa, but *Cutting for Stone* is an airport read, with cliff-hanger plot points at the end of each chapter. For a taste, you might read the opening.

I haven't indicated what the book's about. Briefly, it's a story of medical homecoming. In a primitive hospital in Ethiopia, twin boys are born to an Indian nun and (we suspect) a brilliant, headstrong English surgeon. Romantic complications ensue . . . as do political complications in Ethiopia . . . while the two brothers move toward making their own mark in medicine. The question for reviewers is whether they can make a leap - to see value in a book that's unashamedly a page-turner.