

A – fictional – medical conference in Boston, the legendary doctor conducting the session asks the brightest and the best gathered in the room a curious question: “What treatment, in an emergency, is administered by the ear?” The three-word answer can be found in celebrated physician and author Dr Abraham Verghese’s debut work of fiction, *Cutting for Stone*. A good place to look for a longer version of the answer is the author’s life – for it is one lived as a doctor who listens and comforts, heals and cures, teaches and learns. And as a storyteller who writes powerful passionate narratives about these experiences.

Somewhat unusually, US-based Dr Verghese has degrees in both medicine and writing – he’s an MFA graduate from the Iowa University writing programme – but sharply resists being pigeonholed as a hyphenate. “At heart I’m a physician, it is my first and only calling. As a physician things move me, and one way to talk about these things is to write about them. For me writing and medicine are not different parts, it is seamless, the same world view: fiction and healing promote the same cause.”

The cause, simply put, is an involvement in humanity, especially from a medical perspective. “The danger in medicine today is that technology is destroying the uniqueness of the human interaction between physician and patient,” he says. He’s concerned about the evolution of the “ipatient”, where the doctors rarely even touch the patients in the initial examination, and medical information is conveyed electronically. This might mean, “for example, that when a patient complains to the nurse of a bellyache, and the nurse calls the busy intern, the expedient response might be to recommend a CAT scan; whereas if the doctor had met, talked and listened to his patient, he might discover the ache was born out of anxiety over a teenage daughter. We are overburdened with information that masquerades as knowledge.”

Dr Verghese firmly believes that medicine cannot masquerade as just another trade, “it should be a calling. Like a love affair. There is a reason we use the verb ‘fall’ in love, it is like free flight. That’s how I felt when I embarked on medicine as a career: it felt like falling in love.”

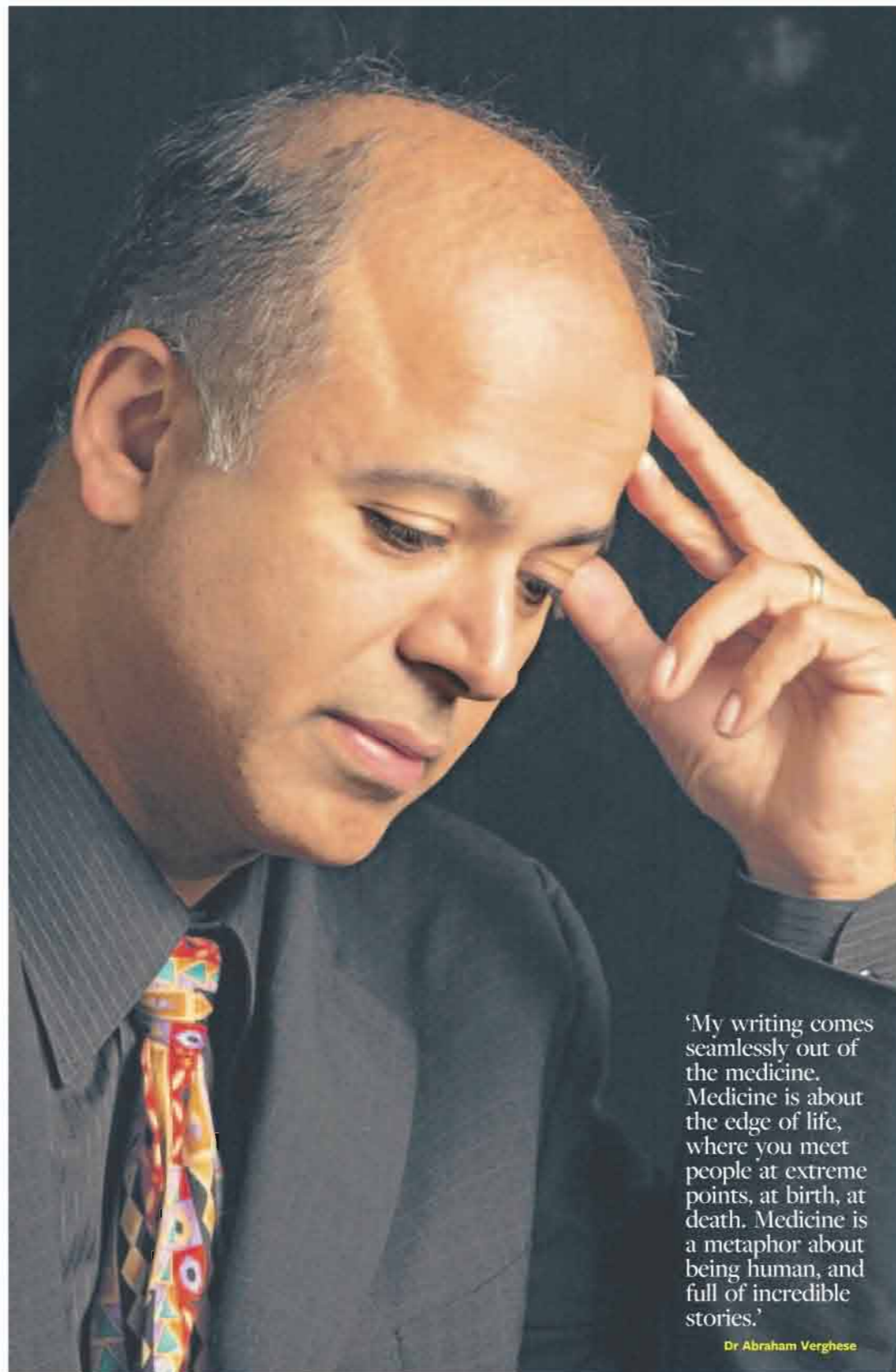
It is a love affair that continues to flourish in both its manifestations. As a writer, his ‘non-fiction novels’ – *My Own Country: A Doctor’s Story*, and *The Tennis Partner: A Story of Friendship and Loss* – are considered top examples of the genre. Most scribes would salivate over the list of publications that have featured his writing – *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, among others. And to top it all, earlier this year, he released his debut work of fiction, the above-mentioned *Cutting For Stone*.

As an academic physician, Dr Verghese is a tenured professor at the Stanford University School of Medicine, where he is Senior Associate Chair for the

# Doctor of letters

Physician, academic, author. Abraham Verghese’s three roles share one defining characteristic that anchors both healing and storytelling: humanity.

By Parvathi Nayar



‘My writing comes seamlessly out of the medicine. Medicine is about the edge of life, where you meet people at extreme points, at birth, at death. Medicine is a metaphor about being human, and full of incredible stories.’

Dr Abraham Verghese

Theory and Practice of Medicine in the Department of Internal Medicine. As a practising physician, Dr Verghese is much-admired for teaching the importance of the bedside examination and the doctor/patient relationship – and being a vocal advocate for retaining the humanism in medicine.

As he wrote in the article “Health Care’s Next Crisis”, featured in Tina Brown’s *The Daily Beast* earlier this year: “President Obama’s proposal to solve the nation’s healthcare woes includes a plan to commit billions of dollars to “digitizing” medical records. Incredibly, there is much more money flagged for that goal than for easing the critical shortage of primary-care physicians. That suggests to me that there’s a voice not being heard in this debate. It’s not the voice of Medicare or insurance companies or organized medicine – it’s the patient’s voice.”

The African-born, US-based, Indian doctor’s own voice has been shaped by the geographies of his life. Born in 1955, in Ethiopia to Indian parents, his medical training was cut short by civil unrest in the land. He followed his family to the US, worked as an orderly in a hospital, then left for India. After completing his medical studies at Madras University in Chennai in 1979, he returned to the US, as one among a herd of foreign medical graduates seeking residencies.

These experiences are reflected via a fictional prism in *Cutting For Stone*, the story of a pair of twins born mysteriously to a nun in Ethiopia, whose lives are inextricably entwined with the world of medicine in Africa, India and the US. He shares: “I had a great sense of having lived through something extraordinary, and wanted to share landscapes that had rarely been written about in fiction – of being an Indian growing up in Ethiopia or a foreign medical graduate looking for opportunities in America. India is my country but I am also proud to be American – I’m not American out of convenience, but out of gratitude.”

But he clarifies: “*Cutting for Stone* is biographical in that it covers the geography of where I’ve lived, but it’s not autobiographical. In another sense, of course, all novels come out of the mind of the novelist – so even if it’s not my life, it is my imagination. Every writer has a world vision and an aesthetic that comes out in the writing. It is inevitable. My writing comes seamlessly out of the medicine.

“Medicine is about the edge of life, where you meet people at extreme points, at birth, at death. Medicine is a metaphor about being human, and full of incredible stories.” He shares how earlier in the day, before our interview, he had gone on hospital rounds with the senior residents, and “it was an exhilarating session, when I felt that time stood still. I was not aware of myself, it was a moment of flow. I have a feeling that my writing is dependent on moments like that in my life – I’d have nothing to write about, without such experiences.”

## Getting personal

Has the writing, in turn, assisted him as a doctor? “Ten years ago I would have said ‘No’, but today I will say ‘Yes’. The writing has helped me find my own agenda – which is my monomania about the importance of the bedside examination and the doctor/patient relationship. When I read my earlier writing, I’m taken aback how, in a way, this is what I’ve always been writing about, because this is what I care about.”

It’s not unexpected to hear that, “I write in order to understand what I’m thinking.”

## Dr ABRAHAM VERGHESE

Senior Associate Chair and Professor for the Theory and Practice of Medicine, Stanford University School of Medicine; author of three bestsellers

1955: Born in Ethiopia

1974-1979: Finished medical degree from Madras University in India

1983-1985: Fellow in Infectious Diseases, Boston University School of Medicine

1990-91: Attended the Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa and obtained a Master of Fine Arts degree

1994: *My Own Country*, about AIDS in rural Tennessee, published by Simon & Schuster; picked as one of the top five books of the year by Time magazine and for notable mention by the New York Times Book Review; won the Lambda Literary Award; made into a movie by Mira Nair

1998: *The Tennis Partner: A Doctor’s Story of Friendship and Loss*, published by Harper Collins in the US in 1998; picked as a New York Times notable book and was a national bestseller

2007-present: Professor of Medicine (tenured), Senior Associate Chair for the Theory and Practice of Medicine, Stanford University. Adjunct Professor, University of Texas Health Sciences Center, San Antonio

2009: First work of fiction, *Cutting for Stone*, published by Alfred A Knopf. A New York Times Book Review bestseller

for words obviously matter to him. Throughout the interview, the words chosen are by a speaker who understands the weight of their meaning both in speech and in print. With *Cutting For Stone*, “my anxiety isn’t about being judged as a person, I’m putting myself out there as a writer. So the first level of anxiety is this: Did the writing work? The second level is that, clearly, I am advancing a certain vision of what medicine should be, that is mine; whatever truths about medicine the reader takes away from the book are ones I have put forward.” Indeed, *Cutting for Stone* encapsulates Dr Verghese’s personal feelings about medicine: its redemptive joys, its dangerous obsessions.

He continues: “My ambition was to write a big sweeping novel into which you could disappear, travel away as though in a spaceship, disappear, meet exciting people, and return to find that only a couple of days had passed in your real life. That’s what happens to me when I am reading a good book. A book like *Love in The Time of Cholera*, for example, which when you put down, makes you feel you have lived an entire lifetime between its covers.”

Books – many of them – come up over the course of the conversation, from the new Marquez biography he is currently reading, to classics such as *Oliver Twist* to medically-driven books such as surgeon Richard Selzer’s *Taking the World in for Repairs*. “Books conditioned me,” he says, recalling it was Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage* that inspired him to become a doctor.

Over a decade ago, director Mira Nair

turned Dr Verghese’s best-selling memoir *My Own Country* into a well-received film-for-television starring Naveen Andrews. He enjoyed watching the results, but notes “it is such a different medium, it almost felt like watching the story of someone else’s book. I don’t write with movies in my mind. But yes, I have been told that I write in a ‘cinematic fashion’; people tell me ‘I could see it’ after reading my book, but I take that as a compliment.” This strongly visual style, “is the only way I know to write.”

*Cutting For Stone* finds the physician hooked on writing fiction. Though resistant to discussing “future projects”, he does reflect it’s unlikely that “I’d take on a book-length non-fiction project. Writing fiction was pure joy, I could make things up and not have to torture myself by reliving things.” Mining his life for material was a painful – but perhaps necessary – process, especially in the writing of that acclaimed first book, *My Own Country*.

It was based on his experiences in Johnson City, Tennessee, in 1985, when circumstances forced Dr Verghese to become the local expert on a then-new epidemic, AIDS. The unsought role came with unbearable pressures; he responded with a compassion bordering on obsession over the wellbeing of his patients, which unfortunately took its toll on his first marriage. There may be old wounds beneath the surface, but “being older helps”, he half-smiles. If he is still “existentially restless”, he also shares the hard-won wisdom that “I don’t have to act on those feelings or feel that I have to change all the time.”

Beyond the healing and the writing, Dr Verghese’s love of story-telling informs another aspect of his life: teaching. “I believe that as physicians, we become involved in the stories of our patient’s lives,” whether as witnesses interpreting a medical chart or as actual players. He places great store on the importance of stories to help make sense of the past. For in the journey of becoming and being a doctor, “what’s most important is that who you are to begin with, doesn’t get altered. It’s not technology or academics, ultimately, it’s our humanity that makes us good physicians.” Which brings us to the core of the kind of healer that Dr Verghese is, and back to the “trick” question posed in *Cutting For Stone*: “What treatment, in an emergency, is administered by the ear?” The answer, dispensed by a caring physician and clever author, is simply: “Words of comfort.”

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