

# San Antonio Express-News

## Words of Humanism and Comfort

In his 'great medical novel,' physician Verghese takes readers on an epic journey colored by his experiences and ideals.

By Steve Bennett - Express-News Book Editor

*I'd like to practice medicine till my last breath without actually collapsing on the patient — that would be bad form.*  
Dr. Abraham Verghese

To understand Abraham Verghese, writer, you must contemplate Abraham Verghese, physician. The two are joined at the heart, and there isn't a surgeon skillful enough to separate them.

"My writing emanates from a very personal stance, which my case is wrapped up in the privilege of practicing medicine," Verghese says.

A primary-care .D. who is also a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, Verghese has authored two critically acclaimed nonfiction books: *My Own Country*, a New York Times Notable Book of 1994 that chronicles his experience as a young doctor in rural Tennessee confronted by a new disease, AIDS; and *The Tennis Partner*, a 1999 memoir written while Verghese was practicing internal medicine in El Paso that delves into his relationship with a colleague addicted to drugs.



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The underlying themes of both books — the dichotomy of healing versus simple curing, the gantlet medical students must negotiate to become doctors, the humanity, or lack of it, in the doctor/patient relationship — are distilled in Verghese's first novel, *Cutting for Stone*, just published by Knopf. Verghese gives a public reading in San Antonio on Feb. 18.

"Abraham is a really wonderful writer — humane, ranging and very talented," says Ethan Canin, a novelist/physician (*"America, America"*) who is on the faculty of the Iowa Workshop. "He's got quite a gift and a rare, rare mind. I can't think of anyone, in fact, who's ranged as far as he has, between his life in medicine and his life in prose."

### 'Samaritan function'

The humanist ideas and ideals that undergird Verghese's practice of medicine — and, really, his life — are the cornerstones of the Center for Medical Humanities & Ethics, which Verghese founded in 2002 at the University of Texas at San Antonio Health Science Center.

Since 2007, he has refined his medical philosophy at Stanford University: as a professor of theory and practice of medicine at the university's School of Medicine; and senior associate chairman of the department of internal medicine, where he teaches "bedside medicine," advocating what he calls "the Samaritan function of doctors."

"Most students come to medicine thinking that this is what it's going to be like, this bedside Sherlock Holmes kind of thing, and I think they are disappointed to find how much it can become a very algorithmic, sitting-behind-a-computer activity," the 53-year-old internist said in a recent phone interview from his Stanford office.

"How can we attract people to primary care if our model is a team of people sitting behind computers making sure this test is done and that test is done? I think we model it by showing the excitement of the bedside and the rewards that are there.

"Knowledge has become democratic — you can find out about a patient in five minutes without leaving your desk. So the quality that we need to focus on is clinical skills, or what I call the Samaritan function of doctors. There's much more to this than fixing a problem, curing a disease. There is a Samaritan function that doctors are in danger of losing sight of."

At the heart of the matter is the physical examination, which, Verghese argues, is often the surest way to discern what's wrong with a patient, but it is “an important ritual, the ritual of one person baring their soul to you and then baring their body and allowing you the privilege of examining them.”

In a December article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Verghese introduced his concept of the I-patient, which he identifies as “this sort of virtual entity” that hospital staff encounter in a computer after the ER has put patients through their technological paces — CAT scans and MRIs.

“The house staff can go online, and they can feel like they know the patient, but they haven't really met the patient yet,” Verghese says. “There's a danger of the patient in the bed becoming an icon for the real patient who's in the computer.”

Like all rituals, such as the marriage ceremony, the physical examination “is an important human endeavor towards translation,” Verghese says.

“This ancient ritual of physician and patient, especially the ritual of examining a patient, is a ritual that also has transformation, which takes the shape of the patient coming to trust the physician,” he says. “That's the beginning of that process. If you shortchange that, just walk in and say, ‘Oh, I've seen your scans and I know what's going on with you,’ you haven't earned the patient's investment in you.”

Dr. Jerald Winakur, a San Antonio geriatrician whose recent book “*Memory Lessons*” touches on many of the same issues, calls Verghese “our example.”

Winakur, who teaches a course at the Center for Medical Humanities & Ethics with his wife, poet Lee Robinson, encountered Verghese two decades ago when he enrolled in a two-week summer course at the Iowa Workshop.

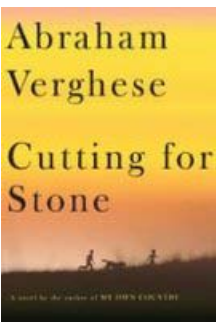
“I had never heard of Abraham and went to a reading given by him on the occasion of the publication of his first book, ‘*My Own Country*,’” Winakur said recently. “I sat with my head in my hands after he finished his reading.”

“Here was a doctor — like me — who wrote compassionately and exquisitely of his very personal experiences with his sick and dying patients. He was not afraid to express his empathy or his humanity. He was not afraid to express his own anguish at the sadness and suffering he witnessed. He was not afraid to be considered ‘too soft’ for the practice of medicine — something I once, in med school, had been accused of.”

“Almost 20 years have passed since the day I heard him read, and I am finally emerging from under the morass of those early medical-training experiences. His writing is in large part responsible for my own transformation.”

### **'Medical epic'**

“*Cutting for Stone*” tells the story of twins born to a Catholic nun from India in an Ethiopian medical mission in 1954. It is set against the roiling backdrop of political unrest that would soon engulf the African country and depose its ruler, the revered Haile Selassie, who traced his origins back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and inspired the Rastafari movement in Jamaica.



The nun, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, dies in childbirth, and the father, a single-minded surgeon named Thomas Stone, is devoured by grief and guilt. He abandons his mission and the boys.

Adopted by a pair of doctors, both Indian, they are named Marion and Shiva Stone, taking their birth father's surname and giving the novel one aspect of its title.

“There is a line in the Hippocratic oath that says, ‘I will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom the disease is manifest,’” Verghese explains. “It stems from the days when bladder stones were epidemic, a cause of great suffering, probably from bad water and who knows what else. Adults and children suffered so much with these — and died prematurely of infection and kidney failure. There were itinerant stone cutters — lithologists — who could cut either into the bladder or the perineum and get the stone out, but because they cleaned the knife by wiping it on their blood-stiffened surgical aprons, patients usually died of infection the next day. Hence the proscription, ‘Thou shall not cut for stone.’”

“It has always seemed to me a curious thing to say when we recite the oath in this day and age. But I love the Hippocratic oath — or oaths, because its origins and authorship are far from clear, and always try to attend commencement. When the new

graduates stand and take the oath, all the physicians in the room are invited to stand and retake the oath. It chokes me up every time.

“How does all this relate to my novel? Well, the main characters have the surname Stone, but I was hoping the phrase would resonate for the reader just as it does for me, and that it would have several levels of meaning in the context of the narrative. And that the reader would enjoy that antique expression ‘cutting for stone.’”

In many ways, “Cutting for Stone” parallels Verghese's own life. His parents were Indian — not doctors, but physicists who taught in Ethiopia. He grew up near Addis Ababa and began his medical training there. His older brother, whom he describes, without apparent irony, as “the brains in the family,” had “an aptitude for math, which I lacked.”

The Shiva character, as described in the novel by narrator Marion, is a sort of savant, intellectually and emotionally. While the self-conscious Marion pursues the traditional medical path, including a residency at a small, underfunded Catholic hospital in the Bronx (Verghese described the practice of foreign medical residents finding only less popular American programs open to them in an early New Yorker article, “The Cowpath to America”), Shiva never earns a degree, immersing himself in his own studies in obstetrics and gynecology, becoming a world-renowned expert in an obscure procedure.

“If anything,” Verghese says, “the twins in the book reflect the dichotomy within us, you know, the tensions within one human being to act this way and act that way. I'm not saying I consciously created them for that reason, but in many ways they seem to me to be like that.”

“Cutting for Stone” is epic/intimate storytelling in the tradition of Forster, Conrad, Dinesen, Maugham, Naipaul. Characters such as the twins' adoptive parents, Hema and Ghosh, both physicians who would be horrified at the concept of the I-patient, are warm and confusing and confounding, full of love. Marion, our guide on this trek, is intelligent and empathetic, confident, even arrogant at times, but like most of us suffers from internal crises and learns, often the hard way, that the world is not fair.

Marion is well-acquainted, Verghese says, with “the uncertainties of growing up, the sense of not being OK.” It is through these observant eyes that Verghese leads us on a satisfying journey that spans continents and several decades.

“The novel is full of compassion and wise vision,” says Sandra Cisneros, author of “House on Mango Street” and “Caramelo.” “I feel changed forever after reading this book, as if an entire universe had been illuminated for me. It's an astonishing accomplishment to make such a foreign world familiar to a reader by the book's end.”

All signs point in the affirmative that Verghese has succeeded in his ambition to write “the great medical novel.”

“It's an incredible feeling,” says Verghese, who planted the seeds of “Cutting for Stone” — an image of “a nun giving birth in a mission hospital in Africa” — way back in 1990, when, bone-weary of the AIDS epidemic, he went to Iowa.

“I'm amazed at its size, in a sense,” he says. “Not so much the book's pages, but the story being as sweeping and big as it is. It certainly was my ambition to write something like that. Clearly, I had a goal with this novel to put forth all the things I love about medicine and all that scares me about it, and the fact that words of comfort remain critical even in this era of technology. But to see it done, the arc completed, if you will, is really quite humbling, thrilling, all those things.

“I have this feeling now that I've put everything in there. I can't imagine what I can write about after this.”

*Dr. Abraham Verghese reads from “Cutting for Stone” at 6 p.m. Feb. 18 in the auditorium at the University of Texas Health Science Center, 7703 Floyd Curl Dr. A reception and book signing follows. The event is free and open to the public.*