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By Steve Bennett - Express-News

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What began nearly two decades ago with an image of “a beautiful South Indian nun suddenly and precipitously going into labor” has grown into a spellbinding 534-page novel, a medical epic that brought its author full circle to a warm “homecoming” Wednesday evening at the University of Texas Health Science Center.

“San Antonio remains very much a home for us. This is a home reading for me,” Dr. Abraham Verghese, accompanied by his family, told a few hundred friends and colleagues, including Dr. Francisco Cigarroa, former president of the UTHSC and now the University of Texas System chancellor, during a publication celebration for his long-awaited first novel “Cutting for Stone,” published this month by Knopf.

Verghese, the founding director of San Antonio’s Center for Medical Humanities & Ethics, left for a teaching position at Stanford University two years ago.

He had the crowd alternately wincing and laughing as he read a scene of a vasectomy surgery from the novel.

“It is a book for the ages, full of medicine and humanity, written in stolen hours in the dead of night after Abraham had been teaching and administering to patients all day,” said Edith McAllister, the chairwoman of the center’s advisory board, who introduced Verghese, and not incidentally, was celebrating her 91st birthday.

The doctor warned would-be writers, however, that “it’s hazardous to proceed with just a vision,” quoting one of his mentors, novelist John Irving, who said a writer must know the whole story in advance.

“Irving,” Verghese noted, “always said, ‘If you are just making it up as you go along, you are not a writer, just a liar.’”

Verghese said he hoped “Cutting for Stone” would inspire readers to become doctors.

“I wanted the novel to transform people,” he said.