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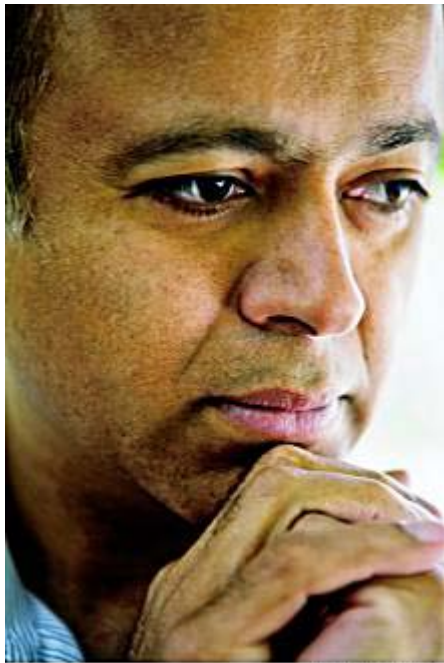
'Cutting for Stone,' by Abraham Verghese

Meghan Ward, Special to The Chronicle
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Cutting for Stone

(Alfred A. Knopf; 541 pages; \$26.95)

By Abraham Verghese



Joanne Chan

An epic tale about love, abandonment, betrayal and redemption, Abraham Verghese's first novel, "Cutting for Stone," is a masterpiece of traditional storytelling. Not a word is wasted in this larger-than-life tome, a saga that spans three countries and six decades.

When Sister Mary Joseph Praise, an Indian nun, saves the life of British surgeon Thomas Stone during a perilous voyage from India to Yemen in 1947, the two develop a bond that results, seven years later, in Praise giving birth to conjoined twins, who are then surgically separated, in a hospital in Central Ethiopia. Praise dies in childbirth, compelling the distraught Stone to flee, abandoning his sons to be raised by two Indian doctors who work at the hospital.

Thus begins the story of narrator Marion, the first-born twin, and his quest to become a surgeon and reunite with his long-lost father, a journey that eventually lands him a job in an inner-city hospital in New York City and gives a double meaning to the title "Cutting for Stone," a phrase taken from the Hippocratic Oath: "I

will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by practitioners, specialists in this art."

The bulk of the novel takes place at Missing Hospital (a mispronunciation of Mission Hospital), in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, where, under the tutelage of their adoptive parents, Hema and Ghosh, the twins embark on medical careers. So adept at keeping his readers engaged, Verghese (a doctor himself, as well as a professor at Stanford) is able to relate long, technically detailed accounts of medical procedures without ever slowing the pace of the narrative.

Detail, in fact, is Verghese's forte. Every character has a history - from Stone's former maid Rosina to Tsige, a woman who works in a bar across the street from Missing Hospital. And just when the reader is wondering whether the bridge-playing habits of the driver for a colonel in the Imperial Bodyguard are pertinent to the plot, they prove to be just that, as Verghese expertly weaves the threads of numerous story lines into one cohesive opus.

The writing is graceful, the characters compassionate and the story full of nuggets of wisdom. Halfway through the book, Ghosh relates the "Abu Kassem" story to the twins, a Middle Eastern folktale about a man who could not rid himself of his old slippers. Afterward, Ghosh says to the twins, "I hope one day

you see this as clearly as I did in Kerchele. The key to your happiness is to own your slippers, own who you are, own how you look, own your family, own the talents you have, and own the ones you don't. If you keep saying your slippers aren't yours, then you'll die searching, you'll die bitter, always feeling you were promised more."

Verghese's august talent for storytelling is apparent in the dramatic arc of every chapter, but it is his handling of the human condition, of sins and salvation, of flaws and forgiveness, that makes this work particularly moving. From the twins' dramatic upbringing in a politically unstable nation to their heartbreaks and humiliations, Verghese's prose is teeming with memorable dialogue and description. Marion's arrival in New York City captures the wonderment of an immigrant: "I was alone in my hemisection of Mr. K.L. Hamid's cab, my luggage next to me, and a scratched Plexiglas partition between us. Two strangers, isolated and distant, in a car so broad that the backseat alone could have held five humans and two sheep."

Although Verghese's nonfiction works - "My Own Country: A Doctor's Story," an acclaimed medical journal that was made into a TV movie directed by Nira Mair and starring Naveen Andrews ("Lost"), and "The Tennis Partner: A Doctor's Story of Friendship and Loss" - both exemplify the sensitivity and awareness evident in "Cutting for Stone," neither achieves the depth or breadth of this fictional tour de force.

With all the traits of a great 19th century novel - a personal and intense narrative with coincidences and an unexpected denouement - "Cutting for Stone" is destined for success.

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