

The Salt Lake Tribune

The body of narrative: Verghese reveals medicinal qualities of literature

Writer and doctor Abraham Verghese will read from his new book Jan. 28 at King's English.

By Ben Fulton
The Salt Lake Tribune

Novelist Abraham Verghese will be at The King's English book shop Jan. 28, 7 p.m.

Abraham Verghese is an accomplished doctor with a storied career, not to mention current professor and senior associate chair for the theory and practice of medicine at the Stanford University School of Medicine.



Abraham Verghese
Credit: James Chan

He's also the kind of modest overachiever most people love to hate. After all, on top of his accomplishments in medicine, he writes like a dream.

Evidence is *Cutting for Stone*, a Mexican-jumping-bean of a novel that spans the lives of twin brothers across India, Ethiopia and New York City. It's a 650-plus-page opus that's no doubt been responsible for countless "sick days" among those who find themselves luxuriously enmeshed in its all-too-human story lines of hope, love and loss. Fellow writers

Atul Gawande and Simon Schama -- hardly slouches themselves -- have praised Verghese's novel to high hosannas.

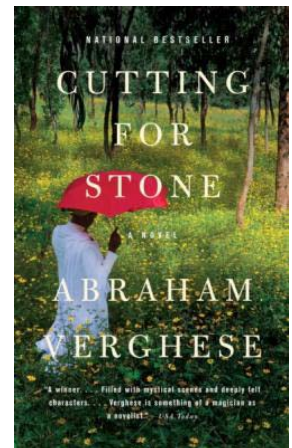
Verghese is a 1991 graduate of the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, but his talent also matured under a rigorous doctor's schedule that began when he came to the United States as a foreign medical graduate serving an open residency position at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City.

"When you're helping a patient, you listen to their stories, looking for clues that will tie their condition together into one entity," Verghese said during an interview from his Stanford office. "The whole notion of reading the body as text, and trying to figure out what that text is saying, has deep parallels."

You once said that your ability to "imagine suffering" has helped you become a writer.

The genesis of that statement comes from a great irony in medical teaching. People have empathy for one another, but the irony of medical education is that we pour so much information into young minds that people tend to become very disease oriented. Patients become "The heart attack in bed No. 4" or "The stroke in bed No. 3." It's as if sick people become what I like to call the "iPatient." We're really good in medicine about taking care of the abstract patient. But when we stop to think about it, the doctor-patient relationship is built upon an incredible level of trust. A doctor reaches under the gown and touches a patient in all sorts of places. In any other setting that would be considered an assault.

Your book offers an incredible evocation of what it's like to practice medicine. You paint a stark portrait of what you call "Ellis Island" hospitals where the poor are treated by an influx of



overseas doctors longing to practice medicine in the United States, and "Mayflower" hospitals where the rich are treated.

That distinction is not my invention. It's a very old, two-tiered system that's come about because of the inefficiencies in our system of health care. Health-care reform is very germane to the whole story. A great burden falls on public hospitals. Some form of universal health-care insurance or expansion of coverage would alleviate some of these inequalities.

Do you think people underestimate the therapeutic qualities of a good book?

I use Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich* with a lot of my medical students to convey the importance of putting yourself in the patient's shoes. I scare my students by saying that "the clinical imagination" dies if all you read are textbooks. You've got to keep the right brain kicking and alive. Otherwise, as Dorothy Allison once said, "Fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about the world." For anyone who thinks that fiction is not a serious enterprise, just point to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which started the abolition movement. The novels I tend to be drawn to are the big, epic books that, while reading them, you feel you've lived lifetimes. Then you lift your face up from the book and it's only Tuesday. I don't think those books hold up to the impatience of our age, but many of us still have a need and desire to escape in that fashion.

Doctor's orders

Abraham Verghese, author of *Cutting for Stone*, will read.

When - Jan. 28, 7 p.m.

Where - The King's English bookshop, 1541 S. 1500 East, Salt Lake City

Info - Free. Call 801-484-9100 for more information, or visit www.kingsenglish.com.