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Doctor takes novel route to inspiring students

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Growing up in a middle-class Indian family in Ethiopia, Abraham Verghese says he had four career choices: "Doctor, lawyer, engineer ... or failure."

He didn't have his elder brother's dazzling aptitude for math, so engineering was out of the question. He loved literature, but it wasn't an option. Instead, he declared his intention to become a doctor, a profession he has proudly practiced for 30 years.

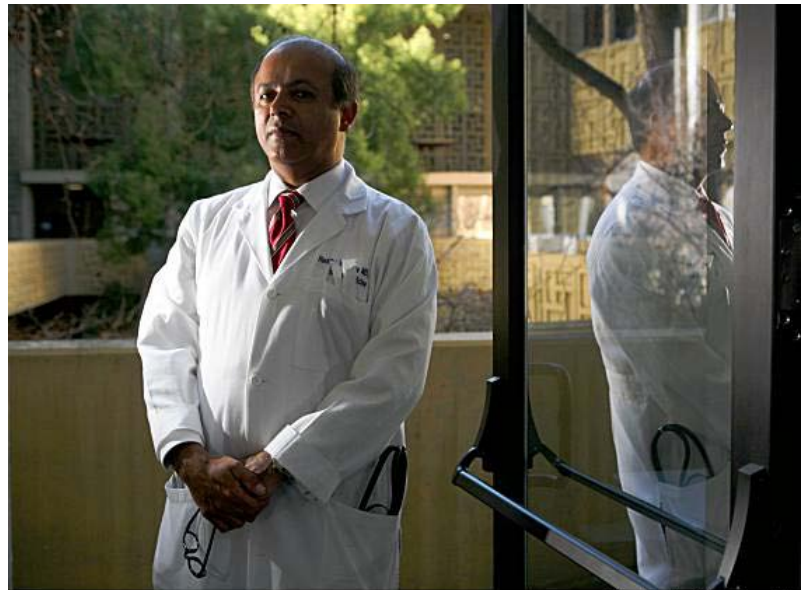
Today, he is a professor at the Stanford University School of Medicine - and the author of two best-selling memoirs. One of them, "My Own Country," a memoir of his medical residency in rural Tennessee at the start of the AIDS pandemic, was the basis of a 1997 film directed by Mira Nair.

That book, set in the time before the age of antiretroviral drugs, is a powerful treatise on the importance of "bedside medicine," in which the body - not what he calls "the i-Patient" on a computer screen - is the primary concern. Bedside medicine teaches doctors to read the body for clues. As Verghese recalls, "By visiting patients in their home, by helping them come to terms with their illness, I could heal when I could not cure."

He expands on the theme in his first novel, "Cutting for Stone," published this month by Knopf and already receiving ecstatic reviews.

The novel tells the story of conjoined twins born in Ethiopia in charged circumstances - the issue of an Indian-born British surgeon and his nurse, a devout Carmelite nun.

Separated at birth but spiritually entwined, the twins become surgeons on different continents. Set against a backdrop of political and cultural dissonance, "Cutting for Stone" is an admixture, a marvel of intimacy and sweep. In it, the reader is taken under the skin - in the operating rooms and into the lives of a Dickensian cast of characters.



Mike Kepka / The Chronicle

"I wanted to write a story about two continents," Verghese said in a recent interview in his sunny office deep in the labyrinth of Stanford Medical Center.

"I was drawn to the idea of showing how we are very much the same in our aspirations for our children, in the kind of things that make us love and make us cry. But where we are makes such a difference in the trajectory of our lives."

Geography is destiny, he says, while "everyplace has the potential to be home, whether it's Rochester, New York or Addis Ababa."

"Every time you move, you reinvent yourself," he says. "You have an opportunity to recast your own sense of self."

His own parallel interests in medicine and literature have taken him from Ethiopia to India; from rural Tennessee to Boston; and from Iowa, where he worked in the AIDS clinic while earning his master's of fine arts at the University of Iowa's prestigious creative writing program, to Stanford.

"One of the advantages of being a perennial outsider or a peripatetic soul like I am, perhaps you are always more observant, as if you are from Mars," Verghese muses.

The art of observation was honed through reading, too.

"There are books that call us to medicine," says Verghese, whose favorite of many was "Of Human Bondage" by W. Somerset Maugham.

"Something about how medicine was described showed me that it could be a passionate pursuit worthy of my whole being," he says.

Today, he uses literature, including the work of renowned doctor/authors such as Anton Chekhov and William Carlos Williams in his teaching at Stanford, where he is professor for the Theory and Practice of Medicine.

"Students undergo a conversion in the third year of medical school - not pre-clinical to clinical, but pre-cynical to cynical," he says.

It's understandable. Faced with the carnage of a city hospital, it is easier to focus on the disease rather than the patient.

To deepen his students' understanding of death, he assigns "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" by Leo Tolstoy.

"The story makes you imagine the suffering of others," he says. "Story and narrative are really central to medicine."

After years spent learning how to read the body for clues, it was only when he got to Iowa that he felt he had the life experience and the writing skills to bring to a novel.

"I realized how rich medicine was to me, how complete a world it was. I wanted to convey the excitement and adventure of learning medicine," he says.

With "Cutting for Stone," he hoped to create the kind of book that might inspire a new generation - as Maugham's novel, and others, inspired him.

"I feel that I put every single thing that I know in this novel," he says. "I have no idea what comes next. Luckily, I have a good day job."