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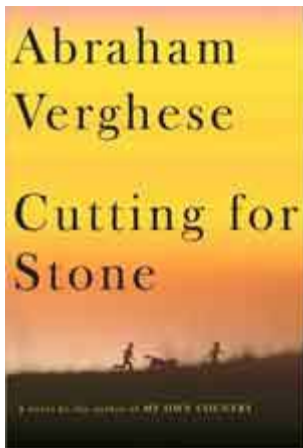
'Cutting for Stone'

By Harry Levins

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How to sum up Abraham Verghese's "Cutting for Stone." Well, it's a coming-of-age novel. But it's also a novel about doctors and nurses living amid the rich contradictions of Ethiopia. Then again, it's a novel about the making of a surgeon, an expatriate who leaves Ethiopia to learn the art in a not-so-nice neighborhood in the Bronx. On another level, it's a surgical thriller.



Finally, "Cutting for Stone" is a novel of character — of a family held together by love and split by betrayal. And it starts with the worst kind of scandal.

In 1954, in a Catholic charity hospital in Ethiopia, a young nurse, a nun from India, dies giving birth to identical twin boys. The father — he's a surgeon from Britain — is aghast. He flees, abandoning his sons.

Bad enough that the father has betrayed the boys. But in adolescence, one of the twins betrays the other, causing complications that spiral through the rest of this complicated and compelling novel.

At book's end, in the Bronx, the miscreant father and twin get a chance to make it up to the other twin, by now a surgeon on his own. Things go wrong but go right, and readers will put this novel down at book's end knowing that it will stick with them for a long time to come.

All of which sounds unlikely, at best. But somehow, this grab-bag of a story hangs together and refuses to let go of the readers.

Like the fictional surgeon, Verghese has a medical degree and teaches at Stanford's medical school. Like his fictional surgeon, Verghese spent his youth in Ethiopia, the child of teachers from India. Like his surgeon, Verghese arrived in a tough part of New York for his surgical residency, at a hospital spurned by American medical school grads and forced to import hungry foreigners.

But unlike many doctors, Verghese can write. He took time off from his medical practice to graduate from the Iowa Writers Workshop. And, unlike so many doctors, Verghese (or at least the surgeon in this novel, his first) insists on seeing patients as humans.

Otherwise, he writes, "patients can become 'the diabetic foot in bed two' or the 'myocardial infarction in bed three.'" At another point, the young surgeon shows a visitor the bookcases in his New York apartment and says, "I built these bookcases myself. Half the books have nothing to do with surgery. Surgery isn't my life."

Even so, surgery makes up a good part of "Cutting for Stone." Somehow, even using the jargon that surgeons use, Verghese makes the process clear to readers.

Harry Levins retired in 2007 as senior writer of the Post-Dispatch.