

Med. Prof. talks new novel

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Like most tenured professors at the Stanford School of Medicine, Prof. Abraham Verghese is a distinguished educator and physician. But Verghese has also found time to make a name for himself in the literary arena. His first book, *My Own Country*, tells his own story as an AIDS physician and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle. *The Tennis Partner*, a second memoir, was a New York Times notable book and a national bestseller. With his third publication and first novel, the recently published *Cutting for Stone*, Prof. Verghese shared his unique insight into medicine, literature and their middle ground in a phone interview with The Daily.

The Stanford Daily (SD): What persuaded you to write?

Abraham Verghese (AV): I always wanted to be a physician. Somehow along the way, I really began to write, often about medicine, often about practices of medicine, the kind of things that don't go into medical journals, that don't go into scientific journals. I've never had a sense of wanting to give up medicine. Writing became more and more important as an aspect of what I do in medicine.

SD: There is the saying that all great fiction has some elements of autobiography. Is there anything autobiographical in your novel?

AV: Why do you write a novel except to tell a good story and somehow present a view of the world, your own view of the world? In that sense, this novel is very much like any novel. It has my view of the world. I also have made use of the geography that I'm most familiar with. I made use of the fact that my early life was in Africa. I made use of the fact that I had experience with a certain kind of medicine. In that sense, I've called on everything that I know, but I wouldn't say that it is my experience at all, just some of my observations.

SD: What do you think is the most important quality of being a writer, of being a doctor?

AV: I think the most important quality to being a writer maybe it's the same for being a doctor is to be persistent, to have patience and look at the long haul. I am a great believer that stamina is very important to being a writer. You have to be willing to sit in that chair day after day, week after week, even when the end seems very, very far away. Medicine is kind of the same thing. With difficult patients, we have to be dogged to keep at it, keep at it, look at it afresh, until you solve all the problems.

SD: Quite a few brilliant writers have also been doctors coincidence?

AV: Given how many things that doctors are exposed to, the extraordinary trials and tragedies that we witness, I'd almost be surprised that more doctors aren't writers. I think we have this urge to write in order to find out what we're thinking. Doctors may have more things that trigger this desire.

SD: You have a lot of experience teaching medical ethics. What do you see as the connection between medicine and the humanities?

AV: It's funny that when we see patients, it's really important that we be able to imagine the suffering of the patients. Sometimes when you're involved in medicine, it is easy to put labels on people. I think the very beauty of teaching medical humanities is that sometimes, through the vehicle of fiction, you can actually help others understand the nature of suffering and you can actually put yourself in the patient's shoes. I love the phrase by Dorothy Allison that "fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about how the world lives."

SD: How do you divide your time between teaching and writing?

AV: I have roughly about one half to two days a week when I disappear and write. The activities around writing can be researching, thinking of new projects, finishing short pieces on a deadline. The remaining time I spend with students teaching and seeing patients. When I say two days of writing, it's a little more fluid than that. Some months I'm on the ward and I'm responsible for a whole ward team. That month, obviously my focus becomes the ward and taking care of the ward. Other months, I don't have this responsibility so I have more time.

SD: I heard you have a secret office just for writing?

AV: I have a second office that I disappear to. It doesn't have my name on the door. It's a good place to get away, and I don't have a phone there. Quiet place to write. I really enjoy that secret office. The whole idea of the office is for me to work; it would defeat the purpose to publicize it.

SD: Any advice to aspiring doctors or writers at Stanford?

AV: To give your whole heart to medicine. The house of medicine is very big. You can enter it and lose yourself. My life is a bad example. People look at me and think that I'm a doctor and a writer. But I don't see it that way. I see the writing as coming out of 100 percent commitment to medicine. I'm worried when I see students who want an MBA plus an MD, who try to wear too many hats. I always think medicine is a calling. If you come into medicine, it's a calling in which you can lose yourself, and in which you should lose yourself. Give it your all; don't hold back.