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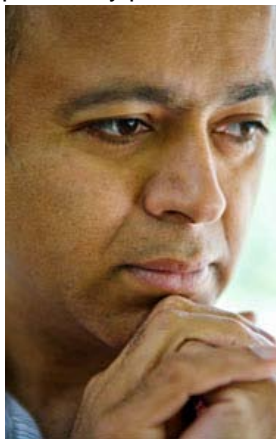
Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese

(Photo: Joan Chan)

Abraham Verghese

The Sunday Times review by David Horspool

The Hippocratic oath is often invoked by name, but few of us could quote a word from it. Most doctors are no exception because, contrary to popular belief, they don't have to take the oath before beginning to practise medicine. Abraham Verghese, who is a professor of medicine as well as a writer (this is his first novel, but he has previously published two works of nonfiction, *The Tennis Partner* and *My Own Country*), certainly knows



Hippocrates' words. He has taken one of its promises, "I will not cut for stone", as the inspiration for a moving saga of medicine and family that spans three continents and five decades. In antiquity, "cutting for stone" — operating to remove bladder stones — was often fatal, but even then there were "specialists in this art" to whom a physician would defer. Much of Verghese's novel meditates on this separate breed, the surgeon, on whose skill so many lives depend.

Verghese offers us a classic of the type, Thomas Stone, a British surgeon not merely devoted to but almost consumed by his work in a run-down hospital in Ethiopia. Stone is the dominant presence in the novel, even though we learn early that his defining act will be one of disappearance. The story is narrated by his son, a twin burdened with the name Marion. Its first part leads up to the unlikely union of Stone and his best assistant, an Indian nun called Sister Mary Joseph Praise, the resulting birth of Marion and his (initially conjoined) twin brother Shiva, their mother's death in childbirth, and their father's abandonment. The rest of the novel follows the twins' diverging paths as they come of age in a country that witnesses attempted coups and civil war. The twins' adopted parents, Indian doctors at the same Addis Ababa hospital, are the fixed points in a narrative that ranges as skilfully through the emotional register as it does across time and space.

Novels that chart the effects of loss and abandonment, or the intricacies of the fraternal bond, are not rare. Verghese's is certainly a richly entertaining example. The peculiar experience of being a twin, for instance, is succinctly captured when Marion remarks of a present, "it was the first gift I'd ever received that wasn't one of a pair". In its descriptions of the Ethiopia of Haile Selassie and Mengistu, *Cutting for Stone* convincingly evokes a place unfamiliar to most readers. But the novel's defining characteristic, and its most impressive achievement, is its attention to an even more exotic world, that of the operating theatre. This is, consequently, not a book for the squeamish. It opens with an attempted late abortion and caesarean section, and closes with a liver transplant. In between, there are visceral accounts of volvulus (bowel obstruction), vaginal fistula (the repair of which becomes Shiva's life's work) and various more or less routine operations.

Verghese's qualifications (and the impressive list of consulted works and experts at the end of the novel) leave no doubt that these descriptions are reliable reports of the real thing. The technicalities of surgery are lucidly laid out to achieve a kind of poetry. But Verghese the writer is more interested still in the anatomy of emotion that lies behind and ultimately connects both surgeon and patient. A repeated old saw of medicine makes the point nicely: "What treatment is offered by ear in an emergency?... Words of comfort". *Cutting for Stone* honours the extraordinary, complex work of surgeons and physicians, but it also allows us to see them as ordinary men and women.