

Hurts Only a Little Bit

Abraham Verghese's first novel takes a wrong turn into the territory of epic love, says **NISHA SUSAN**

ALTHOUGH WE spend a greater part of our lives working, few novels really examine work. In recent times Joshua Ferris explored (with a poetic first person plural voice) the tender, comical insides of an ad agency in the throes of recession. In *And Then We Came to The End*, Ferris dwelt on the idiosyncracies of the inhabitants of the office as if they were all neuroses, the results of anxiety sweats. Abraham Verghese, on the other hand, writes about the lives of workaholic doctors and their eccentricities, without passing judgment. In *The Tennis Partner*, his second book of non-fiction, he even made a fair case that the addiction to drugs comes easily to those who chose medicine for their living, those already addicted to work.



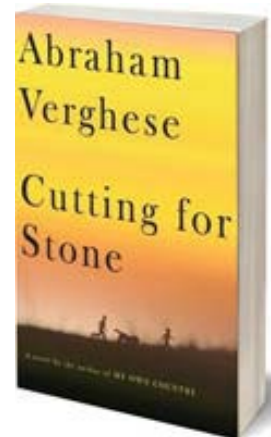
Every major character in Verghese's first novel *Cutting For Stone*, from the *gajagami* Hema to Ghosh who has the charms of a kindly troll, relates to each other through work first and last. From the makeshift rooms in Addis Ababa to well-appointed American hospitals, Verghese's favourite and central characters, are all perfectionists. And he could not imagine them any other way. *Cutting for Stone* unfortunately attempts to tell the story not of work, but of epic love, of love thwarted by the kind of misunderstandings found only in melodrama.

Verghese's prose is agile, elegant and easily embraces the scale of this continent-hopping period novel, which begins in the 1940s, though it is readily apparent that he glories in cramped workplaces. The motley crew at 'Missing' Hospital in Addis Ababa, Abyssinia come together, from as far-ranging places as Yorkshire and Eritrea and Madras, from a desire to serve and an impatience with personal limitations. None seem to think of themselves as adventurers for eschewing comfortable lives at homes for a life in the rough and make-shift. Gratification, in Verghese's world, is always delayed and always short-lived.

This tight little team finds their welloiled and efficient rhythm shattered by the simultaneous events: the birth of twin boys Marion and Shiva Stone and the death of Sister Mary Praise in sudden and bloody childbirth. The central mystery of how the man who fathered a child with a nun had no knowledge of having done so is eventually revealed in a desultory way. In the event, it is not so important. In the event, no adolescent love or grown up yet out-of-step passion can compare to the relentless pursuit of improving the small practical processes of work.

If there is a love story in this novel it is neither that between Sister Mary Praise and Doctor Stone nor the annoying relationship between Marion and Genet, his childhood playmate. Both are eclipsed by the hairy, sweaty and truly romantic relationship of Doctors Hemlatha and Ghosh. Both fall into the rhythm of marriage, work and parenting like well-trained farm horses harnessed together. They emerge as the great heroes of this narrative. Both Marion's anxieties and Shiva's amoral genius are swept aside by this couple's boundless energy. The observation of the crumbling work ethic in the nubile Genet is (perhaps unconsciously) the stuff of greater tragedy to Marion than her eventual loss.

Verghese's clean prose goes a long way in keeping the reader moving at a brisk pace through a big book in which most of the dramatic action (such a Genet's adventures as a revolutionary) is off-stage. The early larger-than-life and mildly magical dimensions to this novel settle fairly quickly into a welltold and plain tale, in which history, plot,



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