

New fiction: Abraham Verghese

Under the knife

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Illustration by Daniel Pudles

SURGERY is a wonderful metaphor. Flexible and sharp, it can incise, expose, exenterate and heal. Abraham Verghese's first two books, "My Own Country" (1994) and "The Tennis Partner" (1999), were intelligent, sensitive examinations of health and disease, communication and loneliness; profound contemplations of the difficulty of life and the certainty of its loss. They brought him a wide following among readers of non-fiction, especially in America, where he now lives. Mr Verghese is an internal-medicine specialist, but his latest work, his first novel, suggests

that he dreams of the free flight of fiction and perhaps, secretly, of surgical glory.



It is from the exotic highlands of childhood memory—Mr Verghese was born in Ethiopia of Indian parents—that the novel launches itself, plumaged in myth and magical realism. The protagonist—and his identical twin brother, his mother, his believed father and both his foster parents—are surgeons, or involved in the practice of surgery. They bicker, miscommunicate, fall in love and perform operations against a tapestry of cross-cultural desire, political change and colourful symptomatology at the sweetly named Missing Hospital on the edge of Addis Ababa. Further surgical spice is added in Madras, at an Eritrean field hospital and in New York. Surgery—dramatised, romanticised, mysticised—is the medium through which the tale is borne along, by which the characters find or lose each other, understand themselves, are rendered whole or apart.

At the novel's heart beats Mr Verghese's joy of medicine: his exultation in the poetry of its Latin phraseology, the arcane imagery based on resemblances between pathology and food. The names of surgery textbooks are introduced reverentially, like sacred scripts; he includes details of Ethiopian history, interesting surgical aphorisms, discourses on diseases and accounts of war-zone and trauma operating.

Patients figure primarily as the pulsus paradoxus or vesico-vaginal fistula that will provide some central character with his next epiphany. The novelistic drama perhaps excuses the odd clinical inexactitude, a sense of operative terms being applied with a somewhat whimsical notion of what they entail. "Cutting for Stone", a reference to an historic surgical procedure, as well as a pun on the protagonist's name, has the hybrid quality of a vivisectionist's experiment: a fleshy family saga stitched around a knobby skeleton of surgical research. Surgery is indeed a wonderful metaphor, but it should be wielded with precision. The sort of precision so evident in Mr Verghese's earlier writings.