

ARTS & EVENTS, February 13, 2009

Getting at Truth: Abraham Verghese, 'Cutting for Stone'

IF YOU DIDN'T already know that Abraham Verghese was a physician as well as a writer, then you might get that distinct impression reading his first novel, "Cutting for Stone." Following a pair of twins from their birth at a mission hospital in Ethiopia to a moment of sacrifice in New York, the novel revolves around a family of physicians and specialists: The twins, Marion and Shiva Stone, become doctors in adulthood, following the examples set by their biological as well as their adoptive parents.

More to the point, Verghese writes like a physician. Throughout the novel's 530 pages, he recounts various surgical procedures (a vasectomy, fistula repair, caesarian section) in such graphic detail that the passages read almost like textbooks. His prose is scrubbed clean of excess words and phrases; his imagery is crisp, exacting, and polished, yet never sanitized or workmanlike. "Cutting for Stone" strikes a precarious balance between the rigidity of medicine and the messiness of human relationships, just as Verghese himself must juggle the demands of both callings: that of a physician and that of a writer.

"I think people tend to break me in two and suggest that I have a doctor's life and a writer's life," he explains. "Honestly, to me it's one seamless enterprise. My identity is completely that of being a physician. I enjoy it and I have an old-fashioned sense of it being a tremendous privilege to see patients."

For him, writing is an extension of medicine. Currently a professor at Stanford School of Medicine, where he also serves as Senior Associate Chair for the Theory and Practice of Medicine, Verghese writes like other doctors might play golf. In the 1990s, he penned two best-selling works of nonfiction: "My Own Country," about AIDS in rural Tennessee, and "My Tennis Partner," about addiction and suicide. While he has a writing degree from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, "Cutting for Stone" is his first fiction book, and it took nearly a decade to complete.

"I began only with the image of a nun in a mission hospital, terribly ill," he says. "It all came from there, bit by bit." The nun, named Sister Mary Joseph Praise, turns out to be the twins' mother, her pregnancy kept a secret from everyone at the small mission hospital in Addis Ababa. However, in turning that image into a novel — and a multi-generational, globe-trotting Dickensian epic novel at that — was itself almost like a workshop for Verghese, who wrote in the evenings and weekends. "There were a lot of blind alleys that I went down for months on end, only to find out that that was not the story and that I had to start again," he says. "I didn't have the luxury I have with nonfiction of saying this is the story I'm telling." Instead, he had write to find the story.

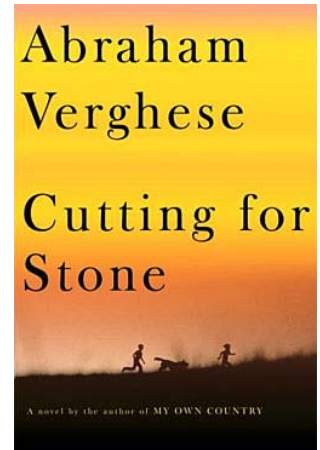


According to Verghese, both fiction and nonfiction serve the same purpose: "I think they're both different ways of getting at the truth. I really didn't set out to write this with some object lesson in the end, but I do think if you manage to create a believable world and get past verisimilitude to truth, then it's almost like you've given the reader the chance to live a lifetime in the course of a few hours and to extract all the lessons of that life."

Q+A

» **EXPRESS:** From a writing standpoint, how did working on a novel differ from working on your nonfiction books?

» **VERGHESE:** With the other books, I had a clear sense of what the topic was. There were still revelations along the way. What I thought the story would turn out to be and what I wrote were very different. With fiction, the liberating thing was I could do anything I wanted to do, but that was also the



scariest thing. There were so many choices that would have made this book go in so many different directions, but I think that when the writer himself or herself is surprised by the ending, that surprise makes it fresh to the reader as well.

» **EXPRESS:** Besides providing subject matter, how does medicine inform your writing?

À» VERGHESE: Medicine is an all-consuming enterprise, but I think the writing emanates from it in a certain way, even when the writing is fictional. I'm writing from the stance--I don't think it's so much a stance in medicine--but a stance in real life. I think it gives you an authority of being connected to what people find important in their lives.

» **EXPRESS:** Conversely, how does writing affect your job as a physician?

À» VERGHESE: Perhaps more than many physicians, I'm very conscious of story. I'm very conscious that when a patient comes to see me, they're telling me a story. What is history except a story? When I'm called in as a consultant to see a complicated patient, if I'm able to sort it out better than the house staff or the resident, it's rarely because I have some special database of knowledge. It's typically because the patient's story resonates with my repertoire of stories. I hear a bit of the beginning and a bit of the end and I know what the middle might be.

Also, I think there is a Samaritan function of being a physician, the ability to come to the bedside of someone who's suffering and to bring all the science at your disposal to make them better. To me, that's the privilege of being a physician, and I think like writing, it fills out that little hollow in ourselves.

Written by Express contributor Stephen M. Deusner