

BOOKS

MD uses skill, subtlety in epic about regular people

By: Reviewed by Bill Rambo

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Cutting for Stone

By Abraham Verghese

Random House Canada, 560 pages, \$35

Epics often rely on larger-than-life characters, or sweeping historical settings, for much of their force. An epic about regular, or even marginalized people, away from the grand canvas of important events, requires the skill and subtlety of a surgeon. Or at least a specialist in internal medicine, like Ethiopian-born author Abraham Verghese. His riveting and uplifting first novel takes us deep into the motivations, and the need, for healing.

Verghese, who teaches medicine at Stanford University in California, has written two non-fiction books. *My Own Country* chronicles his work with AIDS patients in Appalachia. *The Tennis Partner* recounts his relocation to El Paso, Texas, dealing with friendship complicated by drug addiction.

Cutting for Stone mines the meaning of human life in the form of a memoir. Marion Praise Stone and his brother Shiva are conjoined twins separated at birth in 1954 to an Indian Carmelite nun and an Indian-born British surgeon, who serve together at "Missing" Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

"We slept in the same bed till our teens, our heads touching, our legs and torsos angled away," Marion recalls. "We outgrew that intimacy, but I still long for it, for the proximity of his skull."

Marion narrates their story, set against the unsettled political backdrop of Emperor Haile Selassie and, later, the dictator Mengistu. Ethiopian history and society influence the lives of the twin brothers, "ShivaMarion," and their close companion Genet, the daughter of their nanny.

The kind of meaningful misunderstanding that led Mission Hospital to be officially documented as "Missing" is typical of ShivaMarion's experiences. The ability to go on, and find significance even in carelessness and mistakes, makes the brothers' story fascinating and satisfying. "According to Shiva, life is in the end about fixing holes."

Both men become accomplished surgeons, trained by their loving adoptive parents, gynecologist Hema and reluctant general surgeon Ghosh, also from India. Technical details of medical problems and procedures add to the novel's authenticity. Periods of calm and introspection give way to episodes of violence, heroics, desperation, or humour, always believably.

Marion's half century of discovery about himself, his brother, their relationships, and their biological parents, is as engrossing as if he were famous or influential. As Marion discovers: "The world turns on our every action, and our every omission, whether we know it or not."

Even Verghese's minor characters are significant. Those doing desperate or evil things are always people, not plot devices or stereotypes.

The title refers to an archaic mention of kidney or bladder stones in the Hippocratic Oath: "I will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom the disease is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by practitioners, specialists in this art."

Verghese also captures the feeling of rootlessness that is experienced by expatriates in Africa, and America, and the unusual ways that sojourners may find anchors and maintain relationships.

"The observer, the old record keeper, the chronicler of events, made his appearance in that taxi," Marion says "The hands of my clock turned elastic while I imprinted these feelings in memory. You must remember this. It was all I've ever had, the only currency, the only proof I was alive."

Verghese is a specialist in the art of integrating all these pieces into a seamless whole and leading to the poignant, elegant conclusion of Marion's odyssey.

Bill Rambo teaches high school in Niverville. He grew up in central Africa and in the United States.