

Caboodles Book Club Kits

Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese



Reviews

PW Reviews 2008 October #4 Lauded for his sensitive memoir (*My Own Country*) about his time as a doctor in eastern Tennessee at the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the '80s, Verghese turns his formidable talents to fiction, mining his own life and experiences in a magnificent, sweeping novel that moves from India to Ethiopia to an inner-city hospital in New York City over decades and generations. Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a devout young nun, leaves the south Indian state of Kerala in 1947 for a missionary post in Yemen. During the arduous sea voyage, she saves the life of an English doctor bound for Ethiopia, Thomas Stone, who becomes a key player in her destiny when they meet up again at Missing Hospital in Addis Ababa. Seven years later, Sister Praise dies birthing twin boys: Shiva and Marion, the latter narrating his own and his brother's long, dramatic, biblical story set against the backdrop of political turmoil in Ethiopia, the life of the hospital compound in which they grow up and the love story of their adopted parents, both doctors at Missing. The boys become doctors as well and Verghese's weaving of the practice of medicine into the narrative is fascinating even as the story bobs and weaves with the power and coincidences of the best 19th-century novel. (Feb.) Copyright 2008 Reed Business Information.

LJ Reviews 2009 January #1 Focusing on the world of medicine, this epic first novel by well-known doctor/author Verghese (*My Own Country*) follows a man on a mythic quest to find his father. It begins with the dramatic birth of twins slightly joined at the skull, their father serving as surgeon and their mother dying on the table. The horrorstruck father vanishes, and the now separated boys are raised by two Indian doctors living on the grounds of a mission hospital in early 1950s Ethiopia. The boys both gravitate toward medical practice, with Marion the more studious one and Shiva a moody genius and loner. Also living on the hospital grounds is Genet, daughter of one of the maids, who grows up to be a beautiful and mysterious young woman and a source of ruinous competition between the brothers. After Marion is forced to flee the country for political reasons, he begins his medical residency at a poor hospital in New York City, and the past catches up with him. The medical background is fascinating as the author delves into fairly technical areas of human anatomy and surgical procedure. This novel succeeds on many levels and is recommended for all collections. Copyright 2008 Reed Business Information.

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Author Biography

Abraham Verghese grew up in Ethiopia, but he left in 1973 because of that country's political turmoil. He completed his medical training in India before traveling to the United States. There, his work in the 1980s with AIDS patients in Tennessee led him to become an expert in his field. Verghese's experiences working on the cusp of the United States AIDS epidemic are chronicled in his memoir, *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People in the Age of AIDS*. It was also published in England as *Soundings: A Doctor's Life in the Age of AIDS*. The book was a popular and critical success, being nominated for the National Book Critics Circle, selected as "one of the top five books of the year" by Time, and honored with a Lambda Literary Award for nonfiction.

Perri Klass remarked in the *New York Times Book Review*: "The greatest strength of this eloquently written book is its ability to weave together all [its] separate strands. It is at once a previously untold story of AIDS in America, a story of the South, a story of the modern-day immigrant experience in America and a story of a personal journey within the medical profession." Klass also wrote that "Dr. Verghese illumines a number of landscapes here, and does it with more than a touch of the poet. He writes, for example, about the life inside the hospital--but not just any hospital. His greatest affection is reserved for the patients and staff of the Veteran's Administration Hospital, that perennial poor relation of the medical system; perhaps never has a V.A. hospital been written about with such glowing lyricism." Klass then went on to note that "Dr. Verghese's fondness for the people of small-town and rural Tennessee is a strong presence, as is his delight in the Smoky Mountain landscape."

In another part of her lengthy review, Klass remarked that "ultimately, what is most remarkable about *My Own Country* may be that Dr. Verghese's particular professional and geographic coordinates position him to witness, understand and narrate a new story about AIDS. This is the flip side of those more familiar stories, sometimes the stuff of human-interest features or made-for-television movies, the ones that start in the city with a young man getting sick and have him return to face either understanding or ostracism in some hometown or other." The memoir, she found, "is about the hometown, drawing in its various far-flung children. Dr. Verghese chronicles the evolving attitudes toward H.I.V. as the town copes with the disease and people choose their moral and political positions on the plague map of the 1980's."

Verghese's next book, *The Tennis Partner: A Doctor's Story of Friendship and Loss*, is also a memoir. In this volume, the author chronicles his move to Texas Tech and the breakup of his first marriage. More importantly, he focuses on his friendship with his student, David, a recovering drug addict and former tennis professional. David and Verghese play tennis together, and the role of teacher and student is reversed on the court. Sadly, David succumbs to his drug addiction, and Verghese details this in his memoir as well. Praising the book in *Publishers Weekly*, a reviewer noted that "it's a hard trick but Verghese combines all these elements into a cohesive whole." Another *Publishers Weekly* contributor wrote that "this book transcends its purported sporting theme. It belongs in the library of the thoughtful reader, although it doesn't hurt if that reader also happens to be a tennis buff." According to Pico Iyer in *Time*, "Verghese writes with such searching lucidity and is so attentive and engaging a figure that he could hold us just by describing his drives around town."

Breaking away from nonfiction in his next effort, Verghese wrote the novel *Cutting for Stone*. The book includes some autobiographical elements, however. It is set in Ethiopia, India, and the United States, with one setting being a hospital in New York City. The action takes place in the nineteenth century, featuring a nun who saves a doctor's life, though she later dies in childbirth. Her orphaned twin sons grow up to become doctors as well. Like Verghese's previous efforts, the book was applauded by critics. "The narrative is fascinating even as the story bobs and weaves with the power and coincidences of the best 19th-century novel,"

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declared a Publishers Weekly reviewer. A New Yorker writer also commented on the plot's coincidences, finding that "Verghese bends history and coincidence to his narrative needs." Jennifer Reese, writing in Entertainment Weekly, called the novel "a lovely ode to the medical profession." She explained: "Verghese can write about the repair of a twisted bowel with the precision and poetry usually reserved for love scenes."

Verghese once told CA: "Writing has many similarities to the practice of internal medicine. Both require astute observation and a fondness for detail. I have found my writing to be particularly therapeutic as I engage in the practice of medicine in the era of AIDS. Over time, writing has become more serious and more rewarding."

"My great influences have been the work of authors such as Somerset Maugham and contemporary authors such as John Irving. I tend to write both fiction and nonfiction about themes that emanate from my line of work. In nonfiction I find it difficult to write about topics in which I am not actively involved; instead I write on issues where I can become, in some ways, a character in the story. My fiction, by contrast, is totally unrelated to most aspects of my life."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born May 30, 1955, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; became a naturalized U.S. citizen; son of George (a physicist) and Mariam (a physicist) Verghese; married, January 5, 1980, wife's name Rajani (marriage ended, December, 1995); married, wife's name Sylvia; children: Steven, Jacob; (second marriage) Tristan. Also known as: Abraham Cheeran Verghese.

Education: Madras University, M.D., 1979; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1991. Religion: Christian. Avocational Interests: Tennis. Memberships: American College of Physicians (fellow), College of Chest Physicians (fellow), Infectious Diseases Society of America (fellow), American Geriatric Society, American Society of Microbiology, Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine, Royal College of Physicians of Canada (fellow), Sigma Xi, Alpha Omega Alpha. Addresses: Office: University of Texas Health Sciences Center, San Antonio, 7703 Floyd Curl Dr., Mail Code 7730, San Antonio, TX 78229-3900. Agent: Mary Evans, 242 E. 5th St., New York, NY 10003.

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Caboodles Book Club Kits

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Discussion Questions

1. Abraham Verghese has said that his ambition in writing *Cutting for Stone* was to “tell a great story, an old-fashioned, truth-telling story.” In what ways is *Cutting for Stone* an old-fashioned story --- and what does it share with the great novels of the nineteenth century? What essential human truths does it convey?
2. What does *Cutting for Stone* reveal about the emotional lives of doctors? Contrast the attitudes of Hema, Ghosh, Marion, Shiva, and Thomas Stone toward their work. What draws each of them to the practice of medicine? How are they affected, emotionally and otherwise, by the work they do?
3. Marion observes that in Ethiopia, patients assume that all illnesses are fatal and that death is expected, but in America, news of having a fatal illness “always seemed to come as a surprise, as if we took it for granted that we were immortal” (p. 396). What other important differences does *Cutting for Stone* reveal about the way illness is viewed and treated in Ethiopia and in the United States? To what extent are these differences reflected in the split between poor hospitals, like the one in the Bronx where Marion works, and rich hospitals like the one in Boston where his father works?
4. In the novel, Thomas Stone asks, “What treatment in an emergency is administered by ear?” The correct answer is “Words of comfort.” How does this moment encapsulate the book’s surprising take on medicine? Have your experiences with doctors and hospitals held this to be true? Why or why not? What does *Cutting for Stone* tell us about the roles of compassion, faith, and hope in medicine?
5. There are a number of dramatic scenes on operating tables in *Cutting for Stone*: the twins’ births, Thomas Stone amputating his own finger, Ghosh untwisting Colonel Mebratu’s volvulus, the liver transplant, etc. How does Verghese use medical detail to create tension and surprise? What do his depictions of dramatic surgeries share with film and television hospital dramas --- and yet how are they different?
6. Marion suffers a series of painful betrayals --- by his father, by Shiva, and by Genet. To what degree is he able, by the end of the novel, to forgive them?
7. To what extent does the story of Thomas Stone’s childhood soften Marion’s judgment of him? How does Thomas’s suffering as a child, the illness of his parents, and his own illness help to explain why he abandons Shiva and Marion at their birth? How should Thomas finally be judged?
8. In what important ways does Marion come to resemble his father, although he grows up without him? How does Marion grow and change over the course of the novel?
9. A passionate, unique love affair sets *Cutting for Stone* in motion, and yet this romance remains a mystery --- even to the key players --- until the very conclusion of the novel. How does the relationship between Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Thomas Stone affect the lives of Shiva and Marion, Hema and Ghosh, Matron and everyone else at Missing? What do you think Verghese is trying to say about the nature of love and loss?
10. What do Hema, Matron, Rosina, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, Genet, and Tsige --- as well as the many women who come to Missing seeking medical treatment --- reveal about what life is like for women in Ethiopia?
11. Addis Ababa is at once a cosmopolitan city thrumming with life and the center of a dictatorship rife with conflict. How do the influences of Ethiopia’s various rulers --- England, Italy, Emperor Selassie --- reveal themselves in day-to-day life? How does growing up there affect Marion’s and Shiva’s worldviews?

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12. As Ghosh nears death, Marion comments that the man who raised him had no worries or regrets, that “there was no restitution he needed to make, no moment he failed to seize” (p. 346). What is the key to Ghosh’s contentment? What makes him such a good father, doctor, and teacher? What wisdom does he impart to Marion?

13. Although it’s also a play on the surname of the characters, the title *Cutting for Stone* comes from a line 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 has said that this line comes from ancient times, when bladder stones were epidemic and painful: “There were itinerant stone cutters --- lithologists --- who could cut into either the bladder or the perineum and get the stone out, but because they cleaned the knife by wiping their blood-stiffened surgical aprons, patients usually died of infection the next day.” How does this line resonate for the doctors in the novel?

14. Almost all of the characters in *Cutting for Stone* are living in some sort of exile, self-imposed or forced, from their home country --- Hema and Ghosh from India, Marion from Ethiopia, Thomas from India and then Ethiopia. Verghese is of Indian descent but was born and raised in Ethiopia, went to medical school in India, and has lived and worked in the United States for many years. What do you think this novel says about exile and the immigrant experience? How does exile change these characters, and what do they find themselves missing the most about home?

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