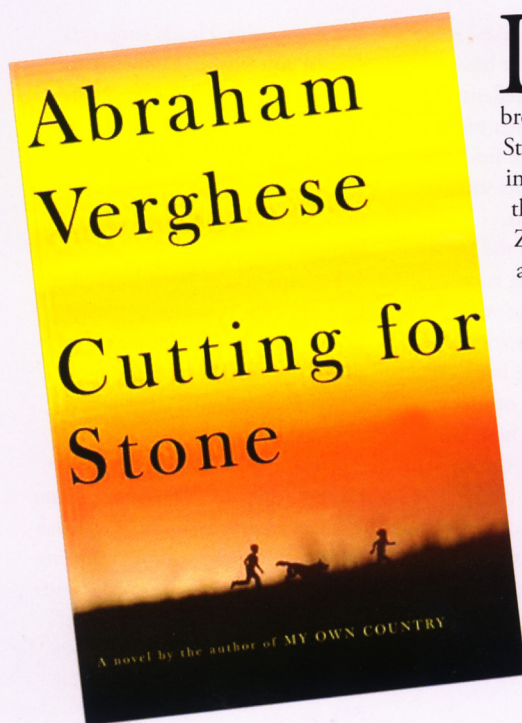


Cutting for stone

Abraham Verghese

\$32.95

Review by
David Miller



During a languid afternoon bookshop browse 'Cutting for Stone' seemed to jump into my hand from the busy shelves of Zabritskie bookshop at Bondi Beach.

It was a title to catch any doctor because "Thou shalt not cut for stone" is a strange and untenable clause from the ancient Hippocratic oath and one of the reasons that doctors can no longer take this outdated oath on graduation, related to an old demarca-

tion issue between doctors and barbers. But that's another story.

This story is narrated by a twin, starting in the womb where he is conjoined to his brother by their heads. They were born in 1954 at a mission hospital in Ethiopia during the reigns of the incompetent Emperor Haile Selassie and Mengistu, the monster dictator

who followed.

The leading character Dr Stone is a gifted surgeon at this mission hospital which is quaintly known as 'Missing Hospital' by patients and staff alike. He has some unresolved seamy steamy love problems around the nursing nun Sister Mary Praise and he mysteriously disappears without trace after botching the disastrous and unexpected birth of her twins, the nun's pregnancy having been shrouded in her habit.

The hospital physician Dr Ghosh has to take over the surgery at Missing and also be a surrogate father to the twins who he had saved with a surgical separation shortly after their birth. The growing relationship between the boys into adulthood is in itself an extraordinary tale of medicine and demonstrates insight into twin relationships.

The author, Dr Verghese is professor of Medicine at Stanford University. He describes many medical conditions and operations throughout the book. As a critic I am always on the lookout for medical inaccuracies and his descriptions are accurate and ring true throughout.

His description of a futuristic liver transplantation scene towards the end of the book is also entirely believable.

He explores through his characters the pioneer work of fistula surgery, still used to save young

girls from a living hell. These undeveloped girls are injured during obstructed childbirth in their villages, due to the ghastly custom of premature forced marriage to older men.

In real life this work was made famous by missionary doctors Dr Reginald Hamlin and Dr Catherine Hamlin, also in Ethiopia at the same time and described in their biography, 'Hospital by the River'. The author acknowledges these wonderful people.

A background in medicine is useful but not essential in tackling this interesting and believable story. There are some curious twists in the clever plot involving the family of doctors, political terror and a night escape over the Missing Hospital wall which leads to America. (no doubt keeping the market in mind)

The last part of the book is dramatic with an unexpected turn of events and explores some of the injustices in the American medical system of today relating to organ transplantation where the poor supply the rich with spare parts. If what the author says is even partly true, it is the stuff of scandal. The plot in the American part of the story also has a big surprise for the reader.

As a read for doctors, I give this book five stars. For others, even without a medical dictionary, 'Cutting for Stone' is a great read.