

Abraham Verghese Biographical Sketch

Having recently had my car stolen from Walgreens and subsequently used in three armed robberies, I was contemplating not rereading *Cutting for Stone*, while I was dealing with, policemen, detectives, insurance companies, and body shops.

Boy would that have been a mistake! Often when rereading a novel, I am disappointed. Not this time. Second time around was even better. What a masterpiece, perhaps a bit lengthy, but certainly riveting. I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did!

Born in Ethiopia in 1955, Abraham Verghese was the middle son of Indian parents who had moved to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to be teachers. They were both Christian. All their children went on to have successful and prestigious careers with the eldest, George becoming an engineering professor at MIT, while the youngest is a software engineer at Google. Abraham is currently an internist physician and Associate Professor and Chair of the Theory and Practice of Medicine department at Stanford University.

Verghese's parents were teachers from Kerala, a state in Southern India. Their expectations were high, he wrote "You were a doctor, lawyer, or engineer or failure," he recalled. At age 15 Abraham did leave Ethiopia for two years of medical school in Madras. However, he then returned to Ethiopia to continue his studies in medicine in an extremely rigorous program. In his third year the Ethiopian medical school was shut down, because of civil unrest. Abraham was a citizen of India. He was a foreigner in Ethiopia.

Abraham's parents left Ethiopia and went to America after the emperor Haile Selassie was deposed and a Marxist military government took over. This event is roughly reflected in the novel. Abraham worked as an orderly for a year before going to India where he completed his medical studies at the Madras College of Medicine in what is now Chennai, India. After completing his internship in India, he came to the United States to work in Tennessee as one of hundreds of medical students seeking open residency positions. He chronicled this experience in a lengthy New Yorker article called the "Cow Path to America," dramatized in the episode of *Cutting for Stone* set in the Bronx

Hospital in New York, a hospital with extremely challenging working conditions, understaffed, poorly funded, and brutally demanding.

Verghese then opted for a residency in Johnson City, Tennessee, serving the surrounding impoverished rural area, where he worked from 1980-1983. He subsequently secured a fellowship at the Boston University School of Medicine, where he witnessed the early incidence of the AIDS epidemic. After that he returned to Johnson City, where AIDS was breaking out at a time when AIDS patients were pariahs and patients were treated as untouchables, as is manifested in the fictional narrator of *Cutting*. Verghese took this challenge in stride, providing compassionate care for Aids patients, whose friends and families often abandoned them.

In 1991, exhausted from his relentless onslaught on the Aids epidemic in rural Tennessee, which was taking its toll on his first marriage to an Indian woman, he cashed in on his retirement plan and went to the University of Iowa, where he earned a Master of Arts in Writing. Following this he went on to become a professor of Medicine and chief of the Division of Infectious Disease at the Texas Tech Health Science Center in El Paso where he spent the next 14 years.

During these years Verghese wrote a memoir, *My Own Country*, which graphically depicts his work with impoverished Aids patients, sparing none of the grim medical side effects of the disease. I endeavored to read this work, but found it painfully grim, but it is apparently used in colleges and medical schools to convey the importance of empathy and compassion for positive care giving. Verghese is currently teaching a class at Stanford on the doctor-patient interview and the introductory physical exam necessary for the successful medical outcomes. This approach is not currently emphasized by all clinicians, many of whom prioritize technology and research. However, as in so many areas we should probably strive for a good balance. Stanford apparently thoroughly endorses Verghese's emphasis on bedside manner and interpersonal relationship.

Verghese's second book, *The Tennis Partner, A Story of friendship and Loss*, also written while in El Paso, is another very personal story, this one, about a medical resident in recovery from drug addiction. The book focuses on the prevalence of physician drug abuse and further elaborates on the breakdown of Abraham's first marriage, also discussed

in *My Own Country*. Marion Stone's focus on his tortured obsession with Genet also deals with unsuccessful romantic entanglements. Verghese does get married again and went on to have a third son. Apparently tennis was a lifelong passion and outlet for him. In 2015, Verghese wrote the forward to *When Breath Becomes Air*, the memoir of another close colleague, Paul Kalanithi, who was dying of lung cancer. These close relationships are reflected in the initial inseparability of Marion and Shiva in the novel.

While *Cutting For Stone* is a novel, as his friend John Irving wrote, "I have not read a novel where in medicine, the practice of it is made as germane to the storytelling process, to the overall narrative as the author manages to make it happen here." No matter what your previous exposure to medicine has been you are swept into the operating room and caught up the the drama as completely as if you were the patient. It is gratifying to be invited to witness the procedures and learn from the telling.

In a 2010 article in the N.Y. *Times*, Denise Grady reflected, "Art and medicine may seem disparate worlds, but Dr. Verghese insists that for him they are one. Doctors and writers are both collectors of stories and he says his two careers have the same joy and the same prerequisite, infinite curiosity about other people." He cannot help secretly diagnosing ailments in strangers or wondering about the lives that his patients lead outside of the hospital. "People are endlessly mysterious, Verghese mused in his office at the Stanford Medical School where volumes of poetry share the bookshelves with medical texts, family photos, and a collection of reflex hammers."

In another interesting article on Verghese, Bob Thompson in the February 6, 2009 *Washington Post* called "Diagnosis Author," reports that in 1990, when Verghese went to Iowa, he had put his career on hold in hopes of writing an epic medical novel. In 2009 nearly two decades later he had done just that having published *Cutting For Stone*, which was on the New York Times best seller list for over two years, making Amazon's Best Book of the year list, as well as that of *Publisher's Weekly*, along with the Indies Choice book award for 2010, among others. While not strictly autobiographical, Verghese is a physician of Indian parentage, raised in Ethiopia and ending up in the United States. He had clearly poured his personal and professional soul into the book. Highlighting a 2009 talk at Vanderbilt Thompson emphasized Verghese's

decision to go back to medical school having run across a copy of Harrison's Principles of Internal medicine somewhat analogous to Shiva Stones' invaluable copy of *Grey's Anatomy*.

For some reason, continuing medical school in the U.S. would have meant starting over again unlike in India where he got credit for his courses in Ethiopia. Ironically he had chosen to specialize in infectious disease, which seemed to be all about cure. When he went off to face an Aids epidemic in Tennessee at the time there was no known cure. After a while he found that when visiting patients in their homes his presence helped them "come to terms with their illness." This significant episode became the source of his harrowing first memoir, *My Own Country*. Most importantly it inspired his very patient oriented interactive medical style.

Verghese's topic in the talk at Vanderbilt was the "Pen and the Stethoscope, What Writing Can Teach Us About Medicine." (Washington Post article) He elaborates, "Harried doctors must understand that to every patient illness is a story." In the lecture he turns the death of the great writer physician Anton Chekov into a parable of human medical care. He goes on to tell the story of how Chekov died and more significantly how his physician behaved at his bedside. Knowing that tuberculosis would soon kill him, Chekov felt an urge to travel. His wife took him to a spa in Germany where a crisis ensued. The spa physician decided to send for an oxygen pillow.

"What is the use?" Chekov is reported to have said. "Before it arrives, I will be a corpse." The doctor changed his mind and ordered champagne, where upon Chekov emptied the glass, laid quietly on his side and died.

Verghese concluded, "I've done some very unusual things at the bedside, but I don't think I would have thought of ordering a bottle of champagne."

In sum, Ralph Horwitz of Stanford's school of medicine clearly appreciated the convergence of Verghese the doctor and Verghese the sewer. First he wanted Verghese to supervise students doing their internal medicine rotations and in particular to teach them how to do bedside exams. "Abraham is one of the most skilled bedside clinicians I have ever encountered," he reflected "He has an even rarer ability to connect the clinical exam to the deeper ideals of medicine." Horwitz also

sees Verghese as a public intellectual whose writing can spark discussion of a crucial problem, how to reconcile medicine's scientific and technical side with its humanistic or Samaritan foundation."

To that end Horwitz offered his recruit an unusual perk, a second hidden office without his name on it. For two days a week, he could write anything he wanted. Finally Horwitz concludes, "medicine is very much about narratives. It is about a patient's story and how you come to understand it. By embedding this concept in his own work, Verghese can help shape the story of medicine itself."