

## CUTTING FOR STONE: Critique

By James Schilling

I originally read tonight's book Cutting for Stone because I knew the author's work from the previous book he had written, "The Tennis Partner". That book, published in 1998, was a memoir of Verghese's friendship with a 4<sup>th</sup> year medical student, David Smith. Verghese first met Smith when he was in one of the classes he was teaching at the Texas Tech medical school. They were drawn together because of a common passion, tennis. Smith, an Australian, had been for a few years a professional tennis player, and playing tennis was one of Verghese's great loves. As Verghese soon learned, however, the brilliant and talented Smith had for years fought a battle against re-occurring drug addiction, a battle which he eventually lost. It is because of this friendship that Verghese developed a reluctant sympathy for the complexities of drug abuse and its victims. The book was rightfully praised as "a beautifully written, luminescent tale of caring and humanity. It is written with a diagnostician's talented eye, and with great honesty and emotion, many times painfully, but always with compassion and intelligence."

I would suggest that the same comment could be made about tonight's book, since, although a novel, it also is in many ways a memoir. It is clear that the author relied heavily on his personal experience to write this novel – the author lived in the same locations and at the same times, as the settings of our book. The life path of the novel's narrator, Marion Stone, follows is very similar to what Verghese did. As a child Verghese even lived in a household with parents who had a difficult and dysfunctional relationship – not dissimilar to the novel's childhood experience of Marion's biological father – Dr. Thomas Stone.

I have always been attracted by memoirs, as a genre, and particularly memoirs written by physician authors, perhaps because of the elemental drama they often exhibit. Exactly when I become aware of the centuries-long tradition of physicians who were also creative writers, I am not sure.

But I think it was about the same time I discovered the short stories of Anton Chekhov, all those tales that had little to do with his daily medical practice, but everything to do with his ability to perceive the truth about human nature. For me, as a young reader, each story seemed to resonate – it was an education in human motives and behavior. The reading of memoirs penned by many other physician authors followed thru the years: Oliver Sacks, Danielle Ofri, Richard Selzer, Atul Gawande, Viktor Frankl, Khaled Hosseini, Sherwin Nuland, and many more.

And this led me to read “The Tennis Partner”, and then to recommend tonight’s novel, and Verghese’s first fiction book, to the Novel Club Selection Committee. The author is currently a Professor and Senior Chair of Medicine at the Stanford School of Medicine; and he would certainly agree with Chekhov’s well-known comment: “Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress.”

But literature is a demanding mistress. A dedicated physician by day, it takes Verghese six or seven years to write a book. This first novel Cutting for Stone impressed me as a thoughtful and engrossing web of character, of love, death, conflict, and betrayal. The characters that inhabit the story, and the novel’s inclusion of minute medical detail, make clear this is a book written by a man who is as deeply in love with his medical wife as he is with his literature mistress.

To begin - just a short summary of the novel’s plot. The story is set mostly in Ethiopia and America, and unfolds over the last five decades of the 20th century. The setting is the Ethiopia Mission Hospital in that country’s capital, Addis Ababa. The hospital name is pronounced “Missing”, because that is how the Ethiopian tongue pronounces “Mission”.

The book begins with the narrator relating a dramatic afternoon in 1954, when he, Marion, was born as one of two male twins – Marion and Shiva – who were co-

joined at the head. Their parents are the hospital's British surgeon, the brash and difficult, but exceptionally skilled Thomas Stone, and an Indian nurse, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, who for the past seven years has been Stone's operating room assistant. The evidence of this liaison is only mentioned much later once we are well into the novel, and then only fleetingly – as tho it were only a distant memory.

Tragically, Sister Praise dies while giving birth to the twins, and the father, Dr. Stone, perhaps in denial, simply disappears. The newly borne twins are surgically separated, and are given a home by two Mission Hospital doctors: Abhi Ghosh (known simply as Ghosh); and Kalpanal Hemalatha (known as Hema). They are both immigrants from Madras, India and become the twins loving parents. With a shared dedication to medicine dominating their lives, Ghosh and Hema clearly are the reason their two charges also eventually choose medical careers.

Shiva and Marion are bound by brotherly love, but betrayal soon raises its ugly head, when as teenagers Shiva has sex with Genet, the daughter of a beloved household servant – despite knowing full well that his brother Marion sees Genet as his great love. Marion can only see his brother's behavior as an intentional betrayal.

The story is set at a time in African history when there was great political turmoil in Ethiopia. Independence movements from the Eritrea north arose and continued for years after its annexation under Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Emperor. And then, after been the Emperor for 44 years Selassie is deposed and a ruthless, dedicated Marxist becomes ruler of the country. Marion is forced to flee, first to Nairobi, and then to New York where he trains to become a surgeon. His brother, Shiva, stays in Ethiopia, and also gives his life to medicine, but taught by Hemma. He does not go to medical school

An eventual reunion occurs when Marion, now a surgical resident at Our Lady Hospital in the Bronx, meets his father Thomas Stone when Stone arrives to harvest a liver for transplantation to one of his patients. This chance meeting evolves into the climax of the novel. Because of a severe Hepatitis B infection, Marion needs a liver transplant to survive, and the best donor is Shiva, Marion's identical twin. The best transplant surgeon in the country is Dr. Stone.

And then the final tragedy – a successful liver transplant is followed by the donor Shiva having a massive brain bleed, and he dies.

Within this brief summary, I have not attempted to include the number of other threads that tie the novel together – perhaps not unlike a Greek tragedy where much of the drama takes place off-stage. To mention only one, Genet, who in Africa had joined a band of militant guerillas, appears again in Marion's life in New York, but only long enough to give him the Hepatitis B infection which leads to his essential liver transplant need, and so to Shiva's death.

In such a brief summary the coincidental elements of the plot may seem overdone, but in the actual telling the book is a page-turner, a well-written, and thoughtful tale. It confirms the truism that fiction, in the telling of a great story, can also in fact tell the truth about how the world lives. One more frame-work summary should be added - a quick reminder of the background to the decades-long turmoil in Ethiopia which forms an important part of the novel's setting.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> colonial conquests in Africa by the European powers, almost uniquely in Africa Ethiopia managed to retain its independence. The country did not have the firm boundaries, however, that we now consider as normal, so pressure did continually exist with its colonial neighbors. The most significant was with Italy and it resulted in an agreement allowing Italy to establish a colony on the Ethiopian Red Sea coast, called Eritrea. The inhabitants there developed a culture and identity separate from Ethiopia itself, but after the defeat of Italy in

WWII, the UN General Assembly, at the request of the victorious allies, ruled that Eritrea was to be federated with Ethiopia. As a result, Eritrea, overnight, became Ethiopia's bitter enemy.

The conflict that followed lasted some 30 years. Eritrea, from a base in Cairo, organized an armed rebellion. It was during the decades-long conflict that followed that our novel is set; with author Verghese having experienced personally many of those years.

Ultimately the Eritreans were successful and Eritrea was formally recognized as an independent country by the UN in 1993. This UN decision came almost exactly 41 years after the UN originally took away Eritrean independence after WWII.

Cutting for Stone is a story about many things: relationships, lives of medicine, and grief. And as in his earlier non-fiction books, Verghese clearly proves himself a fine writer – lyrical and controlled. He captures believably the attachments between people, but also their sense of abandonment and betrayal. And most importantly he knows how to tell a good story.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this critique, and as you know from the Whitney's bio paper, Verghese's background and life experience make him particularly able to bring a dimension of exceptional believability to this novel. He is Indian, but was born and raised in Ethiopia. He was going to medical school there when, in the course of his third year of study the Ethiopian Emperor Selassie was deposed and a brutal military regime took over the country. And one of the first things the new regime did was to close the University and its medical school.

His parents had seen what was coming and had already moved to the US. Their son followed them but his medical study in Ethiopia was not recognized in the US

and so he could not continue medical school. Instead, he worked as an orderly; first in a nursing home, and then in a hospital. Eventually, he was able to move to India to continue his medical school studies, and then after graduation he came back to the US for his residency. Verghese's experience during this residency and his first positions as an MD also clearly parallel the story of Marion in the novel. When Marion interns in a hospital in the Bronx where he finds the patients and the available medical resources nearly as poor and desperate as those in the "Missing" hospital in Ethiopia, he is mirroring Verghese's own personal experience as a new MD.

I particularly mention these parallels because they indicate the underlying truth of the writing in the lives Verghese captures in his fiction. Before he became an MD he also had experienced many years providing the kind of patient care that few MDs ever see. He was with the patients during many of the 23 hours and 45 minutes of each day that the doctor was not in the room. And it shows in his writing.

Verghese's resulting appreciation for the work of hospital orderlies and nurses I think give him an understanding for the "humanity" of medicine that colors each scene in his novel; and I think it creates a sensitivity and understanding of the human condition in distress that so effectively underlies his writing.

This deep education in the human condition, I think, is what allows Verghese's writing to find the internal humanity in his characters; and to capture believably some of the great themes in his book: love and betrayal, forgiveness and self-sacrifice, compassion and redemption. But, of course, the rich detail that the author has absorbed in his difficult path to become a physician is of little value if, as an author, he did not also have a good command of narrative and the emotional portrayal of his characters. Above all, he must be convincing. He cannot write as a surgeon might operate – neatly planned, quickly exposed, problem repaired, and then a careful suturing up. This, of course, is not how life works; and it is to Verghese's credit that he realizes it.

I was also intrigued by Verghese's selection of his book's title. The author, at least in the interviews he has given, does not say why he chose the title he did, other than the reference in his book to the Hippocratic oath, where physicians commit not to cut into the body to remove kidney stones. The complete oath, of course, is a directive against physicians doing surgery of any kind, not just kidney stones. In ancient Greece, surgery was a distinctly separate from medicine, and was not even considered a skill, except as being akin to butchering. Surgeons then had no medical education at all. And the total disdain for surgeons is even more understandable when we remember this was an age before even germ theory was known, much less the discovery of antibiotics. A fatal infection was almost inevitable. Surgery was undertaken only when the pain of the underlying condition became unbearable.

On a personal note, I did suffer a large stone kidney attack some 50 years ago, a time when the only procedure available was opening the torso to allow surgical removal. In my pre-surgery agony, covered in sweat and in the midst of constant nausea and vomiting, one of the nurses comforted me by saying: "Your pain is nothing compared to childbirth." It caused me to wonder how the human race never-the-less kept repopulating itself.

Cutting for Stone is not without its faults. Critics, for example, feel that coincidence plays too big a role in the story. Particularly that the final and sudden twists at the end of the book are too far-fetched – far too unlikely to maintain a sense of credibility - a climax where the son Marion suddenly trusts his life to the two men he has the least reason to trust – the father who abandoned him and the brother who betrayed him.

But by far the most common criticism is that the novel has too much medical detail – that its descriptions of surgical procedures detracted from an otherwise good story. To some extent, I agree, particularly the episode at the beginning of the book describing the mis-guided attempts of Thomas Stone to save the life of

Sister Mary. But for the most part, for me at least, the medical detail was an essential element in creating power and richness to the narrative. And not as one MD critic said: “an unnecessary textbook in liver transplantation and bowel surgery.”

I would suggest that the author’s use of medical detail can more validly be said to create for the reader an emotional rapport with the main characters’ internal motivations and passions. To effectively create character, to bring the reader to an understanding of the mind and motivations of a human being, detail is essential. And since most of the author’s characters are doctors, is not medical detail a necessary element to the story?

A good example is the series of conversations and medical happenings between Marion and Deepak Jesudass, the chief resident at Our Lady Hospital where Marion was doing his internship. How better to understand their relationship than having the reader able to listen to their exchanges. Or the conversations between Deepak and Thomas Stone, when Stone appears at Our Lady to harvest a liver for transplantation. Again, a revealing part of who these men were. It is their passion for medicine that directs and gives meaning to their lives, in contrast even to other MDs who only incidentally come into the story. Admittedly, the result is a great amount of medical detail – which like the human body itself can be beautiful, amazing, and not infrequently, very messy.

That being said, I think the reader could legitimately question some of the plot elements. The revelation, for example, at the end of the novel, of the childhood of Thomas Stone, what made him the man he became – both his great strengths and his great inadequacies – seems too belated and inadequate. Does it explain the man – or is it too much of an add-on, as opposed to an integrated whole with the rest of the story.



The same might be said of Genet, Marion's childhood sweetheart and love of his life. Her motives for coming back into Marion's life when she did, with devastating results for Marion and even more so for Shiva, seem somewhat contrived. Also, is Genet a device the author feels he needed to confront the reader with the harrowing Ethiopian, (and African) practice of female genital cutting, to show the life-long damage it does to its victims. Is she a believable character or a plot device to educate the reader on a barbaric practice?

I had some of the same feelings about Shiva. As his character was drawn he came across to me as somewhat one-dimensional, a needed contrast to the thoughtful Marion. Was his change in character at the end of the book believable? Or is this an unjust comment? Shiva was portrayed in most respects as a savant – exceptionally competent in a few areas; and totally deficient in others, such as the lack of a normal human capacity to understand the consequences of his actions toward others, (or at least until the twist at the end of the book). I would add, however, that the author himself exhibits some of these same characteristics in his personal life. He is absolutely obsessive about what interests him – medicine, tennis, writing – but freely admits that he cannot prevent himself from totally neglecting other aspects of his life – like his marriage and family – which he knows is wrong, but also can't change.

To conclude, I want to mention my feeling that the creation of a good novel cannot be separated from the life experience of the author. I would not pretend that Verghese is in the same league as a Proust or a Faulkner, but do think that like them, his fiction cannot be separated from his life. Medicine is a main part of why he lives, and so it must inevitably be the same for his characters – whether it is a superbly skilled surgeon like Thomas Stone – or an apprentice like Shiva. Medicine is the invisible force that drives the main characters, or that deflects them – but in the end it also the force that sustains them.