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Interview with Abraham Verghese

[John McMurtrie, Chronicle Book Editor](#)

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Abraham Verghese's moving and richly detailed epic novel "Cutting for Stone," published last year, tells of the lives of Ethiopian twins whose fates remain forever intertwined - despite the diverging journeys the two men, both surgeons, take.

Verghese's first novel - after the memoirs "My Own Country" (1994) and "The Tennis Partner" (1998) - was recently published in paperback (Vintage; 667 pages; \$15.95), and the much-acclaimed book is back on best-seller lists. And so the physician and author who grew up in Ethiopia, then lived in New Jersey, India, Tennessee, Boston and Texas - and is now a professor of medicine at Stanford - finds himself journeying once again, crisscrossing the country on a book tour and venturing to Europe to mark the publication of his novel in foreign languages.

We caught up with Verghese by e-mail as he traveled from Boston to Spain.

Q: As a man of medicine, weren't you aware of the harm that reading a 600-page novel can cause to one's wrists?

A: I was more worried about my own wrists, lugging around thrice that many pages in double-spaced manuscript form! But I confess to a love of big books, the kind you don't want to end.

Q: Without giving away too much, the heart of your novel's conclusion is centered on the liver. Your surprisingly moving descriptions of that organ's functions brought to mind the Romans' belief that the liver is the seat of love and passion. Were the Romans on to something?

A: The Romans were way ahead of their time - it is an incredible organ, a veritable factory but one that produces not just one kind of widget, but everything from clotting factors to crucial proteins, and if that were not enough, it also processes the drugs and alcohol we consume, produces bile for digestion - and even that is a very short list of all it does. Like the heart, it is an unpaired organ (unlike lungs and kidney, say), but unlike the heart, surgical techniques can now divide it so you can give part of your liver to save your child's life, for example. I have been intrigued with the liver both because it is the Renaissance man or woman of all the organs and because surgical techniques have had to be at their peak to deal with transplanting it.

Q: Is it true that you've been approached at book readings by people who confuse you with a certain other doctor and writer of Indian extraction?

A: People have said to me, "Dr. Gawande, I love your writing." I have debated whether to simply gracefully accept the praise on Atul's behalf, but I usually counter that I am better looking and have more hair than Atul. (Not.) The problem is compounded by the fact that we are both on the best-seller lists together the last few weeks. I sent him a photo from Chicago showing our two books nestling together on a display of best-sellers. Very proud of what he does.

Q: You're on the road a lot these days. Are you reading anything you'd recommend?

A: I am reading voraciously. Finished "Wolf Hall" (Hilary Mantel) and "Let the Great World Spin" (Colum McCann), and now as I head off to Spain, Italy and France for two days each for the release of the translations of my book, I have packed Cervantes, Eco and, of course, my great favorite, Zola. A goal I had with my book was to write of medicine the way Zola wrote of Paris, so that every page should be steeped in medicine directly or indirectly.

Q: There's a fair amount about Ethiopian food and drink in your novel. For those who can't travel to Addis Ababa for the weekend, what Ethiopian restaurants would you recommend in the Bay Area?

A: There are a ton of superb restaurants all over the Bay Area, and if I mention one as being super, I hope the others will forgive me or better still invite me for a free meal so that I can increase my sample size. But Zeni's in San Jose is the best I have had ever, I must say, and Muna and his wife Zeni are great ambassadors for Ethiopia.

Q: You've been blogging for TheAtlantic.com about the sorry state of health care in this country. Is there anything we can learn from Ethiopia?

A: I think we learn from medicine everywhere that it is at its heart a human endeavor, requiring good science but also a limitless curiosity and interest in your fellow human being, and that the physician-patient relationship is key; all else follows from it. I think we can see how blessed we are in America to have access to the kind of health care we do if we are insured, and even if uninsured, how there is a safety net. Now, as to the problem of how much health care costs and how we reform health care ... it is another story altogether.

Q: "Cutting for Stone" is cinematic in so many ways, from its varied settings to its rich array of characters. Are there any plans for a movie adaptation?

A: Lots of talk, but as far as I know, no one has signed on the dotted line.

Q: In the free time left over from teaching, touring with your book, blogging, writing op-eds and reviews and being a father, are you working on a new 600-page novel?

A: A new novel is the one thing I have not started. But I think the seeds of a story have just been sown, and I am fertilizing and nurturing and looking to spring and summer for the first sign of a bud.