



**Georgetown Township Public Library
Book Discussion Guide**

Cutting for Stone
Abraham Verghese (2009)

About This Book

An epic novel that spans continents and generations, **Cutting for Stone** is an unforgettable story of love and betrayal, compassion and redemption, exile and home that unfolds across five decades in India, Ethiopia, and America.

Narrated by Marion Stone, the story begins even before Marion and his twin brother, Shiva, are born in Addis Ababa's Missing Hospital (a mispronunciation of "Mission Hospital"), with the illicit, years-in-the-making romance between their parents, Sister Mary Joseph Praise, a beautiful Indian nun, and Thomas Stone, a brash, brilliant British surgeon. Mary and Thomas meet on a boat out of Madras in 1947; she follows him to Ethiopia and to Missing, where they work side by side for seven years as nurse and doctor. After Mary dies while giving birth to the twins --- a harrowing, traumatic scene on the operating table --- Thomas vanishes, and Marion and Shiva grow up with only a dim sense of who he was, and with a deep hostility toward him for what they see as an act of betrayal and cowardice.

The twins are raised by Hema and Ghosh, two Indian doctors who also work at Missing, and who shower Marion and Shiva with love and nurture their interest in medicine --- part of the deep, almost preternatural connection the brothers share. They are so close that Marion, as a boy, thinks of them as a single entity: *ShivaMarion*.

In **Cutting for Stone**, renowned physician Abraham Verghese has given us a remarkable reading experience that explores the lives of a memorable cast of characters, many of them doctors; the insight the novel offers into the world of medicine, along with its wealth of precise detail about how doctors work, is unparalleled in American fiction. Verghese is so attuned to the movements of the heart and of the mind, so adept at dramatizing the great themes of human existence, and he has filled this world with such richly drawn, fascinating characters, that **Cutting for Stone** becomes one of those rare books one wishes would never end, an alternate reality that both rivals and illuminates the real world readers must return to when the book is closed.

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About the Author

Abraham Verghese is Professor and Senior Associate Chair for the Theory and Practice of Medicine at the Stanford University School of Medicine. He was the founding director of the Center for Medical Humanities & Ethics at the University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, where he is now an adjunct professor. He is the author of **My Own Country**, a 1994 NBCC Finalist and a *Time* Best Book of the Year, and **The Tennis Partner**, a *New York Times* Notable Book. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he has published essays and short stories that have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Granta*. He lives in Palo Alto, California.

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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?

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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?

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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Resources for additional information about book discussion choices and authors:

Books & Authors (Access through links to MeL Databases on Library's webpage.)
<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/>

LitLovers.com
www.litlovers.com

Overbooked.com
<http://www.overbooked.com>

Penguin.com (USA)
<http://www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/bookclubs/index.html>

Reading Group Center
<http://reading-group-center.knopfdoubleday.com>

Reading Group Guides
<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

Suggested print resources:

The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience
Diana Loevy
374.22 Loevy 2006

The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group
Ellen Slezak (editor)
374.22 Book 2000

Good Books Lately: The One-Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers
Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens
374.22 Moore 2004

Read It and Eat: A Month-by-Month Guide to Scintillating Book Club Selections and Mouthwatering Menus
Sarah Gardner
028.9 Gardner 2005

The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions
Rachel W. Jacobsohn
374.22 Jacobsohn 1994

What Do I Read Next? (Multi-volume set, annual editions)
Gale Research Inc.
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