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Cutting for Stone

Discussion questions used at SPL

1. We often talk about the “doors” into a book that authors use: Character – the people are the most important in the book; Setting – the sense of where the book takes place is tangible; Story – the plot is important, usually a page turner; and Language – the use of words, style, and structure is what lures the reader into the book. --- Which “door” did you enter?
2. Which character did you like the most and why? Did any one character’s story resonate with you? Why?
3. What do you think the title means? The author states that the phrase is from the doctor’s 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.” How does this line resonate for the doctors in the novel?
4. What did you think about the women in the book? How do you feel they were portrayed? Positively? Negatively? Strong? Weak? Victims? Did you like them (her) or were they (she) unfamiliar to anyone you know?
5. 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?
6. Did the author do a good job of telling the story? Who’s story do you think this novel is about? Marion’s or Thomas Stone’s or Ghosh’s.
7. What role does Matron play throughout this story? Do you think she could have stepped in and changed the future of any of these characters?
8. What does the book tell us about the roles of compassion, faith, and hope in medicine? According to Thomas Stone, “Words of comfort is the treatment in an emergency that is administered by ear.” Have you found this to be your experience with doctors and hospitals? Why or Why not?
9. There is a passage/part in the book where Marion is enlightened by his fellow doctors at Our Lady on why their hospital does not attract the American medical students and doctors. Do

- you think this explanation is factual? Is Ghandi's depiction accurate of our medical care educational system and hospitals today and the differences between poor hospitals and wealthy rich ones?
10. Let's talk about the relationships in this book. What are your thoughts on the following relationships: Ghosh and Hema. Sister Mary Joseph Praise and Thomas Stone. Genet and Marion. Rosina and Zemhi.
 11. What other relationships did the author write about that impacted the characters, i.e. parent and child; doctor and student; brother to brother; and the relationship of friendship.
 12. Continuing with the relationship theme throughout this novel, which relationship do you think had the biggest impact on most of the characters? For example, Hema as adoptive mother to the twins and later Genet greatly affected their lives as well as Ghosh, Rosina, and Thomas Stone.
 13. 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 end 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?
 14. This novel had a lot of emotional themes; describe any emotions that you think were central to the main characters? I would say love, guilt, betrayal, and shame were characteristics of all the main characters in this novel. Forgiveness and selfishness (selflessness) were secondary emotions.
 15. Marion suffers a series of painful betrayals—by his father, by Shiva, by Genet. To what degree is he able to forgive them?
 16. 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 explain why he abandons Shiva and Marion to the birth? How should Thomas finally be judged?
 17. So what do you think about Shiva and Marion? Although they were identical twins they were very different in some fundamental ways. Describe their differences. In what ways would you say they were alike and/or different?
 18. Almost all the characters are living in some sort of exile, self-imposed or forced, from their country—Hema and Ghosh from India, Marion from Ethiopia, Thomas from India and then Ethiopia. What do you think the author is trying to say about exile and the immigrant

experience? How does exile change these characters, and what do they find themselves missing the most about home? 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.

19. What does this book 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?
20. 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.” What is the key to Ghosh’s contentment? Do you think this is an accurate assessment of Ghosh’s life? If so, what about his unfinished business with Thomas Stone?
21. There are a number of dramatic scenes on operating tables in the book: the twin’s births, Thomas Stone amputating his own finger, Ghosh untwisting Colonel Mebratu’s volvulus, the liver transplant, etc. How does the author 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?
22. Were you surprised by the ending? If not, were there any surprises in the story for you?
23. Did you like the book? Would you recommend it? If not, why?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Cutting for Stone by Abraham Verghese

Discussion questions taken from [litlovers.com](http://www.litlovers.com)

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/239-cutting-for-stone-verghese?start=3>

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?

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?

(Questions issued by publisher.)