



# MY OWN COUNTRY

*A Doctor's Story*

ABRAHAM VERGHESE



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## **My Own Country: A Doctor's Story** Abraham Verghese

By the bestselling author of *Cutting for Stone*, a story of medicine in the American heartland, and confronting one's deepest prejudices and fears.

Nestled in the Smoky Mountains of eastern Tennessee, the town of Johnson City had always seemed exempt from the anxieties of modern American life. But when the local hospital treated its first AIDS patient, a crisis that had once seemed an urban problem had arrived in the town to stay.

Working in Johnson City was Abraham Verghese, a young Indian doctor specializing in infectious diseases. Dr. Verghese became by necessity the local AIDS expert, soon besieged by a shocking number of male and female patients whose stories came to occupy his mind, and even take over his life. Verghese brought a singular perspective to Johnson City: as a doctor unique in his abilities; as an outsider who could talk to people suspicious of local practitioners; above all, as a writer of grace and compassion who saw that what was happening in this conservative community was both a medical and a spiritual emergency."

## **My Own Country: A Doctor's Story Details**

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# From Reader Review **My Own Country: A Doctor's Story** for online ebook

## Amy says

Excellent narrative of a young doctor who -- by virtue of his infectious diseases specialty, his "foreign-ness" and his deep and utter compassion for others--becomes the "AIDS expert" in a small rural setting of East Tennessee in the mid-1980s, when the number of HIV-infected patients begins to rise. Though it's a nonfiction account, it reads like a novel while providing a fascinating and unflinching look at how AIDS affected the gay community, how it made its way from the urban centers into the rural communities -- and how the American public responded to the public health crisis. I'd give it 6 stars if I could -- I can't recommend it highly enough. One caveat, however: don't read it while you are eating, if you are squeamish.

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## Rae says

Dr. Verghese earned four of my stars for his fictional *Cutting for Stone*, but I only offer three for this memoir. He tells of his years as a rural Tennessee internist, in the era of the discovery of HIV. Verghese shares many vignettes of the HIV patients he managed and the resistance and fear often encountered in the community.

The story is historically interesting, as HIV/AIDs is discovered in urban centers and migrates silently to small-town America. Certainly Verghese performed an enormous service to the Johnson City, TN area in accepting patients otherwise shunned and educating the community concerning the illness. His story must represent many similar scenarios that played-out throughout the United States.

However.

The book became an exercise in tedium and redundancy. And sadly, I often find that physicians often come off as self-serving when presenting autobiographical material. This may be my problem, because Dr. Verghese is an excellent writer and apparently, a compassionate and gifted physician. Per his memoir. Just sayin'.

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## Ellie says

*My Own Country: A Doctor's Story* is Abraham Verghese's (author of the fictional *Cutting for Stone*) moving account of his years as a doctor in Tennessee, specializing in working with patients with AIDS. Verghese recounts his growth from a relative innocent first encountering AIDS to an exhausted veteran who has to come to terms with the fact that he could not save his patients. The years are the mid- to late-1980s and AZT is only beginning to be used at the end of this time and no other drugs have been developed.

Verghese shares the back stories of his patients in a vivid, affecting way as well as his own struggles within his marriage to a woman made uncomfortable by his contact with this deadly disease. Verghese is constantly scrutinizing his attitude towards his patients and despite his commitment to and acceptance of his patients, he wonders if he is open and accepting enough. And it is only as his patients begin to die that he fully accepts

the horror of AIDS and his helplessness in the face of it.

I found the stories fascinating and moving and was drawn to Verghese-I felt I came to know and care about him. The writing is excellent and I will read his well-received Cutting for Stone soon.

This book captures a time and trauma that are well worth thinking about. And the stories Verghese tells are powerful. This is an excellent read.

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### **Celia says**

This is a beautiful book, full of caring and empathy.

While I work on my review, please read as many of my highlights/notes as you are able.

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### **Ali Murphy says**

I read this book immediately after finishing "Cutting For Stone" because I was so impressed with Verghese's writing and by the man too.

Reading "My Own Country" you can see clearly how much Verghese's own life story informed the story of his novel - particularly the life of an immigrant doctor in the second or third tier hospitals and rural areas of the United States. You can also see how Verghese was able to write so eloquently in his novel when he writes about his connection with his patients in Johnson City, Tennessee with such poignancy and compassion.

"My Own Country" reads like a novel as Verghese follows several of the first AIDS patients in Johnson City through the early years of the AIDS epidemic. The stories he shares are touching and frightening and it is all leavened with heavy doses of self-reference, doubt and personal pain from Verghese to make it utterly compelling. I am looking forward to eventually reading Verghese's third book. I can highly recommend the two books I have read by this author.

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### **Linda says**

Okay - so my brother Greg recommended I read Abraham Verghese's "Cutting For Stone". Since Greg has excellent literary taste I looked up the book and recommended it to many of my friends. However, I was "afraid" to read it because I thought it might make me sad. So instead I decided to read his non-fiction account of treating AIDs in Tennessee during the 1980s, "My Own Country". Cause yeah that wouldn't be sad! My gracious friend Molly had a copy of the book which she lent to me. I just finished it and had to share it with you (because I have no life outside of books!).

It is an amazing book. Verghese took a sabbatical after his AIDs experience and attended the Iowa Writer's workshop. I suspect the emotional honesty and self-reflection in this book came about in part, from his experience there. He writes so openly about his journey from typical hetero ignorance of gay culture, the humbling experience of being a doctor who could offer no treatment to his patients, learning how to help

patients die a good death and the strain on his marriage. And yet, gut wrenching as this all was, the bigger impression made on me was how Verghese, his patients and the medical staff grew stronger throughout the book.

Reading this was also a great refresher for me on how shamefully AIDs was handled by the government, the medical profession and society in general. Here in the US AIDs has a much lower profile now, infection rates have stabilized, infection routes and risks are better known and we can treat some aspects of the disease. Because of this I tend to forget the fear and hysteria of those early years. I think it is important to remember how big an impact denial and bigotry can have on our response to a crisis.

The book also reminded me of my experiences working on AIDs in the pharmaceutical industry. Back in the late 80's the little research firm I worked for got the contract on one of the first AIDs drugs. Most of our data entry staff were country girls from Nelson County, VA. They were poorly educated and extremely conservative. The data we entered on the drug contained information on the sexual habits of the AIDs patients. How many partners, what type of sex, how frequent the sex. This was being recorded in an attempt to determine infection rates and routes. I remember listening the entry staff express their disgust over this data and distaste for these patients. But as the study continued I heard their comments change. Although these patients were only anonymous numbers on a page, we all became caught up with their struggle. We followed their weight loss and gain, their battle with infections, their hospitalizations, and often their deaths. By the end of the study the entry staff were crying when the patients died. We all were. In the end our study failed, the drug had no effect on the AIDs virus. We were all so depressed that management held a company wide meeting to discuss the failure, and to remind us that other drugs were coming down the pipeline. AZT was approved not long after that.

So - read the book if you get a chance. It is great! And maybe now I will work up my emotional courage and tackle "Cutting For Stone".

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### **Carolinecarver says**

Verghese is amazing...great writer, albeit a little detail overloaded--sometimes you get the feeling he is practicing his writing. Be that as it may, he is clearly a caring doctor on the cusp of what will become the AIDS epidemic of our time. Takes place in Tennessee where the first cases of AIDS reach his rural community, and the sense of place is as real as the people he treats. Insightful, sympathetic and exhausting all at once.

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### **Diane says**

I decided to read this book for two reasons. One, I really enjoyed Verghese's "Cutting for Stone," and two, a medical student (now MD) friend that I highly respect told me this book had influenced his career choices. The book was full of complexity for me and I related to the story on many levels. I have a long-standing interest in public health, so the story of AIDS coming to a rural southern town was quite powerful. The story covers about 1982-1990 so AIDS was not understood and basically untreatable for most that time. I loved that Verghese really got to know his patients and was aware of the cultural issues of AIDS in a small, rural community. There was a sense of being a doctor at another time and place – like being the leprosy doctor in the middle ages or being my father in rural Saskatchewan in the 1920's with nothing to do for pneumonia (or

so many other conditions) but hold the patient's hand and be there at the bedside. I loved that Verghese loved his small, southern town, that his best friend was a red-neck gas station owner, that he considered it "his country."

Another piece of the book that was important for me was the actual medical information – how he approached each patient and what the procedures were like and what the side effects of drugs might be. He describes in detail the deaths of many of the patients – that sounds dramatic, but it did not seem that way to me. I am facing the death of my husband within the next 6 -12 months and my husband and I have talked a lot about how we want to die and so many of the issues are brought home in Verghese's descriptions. Again, he loves his patient and he cares about how they live and how they die and how the caretakers are cared for.

And, I related to his difficult introspection about what a doctor should do – what does he owe to his patients, to himself, to his wife, to his family. My father was an obstetrician in solo practice in the 1940's and 1950's when I was growing up. He was not home a lot, but he was beloved by his patients. For years I was often called "Dr. McKenzie's daughter" as if I had no name and no identity except through him. He was a kind, and gentle person. My best image (theoretical not a true image) of my relationship with him is that he is sitting on a stool surrounded by his patients and they are all asking him questions and he is talking to each of them and touching their hands and smiling at them. I am way at the back of the circle raising my hand and trying to get him to notice me. I felt that Verghese's wife and to a lesser extent his children (they are very young still) are in that same position – "Call on me! I am here too!" He knows this, but doesn't know what to do about it. He is torn and agonizes over what to do.

Incredible detail, beautifully told and agonizingly real.

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### **Melisa says**

This book pretty much fits the bill for my absolute favorite type of reading: passionate people writing beautifully about whatever they care most about and the way in which they are transformed by that caring. Also I love a good medical memoir so I hit the jackpot with this one.

I looked for this book after reading Verghese's *Cutting for Stone* recently. That novel was brilliant and, as I didn't want it to end, I went looking for more of Verghese's writing. It would be hard for me to say which book I enjoyed more. The novel was lovely and engaging, but the real life memoir was no less so.

There are so many themes in this book that it's hard to pin them all down but Verghese's exploration of what it means to belong to a place is perhaps the most poignant.

The book is filled with well drawn portraits of individuals struck by the first wave of HIV/AIDS and we get a sense of how both a doctor and a community are transformed.

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### **Linda says**

If I could give it a 6 I would...stories and passion from the frontlines of the AIDs epidemic in areas that were unknown and uncovered, not the big cities, but the small towns where there was much less support and recognition...but then maybe not.

"I have lived for five years in a culture of disease, a small island in a sea of fear. I have seen many things there. I have seen how life speeds up and heightens in climates of extreme pain and emotion. It is hard to live in these circumstances, despite the acts of tenderness that can lighten everything. But it is also hard to pull away from the extreme, from life lived far from mundane conversation. Never before AIDS and Johnston City have I felt so close to love and pain, so connected to other people."

"My tools - the hammer, the flashlight, the stethoscope - are scattered on his bed. As I pick them up one by one, I realize that all I had to offer Luther was the ritual of the examination, this dance of a Western shaman. Now the dance is over, and the beeps and blips of monitors register again, as does the bored voice of an operator on the overhead speaker summoning someone stat."

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## **Rachael says**

Wow - a fascinating account of one doctor's experience during ground-zero of the AIDS epidemic. Incredibly well-written and personal, Verghese paints a captivating picture of the utter fear, devastation, and hope in the early days of AIDS.

A specialist in infectious diseases, Verghese did not anticipate that his life in rural Johnson City, Tennessee would soon be consumed by AIDS. The disease was thought to be a problem of the big cities on the coasts. And of the gay community, which was nearly invisible in Johnson City. At a time of great scientific investment and medical advances, it was also believed that a cure was right around the corner.

When HIV/AIDS patients began trickling into Verghese's practice, very little was known about the disease and treatment was essentially nonexistent. His accounts of watching patients deteriorate and eventually succumb to the disease were heartbreaking; a doctor with no cure.

As the de facto AIDS expert of Johnson City, Verghese's work soon became all consuming. He quickly realized that this disease required more than the typical impersonal clinical experience. He made a major effort to get to know his patients, to hear their stories. He developed friendships with some and made house calls. He advocated for their participation in Duke's first AZT studies. And he spent significant amounts of time engaging the public about AIDS prevention. All this came at a great personal toll. This was not the life his wife signed up for and towards the end of the book, his marriage began unraveling.

An immigrant of Indian descent from Ethiopia, Verghese's integration and separation from the community at large was also very interesting. Surprisingly few incidents of racism occurred, but he still often felt like an outsider.

Along the way, it was interesting to witness Verghese struggle with various issues. Confronting homophobia (his own and that of the community), struggling with end-of-life care, and (rather unsuccessfully) attempting a work-life balance.

I don't throw this word around easily, but Verghese is a hero. At a time when the medical community didn't know how HIV was spread (or even what it was), Verghese dove in and provided intensely personal care.

His drive to help his patients went above and beyond the call of duty. His work made a profound impact on the patients and their families. I look forward to reading more from him.

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## **Lori says**

Am I a book snob?

Because I'm finding that as I read a book, like this one, I keep asking myself why someone would waste so many words to say, essentially, nothing that sheds light on the story.

Why do I need to know every time the author got in his car to go somewhere, that he turned right on such and such street, then left onto that highway, and then there was a bend in the road...

For real?

I understand that he was trying to give the reader a sense of 'His Country,' but it became excessive. He often went on long tangents to describe things, like the intricacies of a tobacco business, that, in the end, lent nothing to the story. I kept feeling like I was traveling down a road, fully expecting it to go somewhere, only to find that I had to mentally back myself out of a dead end and re-orient myself to the story.

And oh, my with the naming of every bit of flora and fauna!

This is not to say the book was completely uninteresting. Many parts were enjoyable. The book is best in its opening pages when the reader is brought right into a mysterious medical case. The stories he tells of his work with AIDS patients, and about the patients themselves are often interesting and sometimes even insightful.

But by the middle of the book, the story still isn't turning. The author is still introducing the reader to new patients. You begin to sense that the book is going to carry on the same way until the end: he is going to keep stringing stories of patients together, breaking the monotony by throwing in passages about the scenery in rural Tennessee or brief, predictable updates on his failing marriage (which never seem to bring him to much personal reflection or action.)

The strength of the book is that it gives people with AIDS faces, stories, lives. I appreciated that, and found most of their stories at least interesting.

I give it two stars because I really liked it in the beginning, waited for the story to 'come around' in the middle, and read to the end only because I didn't want to leave another book unfinished.

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## **Shelah says**

Abraham Verghese's Cutting for Stone was one of the best books I read last year. I'm not sure if it was my very favorite, but it was in the top two or three, for sure.



Although *Cutting for Stone* was fiction, *My Own Country* is a memoir, focusing on the years when Verghese, born in Africa to Indian parents, is a young infectious diseases doctor in rural Eastern Tennessee, right at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. As one of the only physicians in the area willing and able to take care of the men and women suffering from the disease, Verghese becomes almost like part of their families as he nurses them to their deaths.

This may sound cheesy, but Abraham Verghese has a gift. As I read the Whitney books, I read a lot of good, solid books by good, solid writers. But when I read for my own pleasure, I tend to read mostly what others have recommended as the best of the best. As a general rule, the quality of the writing in the things I normally read is a degree higher than the quality of what I read in the month of March. Abraham Verghese's writing definitely falls on the highest end of my spectrum, even when that spectrum is comprised many of the good stuff. I know that lots of writers (and I'm sure Verghese would include himself in this group) become good by working hard and revising and thinking and putting in sweat equity. But there's just something about the way he writes that makes me want more. In fact, I just ordered his other memoir.

Another thing I think I thought was interesting about *My Own Country* is the way that Verghese treats his relationship with his wife Rajani. During the years that the book takes place, he and Rajani go from being happily married to realizing that their marriage has problems. By the time the memoir was published, the couple was divorced. So I think it's interesting for him to write about some of the good years of their marriage (both of their sons are born during the Tennessee years) from the perspective of someone who is newly divorced. Although I don't think he shrinks from his role in the collapse of the marriage, he also doesn't portray Rajani as the "and she never complained" kind of self-sacrificing spouse that people like doctors and bishops are supposed to have.

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## **Ben says**

I wasn't expecting much literary prowess from a book I was required to read for medical school, but was pleasantly surprised by Dr. Verghese's seminal account of treating AIDS patients in 1980s rural Tennessee. His accounts delve into so many of the nuanced issues surrounding medicine: patient-doctor relationships, cultural values, work-life balance, but what makes him a good writer (and no doubt a good physician as well) is his painstaking attention to detail. He puts you into his head during the diagnostic process, showing you how the minutest details can lead him to his diagnosis. Above all, one can sense the love he has for his patients. He is concerned with more than just prescribing drugs; Dr. Verghese genuinely desires to understand his patients and soak in their stories. As a nascent medical student, Verghese's account serves as an inspiration as I begin my own career in medicine.

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## **Reid says**

This is a fine book about the early days of the HIV epidemic, and how perplexed and conflicted many were as they came to terms with their own feelings and reactions to the disease and those who contracted it. However, it also is a book in the longstanding tradition of HIV books that are self-congratulatory, maudlin, and self-pitying. The irony of HIV has often been that, while pleading for it to be treated as just another disease in order to normalize those who suffer from it rather than marginalizing them, those who work with HIV patients have simultaneously asked for special treatment, special consideration, and willingly accepted the badge of sainthood conferred upon them. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that I am a

Registered Nurse who has been dealing with HIV patients intermittently for 20 years, and exclusively for the last 10).

Verghese has fallen into this trap, that of the HIV provider as somehow outside the mainstream, isolated and therefore both special and persecuted, taking onto himself burdens impossible for any one man to bear alone, all in the name of serving his clients. But in the process, he (rather predictably) neglects his family, threatens his career, and eventually burns out to the point that he must abandon his beloved clients completely! That he does so with some rather lame philosophizing only makes the whole matter less forgivable rather than more.

As a story, this is a sad one, well told, skillfully written, though when he enters into the long slog of caring for patients with a chronic disease, the author's interest seems to wane, and therefore ours does, too. But as a story of HIV, it is both self-serving and dishonest; Verghese seems to have little stomach for self-examination or self-criticism, only for justification and self-indulgence. A shame, really, for this could have been a much better book but for that.

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### **Shannon says**

I read this book after reading "Cutting for Stone;" I wanted to know more about the author who had penned one of my favorite books and what his real life was like. What I found was an intriguing story of what it is like to be an infectious disease doctor treating patients for which there is no known cure. Verghese struggled with all sorts of questions: How do you help prepare your patients for the inevitable? How do you council them through the ostracism of friends and family? How do you change your own views on homosexuality and see the individuals for who they are?

Despite the sadness of the topic, the book brings out real stories of human courage in the face of adversity. It peers into the depths of what it is that makes us human - our frailties and our surprising strengths.

And the science geek that I am ... my favorite parts were the little pieces of medical knowledge. How the doctor can tell just by shaking your hand what kind of shape your thyroid might be in. Of course, I'm now suspicious of any doctor who doesn't shake my hand on the way in to the exam room.

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### **Emmi says**

This is the story of the author's work with AIDS patients in eastern Tennessee in the 1980's. It was a horrifying time, when there were no treatments (and then finally there was AZT) and when family, friends, clergy, and medical professionals shunned HIV positive people and people with AIDS. The author describes some of his patients, his relationship with them, and how being "the AIDS doctor" impacted his personal and professional life. It was a good and difficult read.

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### **Phyllis says**

In the 1980's when HIV was spreading around the country a young doctor by the name of Abraham Verghese started his practice in a community in Tennessee. Very little was known about HIV at the time and there was no cure and only minimal treatment. Verghese is an Indian doctor who grew up in Africa and studied in

Boston. When he came to Johnson City, TN and I am quoting the blurb on the back of the book. . ."as a doctor unique in his abilities; as an outsider who could talk to people suspicious of local practitioners; above all as a writer of grace and compassion who saw that what was happening in this conservative community was both a medical and spiritual emergency".

I learned so much from this book. He is such an intelligent and thoughtful physician. Grace and compassion.

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## **Bill says**

My Own Country, a memoir by Abraham Verghese, uniquely describes the experience of an immigrant physician with the culture of Appalachia as he confronts the devastating medical and personal consequences of AIDS as AIDS patients sought his care as an infectious disease specialist in the 1980's. These patients grew up in the hills of east Tennessee, fled the ostracism towards gays there, and went to the cities of New York, Atlanta, and San Francisco. There, they felt liberated, accepted in the gay culture. However, they unwittingly caught HIV there and slowly lost their energy, weight, and ability to work. They came back home where their families struggled with their suffering, their lifestyle choices, and their dying.

The author, a physician raised in Ethiopia by Indian parents, adopts Tennessee as his "own country," but finds that his foreignness and his willingness to accept gay patients raises a barrier to his acceptance by the local culture. Nevertheless, he goes beyond the technical medical doctoring to become engaged with the lives, the fears, the suffering of these varied, interesting, and tragic patients.

As such, he reminds me that medicine that includes the stories, the feelings, the relationships, the histories of the patients is far more interesting and meaningful than just treating the physical problems traditionally seen as the scope of medicine.

His story reveals that there is a cost to this approach: time and commitment. The author's choice cost him his marriage. The challenge implied in his memoir to doctors like me is to be a connected, caring physician without destroying personal non-medical relationships and burning out like he did. I have found renewal in exploring my patient's hopes and fears, triumphs and disasters in my daily work as a family physician as I remember Verghese's own hopes, fears, triumphs, and disasters that he authentically shares with the reader.

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## **Ron says**

The author of this book is an Indian doctor, working at a hospital in Johnson city, Tennessee, at the start of the AIDS epidemic. His account is of being the only infectious diseases physician in a rural community at a time when the first wave of HIV-positive gay men were returning to their hometowns from New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. His observations of the men and women who come to him for care, and the relationships that have grown between them, are insightful and vivid. Though he is heterosexual and married with two small children, his intuitive compassion for people with AIDS is a lesson in what it is to be nonjudgmental.

However, the crisis for him is to live in a place and time where his curiosity and compassion are shared by almost no one else, both within and outside his professional community. Through his work, he comes to a

deeper understanding of homophobia and the irrationality that drives people's fear of disease and disability. As an African-born Indian, happily Americanized, he finds in the social isolation of his patients something of his own status as an "outsider." We also see the demands that professional commitments can make on marriage and parenting.

An outgoing and obviously dedicated, self-sacrificing physician, the author is slowly overcome by the growing solitude of his professional and personal journey and the weariness of battling a disease with no cure. Although sometimes a triumph of dignity against all odds, the deaths of his patients are heart-breaking. This is a richly detailed book full of suspense, sorrow, and humor and beautifully written.

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