Wyoming High School Book Rationale

Title: Cutting for Stone **Author:** Abraham Verghese

- **Intended Audience:**
  - Junior / Senior Students
- **Brief Summary and Educational Significance:**
  - Summary: *Cutting for Stone* is an epic novel that follows the lives of twin brothers, Marion and Shiva Stone, born under extraordinary circumstances to a secret union between a beautiful Indian nun and a British surgeon at Missing Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Narrated by Marion, the novel spans several decades and two continents, chronicling the brothers' upbringing in Ethiopia, their complex relationship, their shared passion for medicine, and Marion's eventual journey to America. The narrative weaves together themes of identity, family, love, betrayal, and the practice of medicine as both science and art.
  - It is important to note that *Cutting for Stone* has been widely celebrated as a contemporary masterpiece, spending years on bestseller lists and earning critical acclaim for its ambitious scope and emotional depth. The novel is regularly taught in high school AP courses and college literature classes, and has been praised by medical schools and healthcare organizations for its powerful portrayal of the medical vocation. Verghese's background as both a physician and a literary artist allows him to create a work that is both medically accurate and deeply humane.
  - This novel offers exceptional educational value for our AP Literature curriculum. Verghese, himself a physician and professor of medicine, brings remarkable authenticity to his exploration of the medical profession while crafting a deeply literary work that demonstrates sophisticated narrative techniques. The novel's structure—moving between Ethiopia and America, between childhood and adulthood, between medical case study and family saga—provides students with an excellent example of how

contemporary authors create expansive, multi-layered narratives that operate on multiple thematic levels simultaneously.

- ➢ *Cutting for Stone* enriches our curriculum's exploration of identity formation, particularly examining how family secrets, cultural displacement, and professional calling shape individual lives. The novel offers a rare and valuable literary window into African settings, specifically Ethiopia during a period of significant political upheaval, broadening students' understanding of postcolonial African literature and challenging Western-centric narratives. As a work that treats medicine as both vocation and metaphor, it explores how we attempt to heal physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds, making sophisticated use of medical terminology and procedures as literary symbols. The novel also provides rich material for discussing themes of brotherhood, forgiveness, destiny versus choice, and the immigrant experience—all central concerns of contemporary American literature.

- ❖ **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used:**
  - ➢ The novel will be used to develop the college-level critical thinking, literary analysis and composition skills necessary for the AP Literature and Composition Exam. The book provides students with a rich text that uses a wide range of literary strategies (motif, allusion, non-linear structure, etc.) that can be used to successfully answer any literary analysis free response question.
- ❖ **Potential Problems:**
  - ➢ *Cutting for Stone* contains mature content appropriate for our junior and senior students but which requires thoughtful preparation. The novel includes detailed descriptions of medical procedures, surgeries, injuries, and illnesses, some of which are graphic and may be disturbing to squeamish readers. There are scenes depicting childbirth complications, including the traumatic circumstances of the twins' birth that result in their mother's death, as well as descriptions of other medical emergencies and surgical procedures throughout the novel.

- ➢ The text addresses sexual content, including a sexual relationship between the twins' parents (a nun and a surgeon), Marion's own sexual experiences as a young adult, and a sexual assault that is central to the plot and has devastating consequences for multiple characters. There are depictions of political violence, including scenes related to the Ethiopian revolution with references to imprisonment, torture, and execution. The novel also includes underage drinking and references to substance use.
- ➢ The novel addresses infidelity, betrayal, and complex ethical questions surrounding medical practice, including a controversial surgery performed without full consent. Some medical content involves genital surgery and female genital mutilation, discussed in clinical but frank terms. Additionally, the novel's length (over 650 pages), dense medical terminology, and complex plot spanning multiple decades and continents may challenge some readers.
- ➢ The novel includes characters who engage in premarital sex and depicts a romantic relationship that begins when one character is still married to another, which may conflict with some families' values. There are also frank discussions of human anatomy and bodily functions that, while presented in medical contexts, are more explicit than content in many high school texts.

❖ **Addressing Potential Problems:**

- ➢ We will prepare students for the medical content by explaining that Verghese writes from his expertise as a physician and that the detailed medical descriptions serve important narrative and thematic purposes. We will discuss how these passages demonstrate Verghese's commitment to authenticity and how medical procedures function symbolically in the novel. For students who are particularly squeamish, we will provide advance notice of especially graphic medical scenes and discuss strategies for engaging with the content at a level comfortable for them—such as skimming technical details while understanding the scene's narrative significance.

- To address the sexual assault that occurs in the novel, we will provide appropriate context, emphasizing that Verghese treats this event with seriousness and that it has profound, lasting consequences for all involved characters. Our discussion will focus on how the novel explores trauma, guilt, and the long process of healing and forgiveness. We will analyze how Verghese handles this content responsibly, showing its impact without gratuitous detail, and how it connects to the novel's larger themes about wounds—both physical and emotional—and the limits of medicine to heal all injuries.
- Regarding the sexual content more broadly, we will contextualize these elements as part of the characters' adult lives and development. The novel treats sexuality as a natural part of human experience while also examining how desire, love, and betrayal intersect in complex ways. Our discussions will maintain an analytical focus on how these relationships drive plot and reveal character rather than dwelling unnecessarily on explicit details.
- During the reading students will explore historical context about the Ethiopian revolution and the period of political instability known as the Red Terror. This helps students understand that the novel's portrayal of violence is grounded in historical reality and serves to illuminate a period of African history that is often overlooked in American education. We will discuss how Verghese uses these historical events to create tension and to explore themes of exile, displacement, and loss.
- The novel's treatment of female genital mutilation will be addressed frankly, but sensitively, explaining that this practice is a real issue affecting millions of girls and women globally, and that Verghese's inclusion of this content serves to educate readers about a serious human rights concern. We will discuss how the novel approaches this topic from a medical and ethical perspective, examining how the characters respond to this practice and what the novel suggests about cultural practices that harm women.

- ➢ Ultimately, *Cutting for Stone* is a novel about love in its many forms—romantic love, brotherly love, parental love, and the love that drives healers to dedicate their lives to caring for others. It explores how we are shaped by our origins while insisting that we have agency in determining our destinies. The novel celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, the possibility of forgiveness, and the ways that communities and families—both biological and chosen—sustain us through hardship. Marion's journey from abandoned child to skilled surgeon, from betrayed brother to someone capable of profound forgiveness, demonstrates the transformative power of compassion and self-knowledge.

Prizes/ Awards / Honors:

- Indies Choice Book Award (Adult Fiction, 2010)
- Shortlisted for the Wellcome Trust Book Prize (2009)
- Longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award (2011)
- A *New York Times* bestseller for over two years

The author, Abraham Verghese, personally received the National Humanities Medal in 2016 and a Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities in 2014, for his body of work and contributions to medicine/humanities.

Professional Review:

- *Cutting for Stone*: The Historical Novel Society review calls it an "intensely emotional book" by an author with a "reverence for the medical profession". It is praised for its "lovely intermingling of cultures—Indian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Italian" and offers an "unflinching glimpse into the real world of third-world medicine". While it may have a few "overwrought moments," the novel is an emotionally satisfying and "heartbreakingly lovely" read.