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[rounds](#)
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His Own Country

By [Gene Bryan Johnson](#)

Posted July 26, 2000



Clarity from the outside

At the beginning of his career, novelist and journalist Abraham Verghese, MD, fell into the same trap as many physicians who write. Doctors are privy to their patients' most private secrets, and fight what Verghese describes as a "primal instinct" to share the "prurient details" of their health, sex lives, and drug and alcohol use. To give in to this instinct, fictionalizing to protect the innocent, is simply succumbing to a "sort of juvenile urge." Such an approach offers the writer little more than "a keyhole onto the patient. I speak to many physicians who have this urge," he recalls. "They're either writing, or have finished a manuscript, or are thinking about it, but the challenge is to get beneath this surface fascination and extract a message on the larger scale."

But if Verghese excels at bringing his readers into an inner sanctum, he remains an outsider, a fate seemingly decreed at birth. Born in 1955 in Ethiopia to South Indian parents, he expected to spend his life in a country that "wasn't mine." His medical education began there but was interrupted around his 18th birthday, as the family fled Ethiopia's increasingly dangerous political climate and settled in the United States. After a few years working as a hospital orderly, he enrolled at India's Madras Medical College again finding himself not fitting in. "There were some strong feelings," he says, "that this was my *parent's* country and not quite mine."

In September 1999 Verghese returned, for the first time since 1973, to the land of his birth. The decades had not lessened the crisis in Ethiopia. Famine threatens the lives of millions, and a border war with its former province Eritrea has killed tens of thousands. The diversion of health care resources to the war effort will likely make the situation worse before it gets better.

Verghese made a point of spending time with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, a medical school classmate who'd lived in the bush for two

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A medical school classmate had waged guerilla war in the bush for two decades.



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decades while waging a guerilla war for Ethiopian democracy. The visit became a moving portrait of the war-torn nation in *Talk* magazine. "The war is meaningless to most of us," Verghese says, but for the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea sovereignty is something you "must absolutely defend."

The trip to Africa was emotionally charged but did not make Abraham feel as though he'd gone *home*. With some sadness, he felt secure in the knowledge that his home was now in America, fulfilling the titles of his first book: *My Own Country*.

Friendship and loss

Set in the mid 1980s in Johnson City, Tennessee, [My Own Country: A Doctor's Story](#) (Vintage) depicts an America in crisis. Verghese had quickly become the only AIDS doctor in Johnson City at a time when AIDS was a mysterious and incurable illness. With so little understood scientifically, the illness told us as much about ourselves as it did about those who were infected and sentenced to die. His outsider status as a physician of Indian heritage in the South helped him to find, and ultimately write, a compelling story of ignorance, fear, bigotry, compassion, and dignity in small-town America. His accomplishment is in allowing, insisting even, that the reader experience reality by becoming immersed in the world of these ordinary people who are struggling against an unfathomable disease. He writes with a rich sensuality. "He is a very precise writer who is intelligently sensitive and exhibits a generosity of spirit toward humans in the dilemma of their mortality," says Frank Conroy. "He's very good at letting us feel things."

Though Verghese's heart was in writing fiction (he likes to point out that his first published work was a short story in *The New Yorker* a remarkable feat for a new writer), the success of *My Own Country* had the publisher demanding more of the same and quick. He resisted, insisting that if he were to write nonfiction it would have to be "something that I witnessed and was somehow transformed by." Again, events in his own life planted the seeds of inspiration.

[The Tennis Partner: A Story of Friendship and Loss](#) (HarperCollins, 1998) is the true story of Verghese's relationship with a senior resident who passes through the infectious disease service of El Paso's Texas Tech Hospital, where Verghese was working. The writer's first marriage was about to end, and he found security in the ritual of regular tennis matches with the younger physician, once a player on the pro tour. By the end of the book, David has committed suicide after repeated relapses into cocaine addiction.

The ministry

And Abraham has known about his friend's problem. He did nothing because he had no insight into the nature of chronic drug abuse. "It's absolutely typical of people who have gotten involved in someone else's addiction," he insists apologetically. "You get caught up in their denial, forget that it's a disease, and look at it as a weakness of an individual." Verghese says he's filled with guilt over David's death, and if given another chance "would turn him in in a



My Own Country had the publisher demanding more and quick.



"You get caught up in their

heartbeat."

After David's death Verghese went to visit the Talbott- Marsh Recovery Campus in suburban Atlanta, a facility for doctors who have bottomed out. "There were these 80 physicians sitting in a big circle. My first realization was that I could not in any way distinguish myself from this community. They were the most talented, caring, educated, and empathetic men and women in medicine. When they started to tell their stories I was absolutely astounded by the degree of depravity they found themselves helpless against." This was a story he could write.

Verghese is compelled by "issues of loyalty, trust, fairness, and the mileage that people get, from playing or not playing, the game and how that balance is corrected, if at all." Verghese likes to say that he is not a physician/writer or writer/physician. The roles are seamless. "The ministry of healing has much in common with writing," he says. "Patients are looking for resolution to their crisis. I think many times the role of the doctor is to help them come to the epiphany in their story, which may be the acceptance that there is no resolution: this is how the story is meant to end."

Gene Bryan Johnson, is editor of digital media at *The Daily Deal*, a financial newspaper and website. He has reported on health care, politics, business and the law for *National Public Radio*.



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[The Reading Group Center of Vintage Books](#) This reading guide, provided by Vintage Books, includes analytical information about *My Own Country*, a short biography of author Abraham Verghese, and a link to the Random House website. <http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/country/>

[New York University's Literature and Medicine](#) This site presents a summary and comment on Dr. Verghese's *The Tennis Partner* along with conversations with Dr. Verghese (text and audio) on friendship, understanding addiction, and meeting his former partner. <http://mchip00.nyu.edu/lit-med/lit-med-db/webdocs/webdescrips/verghese1371-des-.html>

[Salon Health and Body: "Tell me where it hurts"](#) Is it ethical for a doctor-turned-writer to use his patients for material? Amy O'Connor's interview with Dr. Verghese covers ethics, HIV, and the physician as storyteller. http://www.salon.com/health/books/1999/11/15/verghese_interview/index.html

[India-born Abraham Verghese's latest book, *The Tennis Partner*](#) A detailed review from a 1998 *Financial Express* (India) of Dr. Verghese's book, and a short discussion of how his life and practice fed the story. <http://www.financialexpress.com/ie/daily/19980910/25350604.html>

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denial."



Verghese is not a physician/writer. The roles are seamless.



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