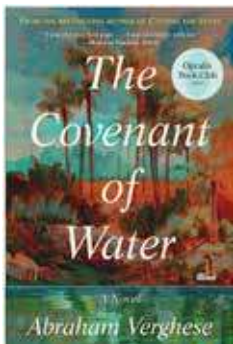


# Book Reviews

Jack Coulehan, MD, MPH, and Raymond Barfield, MD, PhD, Book Review Editors



## The Covenant of Water

Abraham Verghese  
Grove Press  
May 2, 2023, 736 pp.

Reviewed by E. Wesley Ely, MD,  
MPH (ΑΩΑ, Tulane University  
School of Medicine, 1989)

All students in the bonds of medicine should be lucky enough to be taught by a master clinician. My mentor was Dr. C. Thorpe Ray (ΑΩΑ, University of Texas Medical Branch School of Medicine, 1940), a six-foot tall balding icon with deep set eyes, who was always draped in his stethoscope, and trailed by a dozen knowledge-hungry students when he diagnosed and taught on the wards of Charity Hospital in New Orleans. As the heat beat through this 250-year-old refuge for the suffering in the steamy South, Ray stood by the brown, paint-chipped, metal bed rails in Charity's 19-bed open wards and challenged us, "I bet you a bowl of gumbo that I can feel with my hypothenar eminence any murmur you can hear." He never lost that bet.

Abraham Verghese, MD (ΑΩΑ, East Tennessee State University Quillen College of Medicine, 1989, Faculty), became one of the world's Master Clinicians when he gifted us the opportunity to explore the human condition through his latest novel, *The Covenant of Water*. His fourth book burst onto the scene 14 years after the stunning love story and medical saga, *Cutting for Stone*.

*Covenant* is an epic journey set primarily in India, channeling the reader through three generations of love and sorrow over 80 years of the 20th century. The cast of characters is so expansive I had to draw a family tree on the book's inside cover, watching with admiration as the arms eventually converged.

The tale takes readers briefly from India to Scotland, where a budding surgeon claws his way past the memory of a gut-wrenching suicide, then back to Cochin and Travancore on the shores of the Arabian Sea. There, a young bride, snatched from childhood into an arranged marriage to a much older man, inches her way toward matriarchy. Big Ammachi (as she comes to be called, meaning big mother) and her family are battling inner demons, hoping to avoid hardship while sensing, because of a family curse

known as "The Condition," that doom awaits them in the waters of the next monsoon.

The theme of water as both giver of life and bearer of death runs throughout the novel. Water-born illnesses bring entire communities to their knees. As I read, I was reminded of a time when I was in Haiti during a deadly cholera outbreak spread by drinking water—and yet we and other medical teams across the country needed liter upon liter of water to save thousands of patients' lives. The circumstances of death in Big Ammachi's family present a mystery to the reader because of the varied ways they involve water.

This is where Verghese's master stroke as a writer comes into play. He's a graduate of the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop. Verghese has an extraordinary ability to weave metaphors and similes as instruments to unveil the intricacies of human story.

Verghese invests enormous writing capital to provide lagniappe found in seemingly insignificant scenes such as one describing the trunk of an elephant greeting Ammachi, the scared and lonely child bride, early in the story:

The nostrils look so human, fringed by paler freckled skin, as delicate as a lip, yet as nimble and dexterous as two fingers; it snuffles at her chest, tickles her elbow, then traces a path to her face...hot exhalations puff down on her like benedictions. The scent is something out of the Old Testament. Noiselessly, the trunk withdraws.<sup>p19</sup>

The cast of diseases in *Covenant* proves thick and flowing. I kept a running list on the back cover as I read, and it is more than 40 items long. "The children have bones that break easily, and the whites of their eyes have a light-blue tinge."<sup>p79</sup> Osteogenesis imperfecta.<sup>p186</sup> "Her voice is so hoarse. And her skin is different, puffy."<sup>p186</sup> Plus short stature and an umbilical hernia...Cretinism.

But what of "The Condition" itself, with its symbol of a person laid out like a cross with three squiggles of water inscribed onto the family tree below each person who succumbed to this illness? Is it psychosomatic?

The word "covenant," so prominent in the title, commands long-standing importance to the healing art of medicine. When physicians take the Hippocratic Oath, they say "covenant" three times, for example: "I will fulfill according to my ability and judgment this oath and this covenant."

Edmund Pellegrino, MD (ΑΩΑ, NYU Grossman School of Medicine, 1944), one of the greatest medical bioethicists, taught that patients and physicians enter

a moral covenant grounded in beneficence, while Sir William Osler claimed this covenant to be medicine's primary distinguishing feature. Actions at the bedside must be generated by, and directed toward, fulfillment of this covenant between patient and physician.

While one doctor fails his patient miserably due to ego and pride, three physicians in Verghese's novel manifest the true value of covenant: a Swede named Rune Orqvist, a Scot named Digby Kilgour, and an Indian named Mariamma. Each of them fulfills the proclamation made by a priest: "I believe God brought you here and revealed to you your life mission."<sup>p197</sup> And each of their missions is linked by the marvel of the human hand.

Harkening back to Isaac Newton, Rune declares, "The thumb alone would prove the existence of God,"<sup>p201</sup> and he ultimately follows a path of humanism in founding St. Bridget's Leprosarium. St. Bridget's is where Digby, a masterful surgeon stricken by fires of ill decision, convalesces after his hands, the "ruined tools" of his trade, present themselves to Rune.

Digby's recuperation is directed by Rune into the capable hands of a child prodigy, Elsie, who rebuilds his dexterity by showing him how to grip charcoal between his thumb and fingers. She, a masterful artist, brings Digby's hands to life on canvas. Additionally, she rebuilds his soul by other wonders.

Mariamma, the youngest of the three key physicians in the novel, uses the portal of post-mortem hand dissections in a medical research lab to unravel knots in the lives of others suffering from The Condition.

Bad weather, disaster, and death shock readers at every turn. Verghese also doesn't shy away from wounds imposed by social injustices in the country of his birth. The caste system is brought front and center through discussion of how the "kind" owners of the enslaved in India had the greatest difficulty seeing discrimination and were "blind to the system of slavery that they created, they maintained, and that favored them."<sup>p487</sup>

In the darkness of sorrow, *Covenant* shines unexpected rays of light and rebirth. Rune, the true physician, finds his priesthood by tending to the lame, and dies while singing. He, Digby, and Elsie manage—amid the chaos and burden of disease—to find silence, touch, and true presence in the walls of the Leprosarium. "To love the sick—isn't that always the first step?"<sup>p254</sup> Verghese weaves intricate intersections between his characters to emphasize what all in medicine (and life) must know: "Before we treat the flesh, we must acknowledge the greater wound, the one to the spirit."<sup>p255</sup> We come to

understand how "one can witness a spirit heal...just as much as one can see a wound heal."<sup>p263</sup>

The St. Thomas Christians populating the pages of *Covenant* no doubt understand that the most important acts that bind us as humans are small expressions of wonder in the ordinary circumstances of our days. My wife and I care for her brother, Greg, a 58-year-old with Down syndrome, and he teaches us every day by his spontaneous, tiny gestures of kindness about the beauty of simplicity. I was reminded of Greg while reading when Baby Mol declares one morning, "Ammachi, the sun is coming up!"<sup>p237</sup> Reflecting on this moment, Verghese reveals his pearl of great price: "For twenty-eight years of Baby Mol's life, the sun has never failed to come up, yet every morning she's ecstatic at its return. To see the miraculous in the ordinary is a more precious gift than prophecy."<sup>p237</sup>

Herein lies the novel's challenge to each of us. Can we resist measuring whether we're winning in life using society's yardsticks? Or are we able to learn from Baby Mol, as did Big Ammachi, and laser in on what really matters? Too often, we gauge the goodness of days quantitatively. How many things did we accomplish today? Using this barometer, people with severe cognitive and physical disabilities are too often viewed as failures leading unproductive lives.

Another key character in *Covenant*, learns to accept life on life's terms, handling a debilitating disease with remarkable patience and poise. These complementary "conditions" of Baby Mol and this other character, (whom I will keep a secret to avoid playing spoiler), leave us hopeful of our ability to learn qualitative ways of gauging success.

Twice in the novel, we are made aware that myth and fable teach "the truth about how the world lives."<sup>p15</sup> Three words that passed between the two Mariammas in *Covenant* (Mariamma the matriarch known as Big Ammachi and Mariamma the young physician) will be forever nestled as a gift, "Happened is happened."<sup>p15,64</sup> This reminds me of my favorite Old Testament passage in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, which begins, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." *The Covenant of Water* carries lessons for each of us about our addictions, suffering, and, thankfully, life's hopeful path toward redemption.

It is Honorine, a nurse genuinely present for Digby in the throes of his misery, who reminds us of the powerful recovery tool of self-forgiveness. We all make mistakes, some of which have tragic consequences. Through the

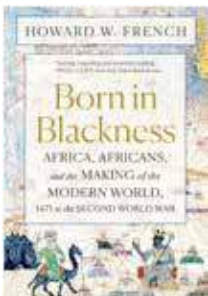
## Book Reviews

lessons on the pages of this novel, I am reminded to adjust myself to things as they are...and of the priceless-ness of unconditional love.

All who read *Covenant*, whether formally engaged in a vocation as a healer or not, would be wise to listen to the wisdom that Honorine shares with Digby, “Roses would be annoying weeds if the blossoms never withered and died. Beauty resides in the knowledge that it doesn’t last.”<sup>p148</sup>

Toward the end, I forced myself to stop reading *Covenant* for a few days to let my experience linger. Through Grace, I hope to sustain the flicker of beauty I found in reading *The Covenant of Water*, and more consistently follow Baby Mol’s example of marveling in repetitive splendor at each sunrise.

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### **Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World**

Howard W. French  
Liveright Publishing, New York,  
October 25, 2022, 544 pp.

**Reviewed by Jack Coulehan, MD,  
MPH (ΑΩΑ, University of  
Pittsburgh, 1969)**

In high school I learned that Portuguese efforts in the 15th century to sail progressively farther south along the west coast of Africa had a single objective: to discover a sea route to India. Presumably all the mariners in the 50 years before Bartolomeo Diaz who rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488 were unsuccessful and simply turned around and sailed home. I learned nothing about the people who lived along the coast, who were assumed to be primitive savages. I was also taught that the 17th century and 18th century American slave trade, terrible though it was, could be viewed as a continuation of slavery as practiced in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. There was certainly no mention of slavery in Europe.

Howard W. French, in *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World*, argues that what I learned in high school was dead wrong. Based on the

work of two generations of modern historians, and his own research, French paints a dramatically different picture.

French argues that Portuguese motivation in Africa was to obtain slaves and gold, not the distant lure of spices in India. The story is told of a fabulously wealthy king of Mali who visited Cairo and Mecca in the early 14th century and convinced Europeans that sub-Saharan Africa must be a major source of gold. The Portuguese began searching in the 1430s, but were sidetracked in 1441 when Captain Antam Goncalvez discovered an easier source of wealth—capturing, and later purchasing, West African natives to sell as slaves in Portugal.

Pope Nicholas V vindicated this practice in 1452, when he granted Portugal the right to enslave sub-Saharan Africans because they were “heathens.” This dispensation was later adopted by the Spanish in the Americas. In 1470, Fernas Gomes sailed to the Gulf of Guinea where he discovered kingdoms rich in gold along the coast of present-day Ghana. These developments initiated centuries of very profitable trade in which Europeans purchased slaves and gold in exchange for cotton cloth, brass, and iron ingots.

Far from dealing with savages, the Europeans negotiated with sophisticated multicultural states, like the Mali and Ghana Empires. They also converted the king of Kongo to Catholicism. In these countries, slaves were generally war captives who would eventually be integrated into the victor’s community. The Portuguese selected an uninhabited island, which they named Sao Tome, to be their entrepot. However, they soon discovered that Sao Tome was an ideal site for growing sugar cane. Wealthy Portuguese divided the island into large sugar plantations, utilizing readily available African slaves as laborers.

The system of plantation slavery that originated in Sao Tome served as a model for chattel slavery as it later developed in the Americas. After more than a century of primacy in the West African slave trade, in the 1600s, Portugal faced fierce competition from England and the Netherlands.

The old sea route to India narrative was not entirely false. Some Portuguese mariners, like Bartolomeo Diaz in 1488, sought to discover a route around the southern tip of Africa, but it took a decade after Diaz for another Portuguese sailor, Vasco da Gama, to follow-up with an expedition to the Indian Ocean.

The final third of *Born in Blackness* deals with the extension of slavery into the Americas, first to Brazil and later to the Caribbean and the English colonies in North

America. Chapters on the Haitian revolution are particularly compelling, especially since Haiti's disastrous history over the last century tends to obscure the fact that Haitian slaves liberated themselves from colonialism earlier than any country in the Western Hemisphere, except the United States. Inspired by the French Revolution, Haitian slaves began their fight for freedom in 1791, fought 12 years to overcome, first, French plantation owners and, later, Napoleon's army, eventually winning recognition of their independence in 1803.

Other enlightening chapters cover the massive expansion of slavery in the United States during the first half of the 19th century. When I went to school, textbooks of American history taught that chattel slavery in the South would have eventually withered away on its own, because it was inefficient and marginally profitable. To the contrary, *Born in Blackness* describes the mutually profitable connections between Northern industries and Southern plantation owners.

Expansion of sugar plantations in Louisiana, and acquisition of vast new lands for cotton cultivation in Texas, generated a forced migration of slaves from the East to the Southwest. Unlike in Brazil and the Caribbean islands, which required a steady input of new slaves because of high mortality from heat, disease, and overwork, the natural growth rate of the slave population in the United States allowed for this territorial expansion even after the international slave trade was abolished in 1808.

The book's subtitle, *Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*, claims that the history of the slave trade and American slavery, as narrated by the author, played a major role in making the world we live in. French brilliantly narrates the inhuman terror of the African slave trade and chattel slavery. He illuminates West African civilizations long obscured by the myth of "heathen savages." However, while chattel slavery certainly had an impact on future developments in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, *Born in Blackness* provides little reason to support the author's assertion that slavery "made" the modern world.

*Born in Blackness* is a revisionist history. We tend to ignore the fact that the traditional version of history was also biased by values and beliefs current at the time it was written. However, history is also a living discipline, not simply a rearrangement of interpretations. *Born in Blackness* provides a great deal of new, or previously ignored, data in telling the story of the early history of Western slavery and its subsequent development in the Americas.

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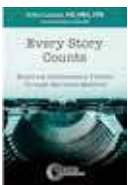
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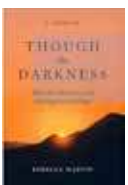
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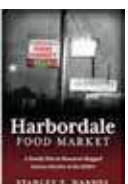
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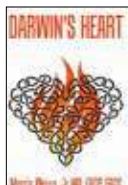
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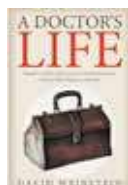
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