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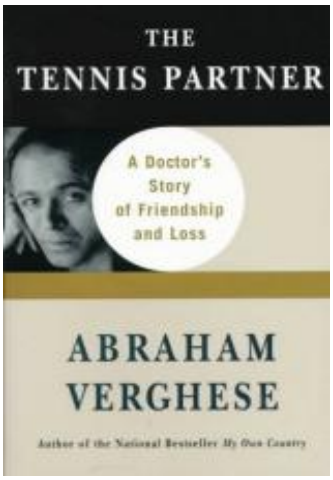
The Tennis Partner

by Abraham Verghese



About the Book

Abraham Verghese's memoir **The Tennis Partner** tells the story of a deeply moving friendship between two doctors. Relocating to an unfamiliar border city as his marriage unravels, physician Abraham Verghese feels alienated and yet strangely unburdened. When he meets a medical student, David Smith, they begin a tennis ritual that allows both men to shed their inhibitions and find security in the sport they love and in each other. The bond they develop as their game progresses becomes increasingly rich and complex. In the hospital, Abraham is the teacher and David the student; on the courts their roles are reversed. Abraham confides in David, telling him about the disintegration of his marriage. David in turn tells him that he is a recovering cocaine addict, and recounts the long saga of his many relapses before he finally became sober. Their intimate friendship reaches new heights, but just when things seem perfect, David begins pulling away, leading to a starling ending which Verghese captures with the tender voice and perceptive eye of a skilled clinician. Ultimately, this is an affecting, heartfelt account of a compassionate doctor and his struggle to understand--and to save--a friend he has come to cherish.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think David might have been a happier and healthier person had he chosen a different profession instead of medicine? Is there something about medicine that attracts addiction-prone individuals or that causes people to turn to drugs?

2. After returning from the Talbott-Marsh clinic, David proudly tells Verghese he has at last found "true recovery". A short time later he is back on drugs and more desperate than ever. What happened? Why does he relapse so quickly and tragically?

3. In a sense, this is a book about foreigners adjusting to a new country. How does Verghese uses foreignness and alienation to heighten the intensity of his narrative? Talk about David's story as a kind of dark underside of the American

dream of renewal.

4. "Tennis was so much more than a game," Verghese writes at one point -- and yet, as he acknowledges at the end, it is also just a game -- a simple, even slightly absurd ritual "of the yellow ball." How does Verghese manage to tie together so many of the book's complex strands through tennis?

5. Do you think Verghese is being honest -- with himself and with us -- about the sexual element in his attraction to David? Do you think this is basically a healthy relationship? Or do you feel Verghese is unaware of how deeply involved and dependent he is on David?

6. David stands at a juncture between two opposite paths: an orderly middle class existence in medicine with a wife and a "dream house"; and a hell of drug addiction, shame, poverty, disease and death. Does David choose hell in part because the respectable middle class existence is so hollow, so spiritually vacant? What other alternative could there be for someone like David? What about for Verghese himself?

7. Do you really believe that drug addiction is a "disease" comparable to diabetes or cancer, or do you think that talking about it in this way is harmful because it somehow absolves the addict of responsibility? Which view does Verghese endorse?

8. Talk about the statement that "David is responsible for David" and how it plays out in the two men's relationship in the final pages of the book. How can a true friend deny responsibility for his friend in crisis? Did Verghese act responsibly in calling the police or did he betray his friend's trust?

Author Bio

Abraham Verghese is a graduate of the Iowa Writers? Workshop and the author of books including the NBCC Award finalist MY OWN COUNTRY and the *New York Times* Notable Book THE TENNIS PARTNER. His book, CUTTING FOR STONE, spent 107 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and sold more than 1.5 million copies in the U.S. alone. It was translated into more than 20 languages and is being adapted for film by Anonymous Content.

Verghese was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2016, has received five honorary degrees, and is an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. He lives and practices medicine in Stanford, California where he is the Linda R. Meier and Joan F. Lane Provostial Professor and Vice Chair of the Department of Medicine at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

A decade in the making, THE COVENANT OF WATER is his first book since CUTTING FOR STONE.

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Publication Date: August 17, 2012
Hardcover: 400 pages
Publisher: Harper
ISBN-10: 0060174056
ISBN-13: 9780060174057