

Book Review: The Covenant of Water
By Abraham Verghese

The length of the average novel is approximately 360 pages. Double that, and you've got Abraham Verghese's best seller "The Covenant of Water" – all 715 pages worth.

This epic novel was published on May 2, 2023, but it took several months of creative procrastinating before I made the commitment to climb that mountain.

Yes, it's a long book. It's not a quick-read page-turner, so it will take some substantial investment of time. But it will be time well spent.

The story focuses on three generations of a family living in Kerala, in southern India, spanning the years 1900 to 1977. It's a family with a history, a "condition" as the family members refer to it, where each generation someone in the family dies from drowning.

The central character is Mariamma (who will eventually become known as Big Ammachi), a 12-year old who has just lost her father. She is sent off to marry a 40-year-old widower who owns Parambil, a large estate. Over time, she will grow to become the matriarch of the family. Through births, deaths, and much emotional upheaval, she will be the glue that holds everything together. The person everyone looks to during times of struggle.

Simultaneously, Verghese gives us Dr. Digby Kilgour, who leaves Scotland in search of career opportunities in southern India. He is a skilled surgeon whose experiences with love and loss will parallel much of what occurs in Parambil. And over time, the waterways of his life will connect with those of Big Ammachi's family. As

Verghese, through his characters, points out, water is everywhere, and eventually it all flows together.

Verghese's narrative is vivid, the land and waterways of Kerala springing to life on each page. Every character is finely detailed, and all are integral to the overall flow of the story that is more than just a family saga. As the decades unfold, India's history from British rule to independence is pulled into focus. The traditions and customs of its people are portrayed in the lives of the characters, and the choices and sacrifices they make. Their scars, both physical and emotional, are on full display.

Advancements and growth in medicine are also chronicled. This is where Verghese's background as both a writer and physician shines. The medical procedures are explicit – some might say too much so – but they bring a realism to what medical life was like before vaccines and technical advances.

Sure, there was a point around page 500 where the story seemed to slow a bit, and I found myself wondering, when is this going to end? But shortly thereafter the story seemed to take on new life (and I got a second wind) as it barreled to its climax.

The book is divided into ten parts, and each part is a substantial number of pages. That makes continuity a bit challenging, as Verghese ends each part with a bit of a cliffhanger, but doesn't return to that point until the conclusion of the subsequent part – which can be some 60-70 pages later. Backtracking a bit is a certainty.

But overall "The Covenant of Water" is an excellent, though lengthy, read. And in the end, it's a book that should not be rushed through. Take your time with it, absorb it, and relish in a conclusion where all the various tributaries come together.

I give “The Covenant of Water” 5 out of 5 stars. If you accept its lengthy challenge, I welcome your feedback.