

Take a book you have recently read and outline a research project based on it.

I can't tell you how relieved I was to wake up from this dream! In the dream, I felt stressed at the outlandish nature of the assignment. But upon further reflection, it was a good reminder that inspiration comes from unexpected sources.



At the time, I was reading *The Covenant of Water*, the 2023 novel from physician and Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate Abraham Verghese. (Pictured here with **Peg Nopoulos** in 2022 when he gave the Carver College of Medicine [Distinguished Mentor Lecture](#) in her honor.)

He tells the story of three generations of a Christian family in the Kerala state in southwest India from 1900 to the 1970s. In each generation, some members of the family die by drowning because of an affliction they refer to as "The Condition."

While I was reading, I found myself drawn to the characters and intensely curious to unravel the root of "The Condition" that had such tragic implications for each successive generation. I thought about how we might approach a question like this in the lab, breaking it down into discrete experiments and methodically advancing our knowledge. I also know how important our clinical ties would be in a case like this, helping to connect family history and experience to the clinical symptoms to make a diagnosis.

I did not come to the lab that morning and design a new project based on the book, but I do think that taking the time to absorb all 700+ pages of this saga expanded my view of our clinical and fundamental scientific work. It made me think about the importance of understanding people's stories, whether they are students, colleagues, patients, family members. How do we connect with the people we meet and the challenges they face?

In Verghese's portrayal, the family lives with The Condition, fearing it and trying their best to guard against it, but they know they can not change it and don't spend their energy fighting that unwinnable battle. There is more to this story, more to their lives, than this medical mystery. (If you've read the book and are as curious as I was about The Condition, geneticist Ricki Lewis that lays it all out in this PLOS [book review](#).)

The book itself took more than a decade for Verghese to complete. Sometimes significant accomplishments take significant time. We need to remain open to the fact that the answers we seek about brain function take time, creativity, and maybe even a break to read a good book.