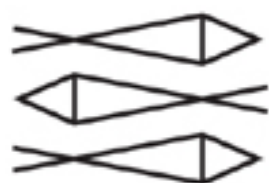


THE SPIRIT CATCHES YOU AND YOU FALL DOWN

A HMONG CHILD,
HER AMERICAN DOCTORS,
AND THE COLLISION OF TWO CULTURES

ANNE FADIMAN



Praise for
The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

“Fadiman describes with extraordinary skill the colliding worlds of Western medicine and Hmong culture.”

—*The New Yorker*

“This fine book recounts a poignant tragedy...It has no heroes or villains, but it has an abundance of innocent suffering, and it most certainly does have a moral...[A] sad, excellent book.”

—Melvin Konner, *The New York Times Book Review*

“An intriguing, spirit-lifting, extraordinary exploration of two cultures in uneasy coexistence...A wonderful aspect of Fadiman’s book is her even-handed, detailed presentation of these disparate cultures and divergent views—not with cool, dispassionate fairness but rather with a warm, involved interest that sees and embraces both sides of each issue...Superb, informal cultural anthropology—eye-opening, readable, utterly engaging.”

—Carole Horn, *The Washington Post Book World*

“This is a book that should be deeply disturbing to anyone who has given so much as a moment’s thought to the state of American medicine. But it is much more...People are presented as [Fadiman] saw them, in their humility and their frailty—and their nobility.”

—Sherwin B. Nuland, *The New Republic*

“Anne Fadiman’s phenomenal first book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, brings to life the enduring power of parental love in an impoverished refugee family struggling to protect their seriously ill infant daughter and ancient spiritual traditions from the tyranny of welfare bureaucrats and intolerant medical technocrats.”

—Al Santoli, *The Washington Times*

“A unique anthropological study of American society.”

—Louise Steinman, *Los Angeles Times*

“Some writers...have done exceedingly well at taking in one or another human scene, then conveying it to others—James Agee, for instance...and George Orwell...It is in such company that Anne Fadiman’s writing belongs.”

—Robert Coles, *Commonweal*

“When the Lees hedged their bets in 1982 in Merced by taking Lia to the hospital after one of her seizures, everybody lost. Fadiman’s account of why Lia failed to benefit over the years from Western medicine is a compelling story told in achingly beautiful prose.”

—Steve Weinberg, *Chicago Tribune*

“A deeply humane anthropological document written with the grace of a lyric and the suspense of a thriller.”

—Abby Frucht, *Newsday*

“Fadiman’s meticulously researched nonfiction book exudes passion and humanity without casting a disparaging eye at either the immigrant parents, who don’t speak English, or the frustrated doctors who can’t decipher the baby’s symptoms...*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* conveys one family’s story in a balanced, compelling way.”

—Jae-Ha Kim, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Fadiman’s sensitive reporting explores a vast cultural gap.”

—*People Magazine*

“Compellingly written, from the heart and from the trenches. I couldn’t wait to finish it, then reread it and ponder it again. It is a powerful case study of a medical tragedy.”

—David H. Mark, *Journal of the American Medical Association*

“*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is Fadiman’s haunting account, written over a nine-year period, of one very sick girl in Merced,

California...What happens to Lia Lee is both enlightening and deeply disturbing.”

—Kristin Van Ogtrop, *Vogue*

“Fadiman gives us a narrative as compelling as any thriller, a work populated by the large cast of characters who fall in love with Lia. This is a work of passionate advocacy, urging our medical establishment to consider how their immigrant patients conceptualize health and disease. This astonishing book helps us better understand our own culture even as we learn about another—and changes our deepest beliefs about the mysterious relationship between body and soul.”

—*Elle*

“The other day, I picked up a book I had no intention of buying. Eight hours later, having lifted my head only long enough to pay for the book and drive home, I closed Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* and started calling friends...This is an important book.”

—Wanda A. Adams, *The Honolulu Advertiser*

The Spirit Catches You
and You Fall Down

A Hmong Child,

Her American Doctors,

and the Collision of Two Cultures

Anne Fadiman

Farrar, Straus and Giroux / New York

Contents

Preface

1 / Birth

2 / Fish Soup

3 / The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

4 / Do Doctors Eat Brains?

5 / Take as Directed

6 / High-Velocity Transcortical Lead Therapy

7 / Government Property

8 / Foua and Nao Kao

9 / A Little Medicine and a Little Neeb

10 / War

11 / The Big One

12 / Flight

13 / Code X

14 / The Melting Pot

15 / Gold and Dross

16 / Why Did They Pick Merced?

17 / The Eight Questions

18 / The Life or the Soul

19 / The Sacrifice

Note on Hmong Orthography, Pronunciation, and Quotations

Notes on Sources

Bibliography

Acknowledgments

Index

Preface

Under my desk I keep a large carton of cassette tapes. Even though they have all been transcribed, I still like to listen to them from time to time.

Some of them are quiet and easily understood. They are filled with the voices of American doctors, interrupted only occasionally by the clink of a coffee cup or the beep of a pager. The rest of the tapes—more than half of them—are very noisy. They are filled with the voices of the Lees, a family of Hmong refugees from Laos who came to the United States in 1980. Against a background of babies crying, children playing, doors slamming, dishes clattering, a television yammering, and an air conditioner wheezing, I can hear the mother's voice, by turns breathy, nasal, gargly, or humlike as it slides up and down the Hmong language's eight tones; the father's voice, louder and slower and more vehement; and my interpreter's voice, mediating in Hmong and English, low and deferential in each language. The hubbub summons a whoosh of sense-memories: the coolness of the red metal folding chair, reserved for guests, that was always set up as soon as I arrived in the apartment; the shadows cast by the amulet that hung from the ceiling and swung in the breeze on its length of grocer's twine; the tastes of Hmong food, from the best (*quav ntsuas*,* a sweet stalk similar to sugarcane) to the worst (*ntshav ciaj*,* congealed raw pig's blood).

I sat on the Lees' red folding chair for the first time on May 19, 1988. Earlier that spring I had come to Merced, California, where they lived, because I had heard that there were some strange misunderstandings going on at the county hospital between its Hmong patients and its medical staff. One doctor called them "collisions," which made it sound as if two different kinds of people had rammed into each other, head on, to the accompaniment of squealing brakes and breaking glass. As it turned out, the encounters were messy but rarely frontal. Both sides were wounded,

but neither side seemed to know what had hit it or how to avoid another crash.

I have always felt that the action most worth watching is not at the center of things but where edges meet. I like shorelines, weather fronts, international borders. There are interesting frictions and incongruities in these places, and often, if you stand at the point of tangency, you can see both sides better than if you were in the middle of either one. This is especially true, I think, when the apposition is cultural. When I first came to Merced, I hoped that the culture of American medicine, about which I knew a little, and the culture of the Hmong, about which I knew nothing, would in some way illuminate each other if I could position myself between the two and manage not to get caught in the cross fire.

Nine years ago, that was all theory. After I heard about the Lees' daughter Lia, whose case had occasioned some of the worst strife the Merced hospital had ever seen, and after I got to know her family and her doctors, and after I realized how much I liked both sides and how hard it was to lay the blame at anyone's door (though God knows I tried), I stopped parsing the situation in such linear terms, which meant that without intending to, I had started to think a little less like an American and a little more like a Hmong. By chance, during the years I worked on this book, my husband, my father, my daughter, and I all experienced serious illnesses, and, like the Lees, I found myself spending a lot of time in hospitals. I passed many hours in waiting rooms gnawing on the question, What is a good doctor? During the same period, my two children were born, and I found myself often asking a second question that is also germane to the Lees' story: What is a good parent?

I have now known the people in this book for much of my adult life. I am sure that if I had never met Lia's doctors, I would be a different kind of patient. I am sure that if I had never met her family, I would be a different kind of mother. When I pull a few cassettes from the carton beneath my desk and listen to random snatches, I am plunged into a pungent wash of remembrance, and at the same time I am reminded of the lessons I am still learning from both of the cultures I have written about. Now and then, when I play the tapes late at night, I imagine what they would sound like if I could somehow splice them together, so the voices of the Hmong and the voices of the American doctors could be heard on a single tape, speaking a common language.

A.F.