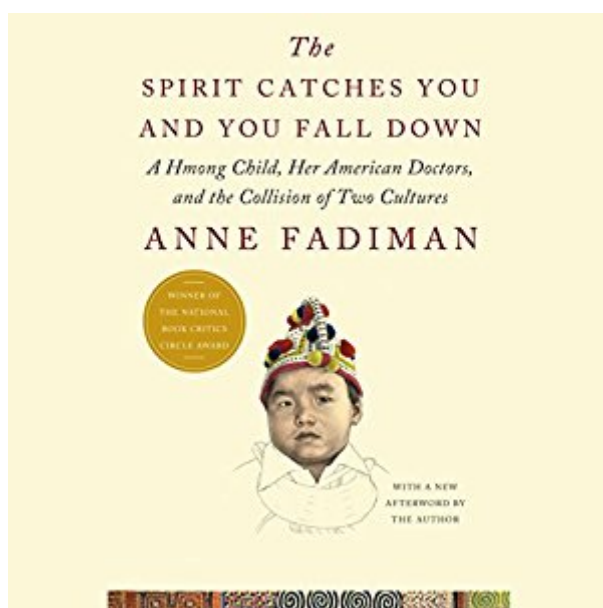


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# The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, And The Collision Of Two Cultures



## Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction When three-month-old Lia Lee arrived at the county hospital emergency room in Merced, California, a chain of events was set in motion from which neither she nor her parents nor her doctors would ever recover. Lia's parents, Foua and Nao Kao, were part of a large Hmong community in Merced, refugees from the CIA-run "Quiet War" in Laos. The Hmong, traditionally a close-knit people, have been less amenable to assimilation than most immigrants, adhering steadfastly to the rituals and beliefs of their ancestors. Lia's pediatricians, Neil Ernst and his wife, Peggy Philip, cleaved just as strongly to another tradition: that of Western medicine. When Lia Lee entered the American medical system, diagnosed as an epileptic, her story became a tragic case history of cultural miscommunication. Parents and doctors both wanted the best for Lia, but their ideas about the causes of her illness and its treatment could hardly have been more different. The Hmong see illness and healing as spiritual matters linked to virtually everything in the universe while medical community marks a division between body and soul and concerns itself almost exclusively with the former. Lia's doctors ascribed her seizures to the misfiring of her cerebral neurons; her parents called her illness *qaug dab peg* - the spirit catches you and you fall down - and ascribed it to the wandering of her soul. The doctors prescribed anticonvulsants; her parents preferred animal sacrifices.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I thoroughly enjoyed *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. I can understand why over the

course of the past decade, it has become required reading for many students entering health care professions. It painted such a detailed picture of not only a specific incidence of cultural collisions with the Lee family and doctors of Merced, CA, but also how these collisions occur in other cultures and in other instances across America and the world. I felt that it was extremely thorough and fair to both the Hmong experience and the Lee family, and also that of the doctors at MCMC. I could feel and relate to the horrors and frustrations on both sides, and fully understood how and why it was so difficult to reach common ground. I had a deep sense of empathy for Lia, who was the innocent victim of an almost unavoidable cultural gap. The culture expressed by the Hmong people is vastly different from that of Western culture, and even most Eastern culture and neighboring Asian countries. For example, there is a passage in the book that explains common gestures and social interactions that are considered inappropriate to the Hmong: "Doctors could also appear disrespectful if they tried to maintain friendly eye contact (which was considered invasive), touched the head of an adult without permission (grossly insulting), or beckoned with a crooked finger (appropriate only for animals). It was important to never to compliment a baby's beauty out loud, lest a dab (an evil spirit) overhear and be unable to resist snatching its soul. The Hmong community in Merced, California are in desperate need of translators. Not only language translators, but more importantly, cultural translators. They need cultural liaisons to not only guide them through western culture, but to educate westerners about their culture. One thing I thought was very poignant, was a quote by a psychologist at Merced Community Outreach Services, by the name of Sukey Walker. She found a way to interact and communicate with the Hmong that was better than any of her American counterparts. She detailed one of her keys to success: "I have one rule. Before I do anything, I ask 'Is it Okay?' This is a very real book. It is very heartbreaking, and very true to life. There was no happy ending or easy solution to the problems in this book. However, there is a certain amount of optimism expressed here, and it made me very hopeful and eager to see these cultural barriers deconstructed.

Anne Fadiman tells the story of little Lia Lee, a Hmong-American child with epilepsy, and weaves together the woof of parental love and biomedical treatment with the warp of Hmong and American cultures. This book brings into focus how extensively cross-cultural transitions impact both the approaching and approached peoples. In an interview in 2001, Fadiman explains what drew her so deeply into this book, "Yes, it is about an epileptic Hmong toddler, but it is also about many other things. . . I started pulling on a slender thread, the thread that was Lia Lee, the small sick child . . . I

pulled on the thread and the thread became a string and the string became a rope, and then I tugged really hard on the rope and I discovered that it was attached to the entire universe." Fadiman alternates chapters about Lia with chapters on the history and culture of the Hmong people. Interwoven in Lia's story is the story of her people. The parallel can be drawn that the spirit catches the Hmong people with wars and threats of assimilation, and in response the Hmong eschew resistance and migrate. Most of Merced's Hmong population came to the U.S. Lia's parents wanted "a little medicine and a little txib" (p. 110.) While medical care at MCMC was provided at no charge, Lia's family spent large sums on buying amulets, having a txiv neeb perform ceremonies, and sacrificing chickens, pigs, and even a cow. Foua would grow herbs and make special concoctions both for feeding to Lia as well as bathing her. The author was privileged to be present when the family sacrificed a pig in their living room in order to seek her wandering soul and bring it back to Lia. From the doctors' perspective Neil Ernst said, "I felt it was important for these Hmong to understand that there were certain elements of medicine that we understood better than they did and that there were certain rules they had to follow with their kids' lives" (p. 59.) *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* was both thought-provoking and emotionally rewarding. It is recommended for those who enjoy a well-told story, as well as those working in public health fields, interested in cross-cultural transitions, or who have special interest in the Hmong people. Anne Fadiman discussed Lia Lee with medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman. His observations bring out the crucial point (p. 260), "You need to understand that as powerful an influence as the culture of the Hmong patient and her family is on this case, the culture of biomedicine is equally powerful. If you can't see that your own culture has its own set of interests, emotions, and biases, how can you expect to deal successfully with someone else's culture?" *Where is Lia Lee now?* In a *Newsweek* article in 2005, then 22 year old Lia was still in a persistent vegetative state, still cared for at home by her careful and loving mother.

I bought this book for my Medical Anthropology course. In the end, it ended up being one of the best books I have ever read. It truly does tell an amazing story how our medical system and the cultural differences between peoples can cause more harm. Yet, it is very good at displaying the medical system not as evil but as products of society and culture. I cried through this book, also learned about a war I never even knew about. I would recommend this to everyone. Especially if you have an interest in the medical field or culture.

This book was recommended extra reading for cultural competence in one of my nursing school

textbooks. It is not like you have time to read extra books while you are in nursing school. However the brief review in my textbook captured my attention enough to look it up on . It is among the most memorable books I have read. The communities of people who fought on the U.S. side in Laos during the Viet Nam war were displaced to the United States. This girl was born within one of these communities with a seizure disorder. The Hmong words for a seizure meant, "The spirit catches you and you fall down." Children with seizure disorders are seen as holy, and elevated to special status in the community. In the U.S., the medical community, in huge contrast, saw this as a grave illness, which pretty much bewildered the family and community of the girl. The author researches the situation from birth through the child being taken out of the home, through deterioration in foster care. I found correlations to my experience as a nurse, even within the local community, where many people distrust the intentions of the medical community, and the people in it who are genuinely trying to help, but often end up doing more harm than good. It is an excellent book for anyone in a caregiving occupation.

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