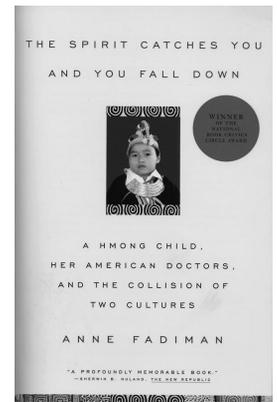


The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures

By Anne Fadiman

Review by Carol A Redding, MA



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The *Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is a stimulating adventure for any intelligent reader whose heart and mind are open to reaching beyond that which is familiar and understood. Against a backdrop of cultural mystery, tales of nations at war, an epoch of human misery, and a thundering clash of two worthy, well-intentioned cultures, a baby girl has epilepsy, and all who know her struggle to help her.

The child—Lia Lee—is the 13th born to mother Foua and father Nao Kao Lee, residents of Merced County, California. The Lees "... are among the 150,000 Hmong who have fled Laos since their country fell to communist forces in 1975."^{1p5} Like many Hmong, the Lees were a fiercely independent family of self-sufficient farmers who, chased by war and political strife, in 1980 arrived in California, a land of foreign customs and languages where the Hmong would save their lives but lose their treasured identity as respected, productive people.

Lia was the first Lee child to be born in a hospital—a surreal experience for Foua, all of whose other children were delivered by Foua, unattended and in silence so as not to alert the evil spirits (*dabs*) to each new child's presence. Nao Kao had dutifully buried the placentas of the first 12 children under the hut's dirt floor so that their souls could find their way back home after death.^{1p5} (And by the time the Lees arrived in California, half of their children had already died.)

The book's title is a literal translation of *qaug dab peg*, the Hmong phrase describing a seizure.^{1p20} Fadiman shows how the Hmong view of epilepsy is similar to views expressed in other periods and cultures—for example, by the ancient Greeks, who viewed epilepsy as a "sacred disease" of supernatural origin.^{1p21,28} Given both their natural concern for the health of their daughter and their reluctance to interfere with things supernatural, the Lees were burdened with an unwieldy internal struggle that would only worsen as they tentatively brought their seizing baby daughter repeatedly into the hospital's emergency department.

There, unable to communicate with the child's parents, the kind, well-intentioned medical staff endured the unspeakable frustrations of having to practice "veterinary medicine" on the seizing Lia. Despite everyone's best ef-

forts, the unavailability of translation services, combined with profound cultural differences, resulted in Lia being undermedicated, overmedicated, and mis-medicated. Lia's seizures were increasingly severe, and her physicians knew that onset of an uncontrollable grand mal seizure was inevitable. Said one of Lia's physicians, "It was so haunting. I started to have nightmares that it was going to happen, and I would be the one on call, and I couldn't stop it and she was going to die right before my eyes."^{1p118}

The Hmong are superior parents in general,^{1p22} and Fadiman illustrates the outstanding care the Lees provided to Lia. Nonetheless, the complexity of Lia's medical regime would have befuddled even the most literate, American-born parents: "By the time she was four and a half, Lia's parents had been told to give her, at various times, Tylenol, ampicillin, amoxicillin, Dilantin, phenobarbital, erythromycin, Ceclor, Tegretol, Benadryl, Pediazole, Vi-Daylin Multivitamins with Iron, Alupent, Depakene, and Valium"^{1p46} and that these drugs were to be administered only at certain times and under specific conditions.

Lia's father said, "Sometimes the soul goes away but the doctors don't believe it. I would like you to tell the doctors to believe in our *neeb* [healing spirit] The doctors can fix some sicknesses that involve the body and blood, but for us Hmong, some people get sick because of their soul, so they need spiritual things. With Lia it was good to do a little medicine and a little *neeb*, but not too much medicine because the medicine cuts the *neeb*'s effect. If we did a little of each she didn't get sick as much, but the doctors wouldn't let us give just a little medicine because they didn't understand about the soul."^{1p100}

The reciprocal frustration of the parents and of the clinicians are compounded by arrival of the grand mal seizure. Fadiman's tale of the events leading up to and following this event make this modern tragedy—in which everyone fights for the good, yet no one wins—an opportunity for greater wisdom. Fadiman provides extraordinary insight into how vital is a thorough understanding of cultural diversity to successful practice of the medical arts. ♦

Reference

1. Fadiman A. The spirit catches you and you fall down: a Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1997.

Carol A Redding, MA, is a member of the American Medical Writers Association and an Information Technology Consultant at San Diego State University. She volunteers as a consultant in information technology and business and as a grant writer for the California Institutes of Preventive Medicine. Also on a volunteer basis, she created, publishes, and edits the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study Web site www.acestudy.org and the *ACE Reporter*, a free research publication about the effects of adverse childhood experiences on adult health and well-being. E-mail: editor@acestudy.org.