
The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman

Birth: August 7, 1953 in New York, New York

Occupation: Writer

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Entry updated: 07/13/2005

Sidelights

Spending nine years as an editor and staff writer for Life magazine served author Anne Fadiman well in the writing of her debut book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. The three years she spent as a columnist for *Civilization*, the magazine of the Library of Congress, led to her second volume, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. Fadiman comes from a family laden with literary talent: her father is the writer and editor Clifton Fadiman and her mother is the journalist Annalee Whitmore Jacoby Fadiman.

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down is a case study of a young refugee girl living in California who was severely stricken with epilepsy. Because her family had their own cultural beliefs about her condition and how to treat it, the child's encounter with California doctors and Western medicine became a trying ordeal for all involved. The book details the life of this child, Lia Lee.

Lia and her parents, Foua Yang and Nao Kao Lee, are Hmong, a people from the mountains of Laos. Since that country fell to the communists in 1975, the Hmong were seen as enemies of the new People's Democratic Republic of Laos, largely because they had supported the previous government that was toppled by the communist troops. As a result, the Hmong became the target of wholesale extermination and were forced to flee. Many of these 150,000 refugees came to the United States, settling primarily in California and Minnesota. Although the United States had received a multitude of immigrants for centuries, the social customs and behavior of the Hmong are unique. In 1980 Nao Kao Lee and his wife Foua Yang, were two of those who arrived in the United States.

In 1982, when the Lees were living in Merced, California, Foua gave birth to Lia. When she was three months old, Lia was diagnosed as having epilepsy. However, the Lees believed the girl was suffering from what they referred to as *qaug dab peg* ("the spirit catches you and you fall down"), despite American doctors' efforts to explain the realities of the malady. Physicians prescribed drugs such as Depakene and Valium; the Lees attempted to "fix her spirit" by employing a shaman, sacrificing chickens and pigs in their living-room, and rubbing coins on Lia's body. It was a case of Western and Eastern medicinal practices clashing. With the Laotian forests a world away, the Lees were unable to attain the traditional roots and herbs they and their people had always used to treat such afflictions. As a result, they had to turn to the Merced County medical system. Unfortunately, the doctors and physicians within that system believed that the Lees' holistic approach was plagued by ignorance and superstition. Lia's medical chart soon expanded to five volumes, weighing nearly fourteen pounds. Finally, her condition became so serious that Merced officials deemed it necessary to use legal means to take custody of the child, a fact that devastated her family. As the dispute continued between the two parties, Lia suffered a massive seizure and was declared brain dead.

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Fadiman first met the Lees in 1988, intending simply to write a magazine article about them. She became fascinated with their case, eventually devoting thousands of hours of her time to the family in interviews and support. She also spent a great deal of time with the doctors and officials who treated Lia. Because of this diligence, her book is a well-documented portrayal of Lia's case. She also plainly lays out the differences between Eastern and Western thinking in medical matters. "The Hmong view of health care seemed to me to be precisely the opposite of the prevailing American one, in which the practice of medicine has fissioned into smaller and smaller subspecialties, with less and less truck between bailiwicks. The Hmong carried holism to its ultima Thule," Fadiman remarks.

In *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* Fadiman attempts to make American readers understand the motivations behind the Lees' actions and beliefs. "The history of the Hmong yields several lessons that anyone who deals with them might do well to remember," she wrote. "Among the most obvious of these are that the Hmong do not like to take orders; that they do not like to lose; that they would rather flee, fight, or die than surrender; that they are not intimidated by being outnumbered; that they are rarely persuaded that the customs of other cultures, even those more powerful than their own, are superior; and that they are capable of getting very angry."

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down was praised by numerous critics who described it as a powerful tale of culture clash. "The mysteries of Hmong language and ritual are balanced throughout the book with passages that portray Western medicine as having its own impenetrable language and ritual," Jennifer Ruark wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Rebecca Cress-Ingebo, reviewing the book for *Library Journal*, proclaimed it to be a "riveting, cross-cultural medicine classic," and declared the story a "haunting lesson for every healthcare provider." Calling Fadiman's work a "profoundly memorable book," Sherwin B. Nuland, in the *New Republic*, applauded the effort. Nuland wrote that Fadiman has "expertly woven together all the fascinating narrative threads in the story." "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," Nuland concluded.

Fadiman's parents, husband, and other family members are featured in the essays collected and published as *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*. Here Fadiman chronicles her lifelong love of books and the written word. A contributor for *Publishers Weekly* found the collection to be "fussy" at times, and recommended that "these essays are best when just nibbled one or two at a time." Writing for *Booklist*, Donna Seaman had more praise for the book, writing that, "As delectable and witty as these divulgences are, it is Fadiman's profound appreciation and knowledge of books and all that they convey that hit home."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born August 7, 1953, in New York, NY; daughter of Clifton (a writer and editor) and Annalee Whitmore Jacoby (a writer) Fadiman; married George Howe Colt (a writer), March 4, 1989; children: two. Education: Harvard University, B.A., 1975. Addresses: Agent: c/o Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 19 Union Sq. W., New York, NY 10003.



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AWARDS

National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, Los Angeles Times Book Award for Current Interest, both 1997, and Boston Book Review Rea Nonfiction Prize, 1998, all for *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*; National Magazine Award.

CAREER

Literary journalist and editor. *American Scholar*, editor, 1998-2004; worked nine years as an editor and staff writer for *Life* magazine; worked for three years as editor-at-large and columnist for *Civilization*.

WRITINGS

- *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1998.
- (Editor, with Robert Atwan) *Best American Essays*, 2003, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2003.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

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- *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 28, 1997, pp. A15-16.
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- *Discover*, May, 1998, Tony Dajer, review of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, pp. 97-98.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, October 23, 1998, review of *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, p. 74.
- *Journal of American Ethnic History*, summer, 1999, Jo Ann Koltyk, review of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, pp. 193-194.
- *Lancet*, January 24, 1998, Charles Gropper, review of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, p. 301; February 6, 1999, Faith McLellan, "A Most Uncommon Reader," p. 508.
- *Library Journal*, September 1, 1997, Rebecca Cress-Ingebo, review of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, pp. 208-209; September 15, 1998, Wilda Williams, review of *Ex Libris*, p. 78.
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- Publishers Weekly, August 11, 1997, review of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, p. 393; August 24, 1998, Ex Libris, p. 34.

ONLINE

- Atlantic Unbound, <http://www.theatlantic.com/> (October 28, 1998), Katie Bolick, "Coming to Life: An Interview with Anne Fadiman."
- Salon.com, <http://www.salon.com/> (October 7, 1998), Dan Cryer, review of *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*.*

SOURCE CITATION: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2006. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2006. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

Document Number: H1000128468