

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman

Booklist

The Lee family had suffered much in Laos and Thailand before coming to the U.S. and settling in Merced, California, among an already large Hmong population. Fadiman explores relations between young Lia Lee, her parents, and various physicians. She brings Hmong culture vividly to life and shows how naturally misunderstandings arise when American health-care providers deal with Hmong patients and their families. For example, the Hmong feel that soul strings must be tied around parts of the body when the individual is endangered; American nurses understandably but insensitively cut off these dirty ties. Fadiman's brief history of the Hmong also explains Lia's parents' desire to be independent and in charge, in the process filling a gap in many a reader's knowledge. Her book has a scope much broader than that of a medical case history, and it could well spark discussion of such questions as whether an immigrant lacks intelligence if she cannot express herself quickly and clearly in English and whether a foreign culture is always inferior.

Library Journal

Award-winning reporter Fadiman has turned what began as a magazine assignment into a riveting, cross-cultural medicine classic in this anthropological exploration of the Hmong population in Merced County, California. Following the case of Lia (a Hmong child with a progressive and unpredictable form of epilepsy), Fadiman maps out the controversies raised by the collision between Western medicine and holistic healing traditions of Hmong immigrants. Unable to enter the Laotian forest to find herbs for Lia that will "fix her spirit," her family becomes resigned to the Merced County emergency system, which has little understanding of Hmong animist traditions. Fadiman reveals the rigidity and weaknesses of these two ethnographically separated cultures. In a shrinking world, this painstakingly researched account of cultural dislocation has a haunting lesson for every healthcare provider. Highly recommended for all collections.