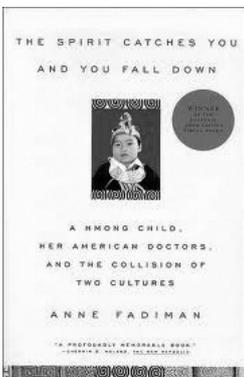


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Camelia Soo is a fourth year medical student at the University of Auckland. She enjoys cross cultural literature and has Dr. Alison McFarlane to thank for introducing this book to her.



### **The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down**

Anne Fadiman, 1998

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Girous

I've been sitting here for the past half-an-hour; pondering on what title to give this review. This isn't like me. Words tend to come easily and a play on words is what I love to do. After numerous attempts and many 'Backspaces', it strikes me. The book's title is special in its own right. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is not your average book. Calls to make it required reading for students have been made; and

being the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award means this book is really something. So what is the fuss all about? And what can we, as current or future health practitioners, learn from it?

The book introduces three main antagonists: the American culture and health system in particular; the Hmong immigrants from Laos and a young sick Hmong girl, Lia Lee. In between alternating chapters Fadiman writes eloquently and without bias about each, capturing the intensity of how cross cultural misunderstanding can go so wrong, with the harrowing tale of Lia Lee at the centre of the cultural conflict.

At one end of this medical saga we have the American doctors, practicing in a health system not unlike our own. Wearing white coats, intelligent, overworked and ordering every test possible to reach the most likely diagnosis, they never seem to falter in their care of the sick. At the other end of the spectrum we have the Hmong people of America; strong-willed, hardworking, polite, loyal and never really fitting in with the Americans. In the centre of it all is Lia Lee, who becomes the prime focus of the two cultures when she battles epilepsy or as it is widely known by the Hmong - the disease which the 'spirit catches you and you fall down'.

In the American's eyes, the Hmong are perhaps the worst kind of immigrants - primitive, rude, not compliant with medication, growing herbs in carpark lots and slaughtering animals (much to the horror of animal advocates) as part of their sacrificial rituals. In the Hmong's eyes, American doctors are bad - taking blood and depleting a person of their finite amount

of blood, forcing medication down to make patients sicker; allowing student doctors to practice, doing lumbar punctures which suck the life or soul out and sending patients to specialists because doctors want a vacation.

If you're looking for cultural differences, challenges, barriers, clashes and conflict, this book is a must read. At the core of the problem are the uncontrollable fits that keep befalling Lia. The doctors attribute it to her parent's non-compliance with antiepileptic medication, while her parents attribute it to the doctor's lack of knowledge or healing powers; how can the Americans possibly know anything when who they trust are their own healers, txiv neeb? Something exceptionally hard for the Hmong to come to grips with is how different the doctors and healers are. Txiv neeb are polite and never ask questions, doctors pry too much, often asking sexual and personal questions; txiv neeb give immediate diagnosis and remedies, doctors run tests and never reach a sound conclusion; txiv neeb never undress the patients, doctors lift up breasts to feel the apex beat...and the differences go on.

This book is more than cultural clashes and medical mystification though. Readers are given an enriching insight into the Hmong culture. Fadiman covers the culture almost perfectly, beginning with the birth, ways of life, traditional healing and touches on death. She traces the Hmong's precarious journey, by foot, from the mountains in Laos, crossing the Mekong River; scaling heights, covering enemy terrains, crossing borders before boarding their first ever plane into America. In America, she tells of how perplexing it was for them to fit in. Many Hmong people wore pyjamas in the streets, poured buckets of water over elements to extinguish the heat, washed clothes in public pools, cooked with motor oil and shot skunks, sparrows and bald eagles.

What does this book mean to us? The most important thing for me is how cultural barriers such as language, beliefs, and attitudes can be so detrimental in the care and management of patients. Sometimes even with the use of interpreters, meaning can be lost and an adequate history cannot be obtained. It may seem like health practitioners are at the losing end (not getting full histories and being frustrated over it), but this happens both ways. We have to also understand that the cultural barriers and challenges pose a difficulty for patients in understanding what their disease is and what each treatment is for. This was very evident in Lia's case. In medicine, we assume everyone has a similar level of health literacy and explain management plans expecting everyone to comply and their health will improve as a result. But it is these cultural walls that prevent meaning from being translated fully.

*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* is about cultural collision and tells a poignant tale about the disastrous consequence of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Readers are given a wonderful insight into the Hmong culture - a culture incomprehensible to the Americans, shown by their seemingly bizarre beliefs and attitudes, yet Anne Fadiman has shown us that they are human all the same.