

Book Review
The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman

On October 24, 1982, Nao Kao and Foua Lee, Hmong refugees from Laos, took their three month old daughter, Lia, to the emergency room of the Merced Community Hospital in Merced, California. They believed their baby girl had *qaug dab peg* which in the Hmong language means "the spirit catches you and you fall down". The condition started when Lia's sister, Yer, slammed the door, and caused Lia's soul to be frightened out of her body. Lia would shake and collapse because a spirit called a *dab* was grabbing her. The Lees wanted to give Lia medicine to make her better, but they didn't mind if her shaking didn't stop completely. The condition, which the Hmong believe facilitates communication with spirits, made Lia special in her culture. It meant she could become a shaman when she grew up. On the other hand, the doctors at the hospital diagnosed Lia's condition as epilepsy. Epilepsy is a disorder of the brain caused when brain cells create abnormal electricity that causes seizures. A seizure is a sudden change in behavior which can have a wide variety of possible symptoms depending on what parts of the brain are affected. Many types of seizures cause loss of consciousness with twitching or shaking of the body. Sometimes the respiratory muscles contract along with the rest of the body, and a person can stop breathing. Lia's doctors felt that in order to provide her the best possible medical treatment, they had to stop the seizures completely. What followed was a heart wrenching struggle between Lia's parents and her doctors that is documented in this gripping book by Anne Fadiman. Everyone tried to do what they believed was the right thing for Lia; but language, cultural differences, and inflexibility impeded the communication vital in a successful patient-doctor relationship. This informative book taught me all about Hmong history and culture. I also learned that a doctor needs to incorporate the patient and their family in the healing process and take into consideration the individual's environment, history, culture, goals, hopes, and dreams. In the words of Nao Kao, Lia's father, in order to "fix" people one must use "a little medicine and a little *neng* (healing spirit)".