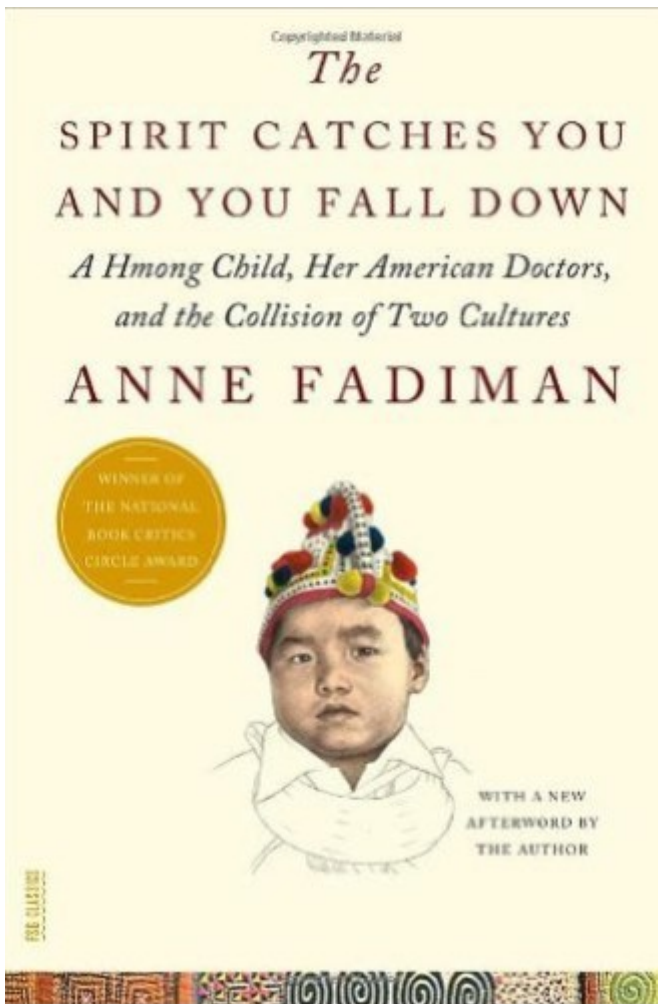


The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, by Anne Fadiman

selected by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down

by Anne Fadiman

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

One of my grad school teachers said that anyone teaching bioethics should adopt Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Upon arriving at Baylor I took up her suggestion, and I have taught the National Book Critics Circle Award

winner twice a year for nearly a decade. In this nonfiction page-turner, Fadiman relates the emotionally gripping drama that unfolds when two distinct cultures offer competing descriptions of the world, and the result is something along the lines of an immovable force meeting an unstoppable object.

When we hear the word *culture* we often think of peoples like the Hmong, with their nomadic history and their animistic rituals, which are primitive and parochial compared to the world of modern medicine and its purported scientific purity. Part of Fadiman's genius is to question this narrow conception of culture as she carefully peels back the layers of American medical culture, which is possessed by a very peculiar, and in this case catastrophically ironic, cultural prejudice against culture. Fadiman ends the book with a cliff-hanger that serves to diagnose the reader's own cultural presumptions.

My bioethics course is full of aspiring medical doctors who claim Christianity as their inspiration. *The Spirit Catches You* leaves the students with a haunting question: If modern medicine can so easily waylay Hmong life, what will it do to Christian life, which might share as much with Hmong life as it does with modern medicine?