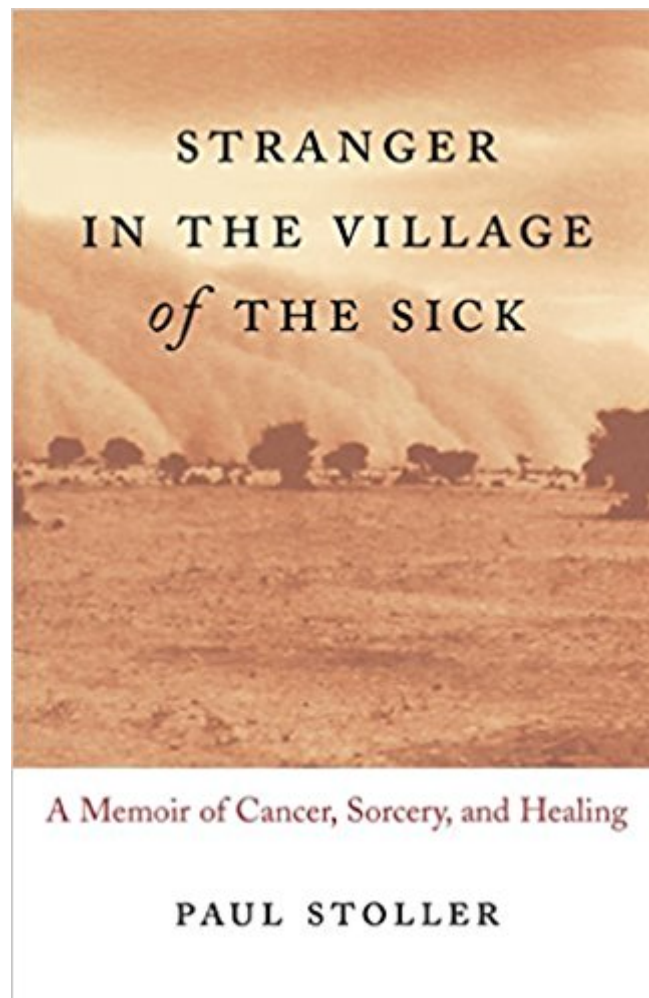




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Stranger In The Village Of The Sick: A Memoir Of Cancer, Sorcery, And Healing



Synopsis

After more than fifty years of good health, anthropologist Paul Stoller suddenly found himself diagnosed with lymphoma. The only thing more transformative than his fear and dread of cancer was the place it ultimately took him: twenty-five years back in time to his days as an apprentice to a West African sorcerer, Adamu Jenitongo. *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* follows Stoller down this unexpected path toward personal discovery, growth, and healing. The stories here are about life in the village of the healthy and the village of the sick, and they highlight differences in how illness is culturally perceived. In America and the West, illness is war; we strive to eradicate it from our bodies and lives. In West Africa, however, illness is an ever-present companion, and sorcerers learn to master illnesses like cancer through a combination of acceptance, pragmatism, and patience. Stoller provides a view into the ancient practices of sorcery, revealing that as an apprentice he learned to read divining shells, mix potions, and recite incantations. But it wasn't until he got cancer that he realized that sorcery embodied a more profound meaning, one that every person could use: "Sorcery is a body of knowledge and practice that enables one to see things clearly and to walk with confidence on the path of fear."

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press (April 15, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807072613

ISBN-13: 978-0807072615

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.7 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #580,941 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #12 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Cancer > Lymphatic](#) #802 in [Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Administration & Policy > Health Care Delivery](#) #887 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > New Age & Spirituality > Wicca, Witchcraft & Paganism > Witchcraft](#)

Customer Reviews

Stoller (*Money Has No Smell*) was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2001. This memoir of his diagnosis, treatment and remission examines what it means to leave the "village of the healthy" and join the "village of the sick," where illness is a continuing condition with no cure. Some

25 years before his diagnosis, Stoller had done field work among the Songhay people of Niger, where he'd apprenticed to their sorcerer/sage, Adamu Jenitongo. After dangerous incidents with competing sorcerers, Stoller returned to America and his academic career, but his cancer brought him back to a re-examination of Adamu's teachings. Sitting in the chemotherapy infusion room, reciting a Songhay invocation, Stoller felt calmer, as if he had "a degree of control over an uncontrollable situation." Illness is but one of life's "points of misfortune," forcing a person to take a new path. The sorcerer, bridging the known world and the chaos of the unknown, can give guidance by invoking the wisdom of the gods "to harmonize the world" so people can see the path more clearly. While Americans use the war metaphor for fighting disease, the Songhay believe "if you learn to live with illness, your being becomes stronger." Although Stoller chose the most aggressive medical treatments available, he also struggled to respect his cancer and use it to develop his understanding of the meaning of his life and work. Even healthy readers will find Stoller's account valuable and his perspective on sorcery-its emphasis on humility, its acceptance of adversity, its vision of a world of forces beyond human control-surprisingly moving. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In March 2001 Stoller learned he had lymphoma. His life changed overnight, and that led him to reflect on his experience 25 years earlier when, a young anthropologist, he apprenticed with a sorcerer of the Songhay people in the Republic of Niger. During illness and treatment, he realized that sorcery was a way of coping; his dreadful disease had opened a way of personal growth. Not that he believes one needs diagnosis with life-threatening illness to become enlightened. But in his case, such a predicament forced recognition of the symbiotic relationships between illness and health, certainty and uncertainty. We follow him from diagnosis through chemotherapy and remission as he coincidentally compares the gentle, one-on-one healer-patient relationship in West Africa to the impersonal, usually overtaxed American medical system. He observes how differently Americans and Songhay experience the world: the former like to feel in control, the latter are highly fatalistic. Ultimately, he learns to respect illness as a part of life. His tough-minded, unsentimental memoir reminds us what it means to be fully alive. June Sawyers Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that "life was something you dominated if you were any good." Harry Crews noted in his book "A Childhood: The Biography of a Place" that "survival is triumph

enough." Author Paul Stoller's memoir of his cancer diagnosis and treatment wanders the vast middle ground between these two poles. And while you can't argue success in that he did get well from his lymphoma, as a reader I often wished he would "fish or cut bait" and for that reason I gave this meandering book three stars. Stoller practiced and witnessed the powerful effects of sorcery to heal or to hurt while on an anthropology research mission in the African bush early in his career. It's a riveting story that Stoller has told before in some of his other books. But that forceful and richly-detailed storytelling is incompatible with his modern-day story about the Western medicines used to diagnose and treat his illness. Stoller practices the beliefs of sorcery without embracing the practice. It casts a bad spell over his story since it seems ridiculous to separate beliefs from practice - something even the sorcerers told him. His conflicted character dominates this work. Conflict may have been the center of Stoller's illness but it really shouldn't have been at the center of his triumphant recovery.

"Stranger in the Village of the Sick" is a memoir by anthropologist Paul Stoller about his experiences as a newly-diagnosed cancer patient. He juxtaposes with these with reflections on his earlier experiences as a student of sorcery in Africa. In 2001, the previously healthy Stoller was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma (slow-growing follicular B-cell lymphoma to be exact). As for many--if not most--cancer sufferers, this diagnosis came like a bolt out of the blue, causing the author to reevaluate his life, his experiences, and his way of looking at the world. As Stoller notes, his form of cancer is ultimately "incurable" but at the same time, "highly treatable." In other words, Stoller was told, he could, with treatment, expect many more years of active life. Stoller underwent cutting-edge chemotherapy, which put his disease into remission. The facts of Stoller's diagnosis and treatment provide only the bare bones of the book. Most people find it impossible to confront a potentially lethal disease without having their view of themselves and their lives changed. For many, this leads to a deepening sense of the spiritual and an appreciation of the moment. For the author, it led him to return to his memories of earlier anthropological fieldwork among the Songhay of Niger. As a young man, he had several extraordinary and frightening encounters with sorcerers. He developed a healthy respect for their powers and become an apprentice sorcerer himself. His book, "In Sorcery's Shadow" (with Cheryl Olkes) was the result of that experience. As he notes, he THOUGHT he understood the Songhay worldview and the way of Songhay sorcery. But, as Stoller discovered, his earlier understandings of Songhay sorcery and society were only superficial. As a young man, he had been incapable of grasping the deeper philosophical currents. As he went through his diagnosis and treatment, his earlier Songhay mentor, Adamu Jenitongo resurfaced in dreams and memories.

Stoller found himself recalling his earlier experiences and comparing Songhay attitudes toward life, death, and illness with those of modern American society. He found much of value in the stoic Songhay attitude toward the hardships of life. According to an incantation Stoller had been taught by his mentor, men have "thirty points of misfortune" and women "forty." Each point is a crossroads, where each person must decide which new path to choose and how to travel it. Songhay accept that these cannot be avoided and, in fact, that illness and misfortune are always present. This, as Stoller explains, is very unlike American views, in which illness is not a normal part of life, but instead, something that must be fought and eradicated. Stoller also points to the social web that ties Songhay society together far more tightly than do similar ties of family and friendship in the United States. Looking again at an incantation that he has known for years, he comes to a new understanding of how the Songhay view themselves as part of an ongoing stream of existence and how this perspective influences their lives. There is much to recommend in "Stranger in the Village of the Sick." Stoller's parallel accounts of his experiences as American patient and Songhay sorcerer's apprentice are fascinating, although at times the juxtaposition seems a little contrived. As an anthropologist, Stoller's insights on the American health care system and American attitudes towards cancer are interesting, although not especially startling to those who have done work in the area. But his comparison of Songhay attitudes and American is invaluable. As is normal for most members of most cultures, we forget that there are other ways of seeing the world. Although most American cancer patients will find Songhay ways foreign, there are still elements of wisdom in the Songhay perspective. Whatever Stoller's ultimate fate, he has done a service in writing of his experiences

Cancer and sorcery would not seem words to be used in the same subtitle at all, yet yoga-practicing anthropologist and sorcerer Paul Stoller found himself in an unusual position when diagnosed with lymphoma, and used the lessons of West African life and health to beat his disease. Ironically, the Songhay sorcery he studied professionally led to a unique ability to handle cancer's special challenges, and his lessons are imparted in *Stranger In The Village Of The Sick*, a deft blending of autobiographical memoir and anthropological healing insight.

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