



Stranger in the Village of the Sick: A Memoir of Cancer, Sorcery, and Healing

By Paul Stoller

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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."

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

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.

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From [Booklist](#)

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*

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Review

Readers will find Stoller's account valuable and his perspective on sorcery surprisingly moving.--*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"[A] fascinating blend of personal and cultural commentary, of provocative insights, and encouraging advice for anyone affected by cancer . . ."--Frances Lefkowitz, *Body and Soul*

"Today one finds a variety of cancer drugs under trial or approved for use . . . But there is still a gap between what medicine can do now and what it will do in the future. And Stoller's book is a bridge over that gap because it reminds all patients that, in the face of illness, their lives are rich in meaning and still worth living."--Nick Owcher, *Los Angeles Times*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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