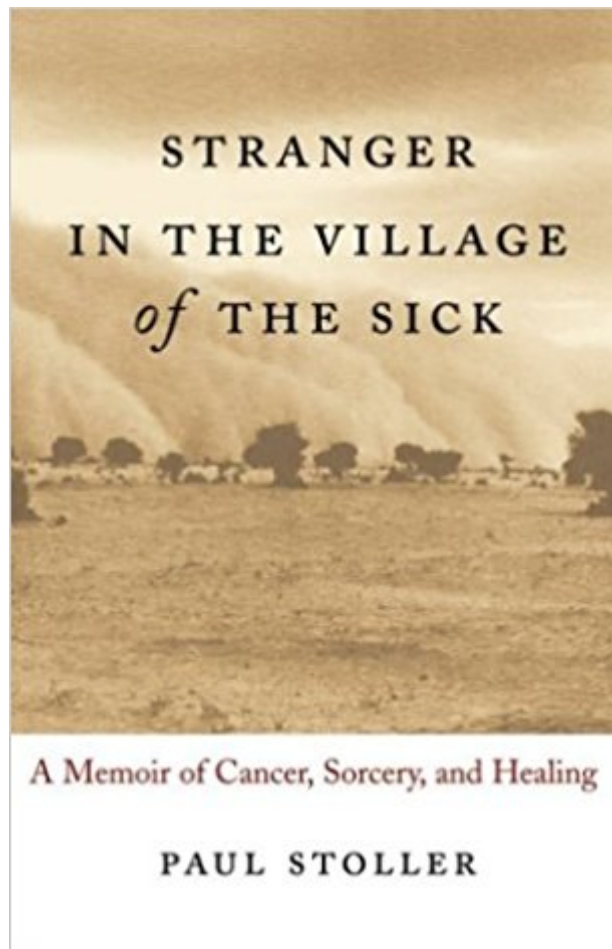


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# Stranger In The Village Of The Sick: A Memoir Of Cancer, Sorcery, And Healing



## Synopsis

After more than fifty years as the model of perfect health, anthropologist Paul Stoller suddenly finds himself diagnosed with lymphoma. The only thing more transformative than his fear and dread of cancer is the place it ultimately takes him—twenty-five years back in time to his days as an apprentice to a West African sorcerer. *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* follows Stoller down this unexpected path toward personal discovery, growth, and healing. Drawing upon an ancient, esoteric tradition, he explores the symbiotic relationship between illness and health, the differences in how disease is culturally perceived, and the stunning capacity of the human spirit to convert adversity into strength and transform knowledge into wisdom. A courageous and extraordinary book . . . No one coping with cancer today should be without *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*. • David Napier, author of *The Age of Immunology*; Neither a tear-jerking testimony nor a morbid story, Stoller's riveting narrative is ebullient, enthralling, and altogether celebratory of life. It is also a superb reminder of the transitory nature of our own lives . . . a masterpiece from a gifted writer. • Jean-Paul Dumont, author of *Visayan Vignettes*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"*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

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.

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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