

Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops

Allison Hong Merrill

She Writes Press (Sep 21, 2021)

Softcover \$16.95 (368pp)

978-1-64742-189-2

Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops is an immigrant's memoir that moves from Taiwan to America, charting challenges and triumphs along the way.

Allison Hong Merrill relates an emotional story of faith, love, and perseverance in her memoir *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops*.

Less than a year and a half into a tumultuous marriage, Hong Merrill came home to find her husband gone. He took with him all of their money. Alone in America with imperfect English and an incomplete education, she had to overcome the traumatizing effects of a lifetime of abuse on her own. Through it all, though, she never stopped hoping for better; she worked hard to find kindness despite the world's frequent cruelty.

Hong Merrill's youth is covered in heartbreaking detail. The book juxtaposes Taiwan's cultural preoccupation with taking care of others with her own abusive childhood. She found comfort in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the kindness of its missionaries, including Cameron, a handsome university student who romanced her and helped her come to the US.

But Hong Merrill found that the infrequent moments when she was made to feel as though she belonged, as when she tried on a wedding dress with her future mother-in-law, were fraught with warning signs that she evaded interpreting in the moment. She struggled with suicidal thoughts and low self-confidence, but came to recognize cycles of abuse in her family and in Cameron's.

The book describes an intense period of grief, guilt, and uncharitable thoughts following Hong Merrill's abandonment. It grapples with complex, relatable feelings, as of simultaneous repulsion and flattery following a friend's sexist compliments. It is sometimes too self-effacing, as with its descriptions of a boyfriend as "an innocent soul"—an odd fit beside his recorded controlling and emotionally abusive behavior. Still, Hong Merrill is a narrator who is quick to own her faults and who, with the benefit of hindsight, explains the flawed logic behind her biggest mistakes well. Her tone is kind and thoughtful, making her struggles all the more painful for the audience to learn about.

Humor is employed in a sparing and effective manner, as in a scene where Hong Merrill spends an evening fantasizing about a marriage proposal that never seems to come. Her never-ending questions about faith, her role in the world, and the inequality she faces as a woman and an immigrant are resonant. From these familiar but powerful portions, the book builds to a satisfying and moving happy ending at last.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (June 18, 2021)

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