

## This Girl Is On Fire: Strength, Faith, and *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops*

Allison Hong Merrill. *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops: A Memoir*. Berkeley, Calif.: She Writes Press, 2021. 346 pp. Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 647421896.

*Reviewed by Shayla Frandsen*

Allison Hong Merrill's menstrual period begins when she's in the fifth grade, and she feels palpable confusion and worry that she's going to bleed all over everything. When a concerned teacher spots her stained skirt, Allison remembers wanting to shout, "I'm innocent! My body is doing its own thing. I can't stop it!" (76)

Merrill's new memoir, *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops*, is full of moments such as these, where Allison finds herself the desperate victim of situations and perpetrators who appear too strong for her to stop. Her memoir is strikingly vulnerable, with almost every one of the ninety-nine chapters revealing new information that knits readers' hearts to Allison's story. Her childhood in Taiwan, her first husband Cameron's pornography addiction, the abandonment that left her without heating, food, and transportation, her complicated relationship with her parents—nothing is off-limits, and the memoir is all the better for it. In the end, I saw that through this book I was given the gift of a funny, heart-wrenching, and spiritual window into another's life.

Despite lasting less than two years, Allison's marriage to Cameron feels like a slog, purposely so. Her account of his abuses and manipulations are like beads on a string, one following right after the other. "Thorn in my side, rock in my shoe, sand in my eye," Merrill writes. "Cameron, born in July with Cancer for his astrological sign, was the cancer in my life" (293). We fear and distrust her first husband, experiencing in a small way how keenly Allison must have felt in his

suffocating presence. Despite this, she writes with sympathy, painting Cameron in a nuanced light that a lesser author might have avoided or mishandled.

Descriptions of Allison's lowest lows—one can almost feel her refusal to fade to black as she painstakingly details her self-harm and long struggles with depression—make her many successes feel that much more poignant and triumphant. Her relationship with an American couple who became her surrogate parents is a life preserver in stormy waters, as is her conversion to the Church and subsequent missionary experience. Her friend Ethan, who shows such compassion to her in the immediate aftermath of her divorce, feels like a precious jewel of whom Allison has offered to give us a glimpse.

Another triumph is her determination to break the cycle of familial abuse and neglect that plagued both her and Cameron. When she considers the importance of her choices in paving a path for her descendants, she writes, "Could this be the price every pioneer pays for those who come after, to give them the best, to make them the lucky ones? If so, then it's not really about me finding my tribe, is it? It's about me creating it" (266). The power of this sentiment struck me. In fact, I found myself pausing in my reading and marinating in her words. Family, legacy, heritage: these are big ideas, but Merrill weaves them throughout her memoir with grace and purpose.

Chapters from her childhood form some of the most difficult moments of the book, but these, too, she writes with a clear-eyed resolve, driven to get every detail right. After her divorce she embarks on various and occasionally bumpy attempts at romantic relationships at Brigham Young University, which she recounts with a similar unapologetic determination. Of her desire to fit in at BYU, she writes, "I was a foreigner who didn't get cultural jokes, didn't have blonde hair and milky skin, didn't have parents or relatives in church leadership positions, or pioneer ancestors who pushed handcarts across the plain to come to Utah. But I could at least get married while still an

undergrad, like everybody else” (299). It’s a sad, bold statement, yet somehow funny, too. This is a tricky balance that Merrill pulls off just right. Her metaphors are surprising, and the writing is peppered with Chinese sayings that illuminate the narrative. When somebody snickers at her word choice during a Missionary Training Center job interview, Allison attempts to discover the meaning for his laughter after. The conversation is awkward, and she leaves feeling unsatisfied with his answer. “What perfectly captures this exact moment,” she writes, “is the Chinese saying, ‘Playing on a harp to a cow,’ which depicts a wasted effort” (272). It’s a fantastic aside, one that imbues extra texture into her story. (The fact that readers eventually discover that the man who laughed would later become her husband is a delightful detail.) One might wish for a few less exclamatory phrases, for Merrill’s humor stands solidly on its own two feet, but her candor is exciting and refreshing.

Merrill informs us that in the Chinese language, the terms “nine” and “a long time” are homophones (295). As such, the word “ninety-nine” sounds even longer, usually taken to mean “never-ending” or “infinite.” But in *Ninety-Nine Fire Hoops*, where readers are engaged with questions of shame, love, healing, faith, country, and home, I found myself wishing that the book reflected the “ninety-nine” of its title: I enjoyed it so much, I never wanted it to end.

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