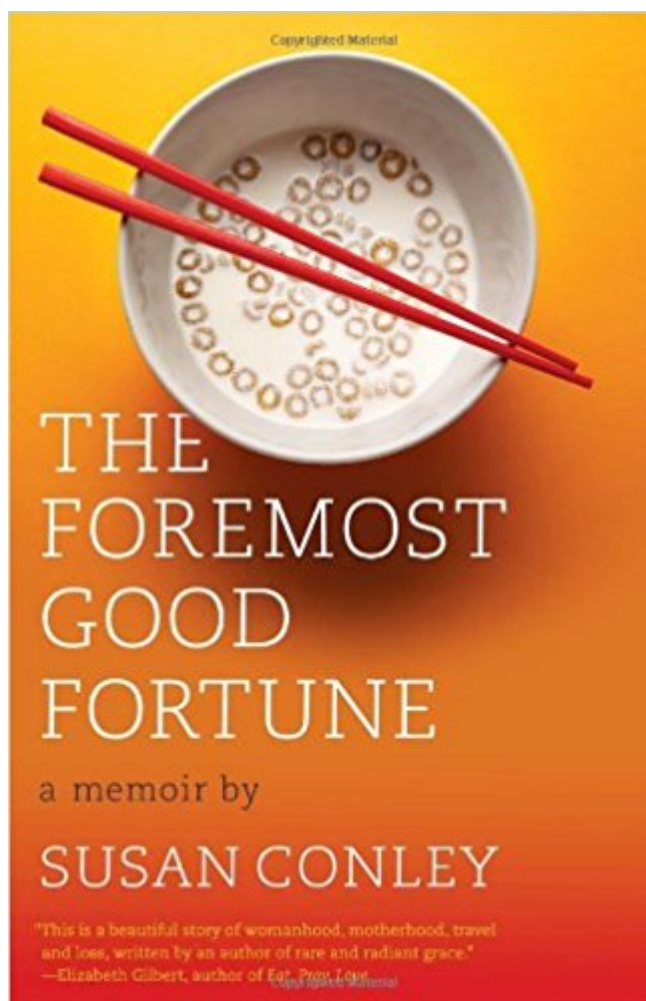


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# The Foremost Good Fortune: A Memoir



## Synopsis

When Susan Conley, her husband, and their two young sons leave their house in Maine for a two-year stint in a high-rise apartment in Beijing, they are prepared to weather the inevitable onslaught of culture shock. But the challenges of living and mothering in an utterly foreign country become even more complicated when Susan learns she has cancer. After undergoing treatment in Boston, she returns to Beijing, again as a foreigner—but this time, it's her own body in which she feels like a stranger. Set against the eternally fascinating backdrop of modern China and full of insight into the trickiest questions of motherhood, this poignant memoir is a celebration of family and a candid exploration of mortality and belonging.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. "China sat in the rooms of our house like a question," begins Conley in this luminous memoir of moving her family from Portland, Maine, to Beijing on the eve of the 2008 Olympics. Conley's husband had accepted a dream job in Beijing, and they had decided to say "yes to all the unknowns that will now rain down on us" including common difficulties faced by many families moving to a new city: a new school for her two young sons, finding new friends, and adjusting to a new apartment all compounded by the intensity of learning a difficult new language and adapting to a new culture. Conley's writing is at once spare and strong, and her description of having to present an unflappable front to her children while being hit "with a rolling wave of homesickness" pulls the reader into her world like a close friend. As Conley starts to hit her stride in her adopted city, she discovers lumps in her breast and finds herself on a different kind of journey,

which she describes as "an essential aloneness that cancer has woven into my days." She explains in this engaging memoir that after her treatment in the U.S. was over, she returned to Beijing, where she searched for the perfect Chinese talisman to "ward off the leftover cancer jujū" and hoping to help her boys move past their own fears of their mother's mortality. (Feb.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Conley, a writing teacher, and her husband, Tony, an IT consultant, relocate from Maine to Beijing with their two young sons. Her compelling and humorous account of the "cultural zeitgeist" in which they are suddenly immersed draws the reader in immediately. It's a travelogue, a cultural history, and a memoir of parenting successes and disasters as she and Tony feel as though they're running a "small overnight camp for American boys in Beijing." As their initially reluctant sons gradually make friends, and Susan slowly learns enough Mandarin to negotiate bargaining at the market and trips with visitors to the Great Wall, their lives seem to be reaching an even keel. Then Susan discovers lumps in her left breast. The family returns for Susan's mastectomy and follow-up radiation to Maine, where family and friends take over as surrogate moms, shuffling the boys from one activity to the next. Then they're back in Beijing, where Susan must come to grips with not only a foreign culture but also "the haze of cancerland." Beautifully written and insightful on many levels. --Deborah Donovan --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I read this memoir in one sitting. As someone who moved with my husband and young children to Asia, I was hooked immediately. Susan nails the incidental moments - the minutiae - that define a family's transition to a new culture. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has experienced or is anticipating an overseas move with children. However, this aspect of Susan's story only scratches the surface of what makes this book a gem. It is funny at times, poignant at others. If you have grappled with parenting decisions, wondered about the realities of day to day life in China, faced an illness of any kind, or supported someone you love through one, you will find this book hard to put down. It is enlightening, hopeful and unequivocally life affirming.

A wonderfully written account of an extraordinary experience connecting the worlds of China and Maine. The storyline does a remarkable job in weaving together the two parallel strands of a life abroad and the personal challenge of a life threatening disease. In capturing this confluence so well, I could feel ("juede") the life experience completely and also personally connect with the tales of

survival. The reader can easily picture the sights, sounds and smells of Beijing ....and the overall experience that is China in transition circa 2007-2010. No other writing has captured this so well, in my estimation. This is a page turner that keeps you wanting to read more. I liked this book a LOT!

My mother has beaten cancer and I read this book years after her surgeries. Conley's words opened my eyes to how isolating her experience was and gave me an avenue to approach that with her. I had her read it and used this book to reflect on her experience. I am so grateful for those conversations, ones I wish we had while she was at home battling cancer and I was away at college. I gave my copy to an aunt with MS who was also able to use this book to communicate how isolated her disease makes her feel, even with the family. In short, the book is well written, engaging, and a clear look into the psyche of someone battling illness and the struggle that creates within a person. Whether or not you're in China, disease can isolate you from those around you. I am grateful that Conley's ability to articulate her process has allowed me to understand how others manage to do the same.

This writer is truly gifted. She had me "at hello"-- I was hooked at the end of the introduction and felt I was with her in her journey every chapter. I could not put the book down. It has been a long time since a non fiction book moved me in such a way. I could relate as a parent who decades ago relocated with a young child to a major city in the US and then learned soon after moving that I had a cancerous disease. But she was all they way over in China where she didn't even speak the language! This woman has so much courage and so honest about what happened in her book and the medical treatment received in Beijing. I especially admire this woman for having the courage to leave her safe harbor in Maine and move back to China with her boys once her treatments were over so they could be a family again. She put her values and priorities in place--her own family. I highly recommend this book to anyone because there is so much to learn from the author. My personal thanks to the author for educating me about both China and breast cancer--the two foreign countries she explored.

The Foremost of Great Fortune is a wonderful read! Conley does a great job describing what it's like to live in a completely foreign world--without having been to China, I feel like I could envision Beijing quite well. Similarly, her descriptions of her emotions as she goes through such a tough time with the diagnosis are so candid and truthful--the reader cannot help but to verbally cheer her on as she journeys through such a challenging time. Her story-telling is so effective--while in one instance I

can empathize with her for her challenges, in the next the comic relief of her sons and their growing up is a wonderful balance on the flow of events. This was definitely a book that I couldn't put down after I had started and one that I plan on rereading soon!

If you like 1st person narrative, this may be the book for you. Plowing through the long descriptions of life in China with 2 children may prove to be a bit tedious. It is difficult to discern why she would have stayed in China through the trials of breast cancer and why the husband didn't just demand her return to the US. All in all, this book was far from a great choice for me. I read it as a book club pick, but I found it to be a trial rather than a joy.

This is one of those books that you just can't put down. It's the kind of book that you want to buy a zillion copies of to give to all your friends, because you know they will love it just as much as you did. Moving, heartfelt, hilarious, authentic....I'm not a writer, so it's hard for me to put into words (I leave that to Conley!). But this is the type of book that stays with you. I \*highly\* recommend *The Foremost Good Fortune*.

Susan Conley recounts her life in Beijing with her family and its travails and triumphs with panache. Her writing style is expert: breezy yet compelling with doses of well-done foreshadowing. You know what's coming but you still enjoy the trip getting there.

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