

## Doctors, Patients, Families and Cross-Cultural Issues

SUMMARY: “Fathering” Bharati Mukerjee, born in Calcutta, now a naturalized American citizen, and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. A Vietnam vet is caught between the jealousies and insecurities of his common-law American wife Sharon and his recently discovered AmerAsian daughter Eng. The daughter’s acute illness and self-imposed remedy of coining involves the family doctor, who quickly unbalances the family system by lending the weight of his authority to support Sharon’s perspective that Eng is a crazy girl who is destroying the family. Although his intent is to be helpful, the physician’s lack of understanding of cross-cultural issues and family’s dynamics further exacerbates an already volatile situation.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the family triangle that exists among Jason, Sharon, and Eng.
2. What is Sharon’s point of view? Jason’s? Eng’s? The doctor’s?
3. How does Sharon attempt to resolve the tensions in the family triangle? (call Dr. Kearns)
4. What role does the family doctor play? How do his actions make matters better? Worse?
5. What could Dr. Kearns have done differently?
6. How would you interpret Jason’s final action?

### TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Permanent Perfect Parent (Physician) – wife and husband initially seem to compete for the attention and approval of the “savior” physician
2. Illicit coalition – scapegoating of patient (Eng) by coalition of wife and doctor
3. Illicit coalition – patient and father form a coalition against the doctor by the end of the story

SUMMARY: “The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down” Anne Fadiman, editor of *The American Scholar* and recipient of a National Magazine Award for Reporting. This is an excerpt from a full-length non-fiction book of the same title documenting the course of a young Hmong child Lia Lee with severe, intractable epilepsy, and the lack of communication and conflicting world-views between her parents and her doctors that complicate and confuse all efforts at treatment.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the relationship between Lia and her parents like?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Lia’s parents and her doctors?
3. How do the parents understand Lia’s illness? How do her doctors?
4. Do you agree with the doctor’s action to remove Lia from her family? What else might have been done?

**TRIANGULATION ISSUES:**

1. Dyadic enmeshment – of patient and family lead to the exclusion of physicians nominally involved in Lia's care
2. Illicit coalition – of patient and family result in attacks on treating physicians