



THE LEAVERS

A Conversation with Lisa Ko and Barbara Kingsolver

A Better Life: An essay by Lisa Ko

Questions for Discussion







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THE LEAVERS IS THE winner of the 2016 PEN/Bellwether Prize, established by Barbara Kingsolver in 2000 to promote fiction that addresses issues of social justice. Kingsolver, the bestselling author of *Flight Behavior*, *The Lacuna*, and twelve other books, talked with Ko about her inspiration for her debut novel.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: The cultural and emotional challenges of adoption are a potential minefield, in literature and in life. Why did you decide to delve into such a fraught subject?

LISA KO: Minefields can make for good fiction! *The Leavers* was inspired by recent, real-life stories of undocumented immigrant women whose U.S.-born children were taken away from them and adopted by American families, while the women themselves were jailed or deported. It was this missionary-type attitude: We need to save these kids from their own culture and families. The kids are assimilable; the mothers are not.

Today, we're seeing more conscious efforts from adoptive parents to celebrate racial difference, rather than trying to ignore it. But choosing to adopt transracially as a symbol of diversity can be a kind of liberal racism in itself.



With *The Leavers*, I want to decenter the narrative of transracial adoption away from that of the adoptive parents. Instead, we need to privilege the voices of adoptees, who are often missing from the conversation or dismissed as being bitter if they're honest or critical about their experiences.

BK: Polly is one of the more remarkable, memorable, complicated characters I've read in a long time. How did you feel about her? Can you talk about your process of creating this seemingly selfish mother at the center of Deming's longing?

LK: Personally, I love Polly's character. She's the mouthy, adventurous badass I wish I was more of, and we need more portrayals of "selfish" women—mothers, in particular, can often be both despised and deified in the United States, making it difficult for them to simply be human. I wanted to create a character who was an immigrant and a mother, who was complex and imperfect and totally real.

BK: You write a lot about psychological doublings in this story—both the mother, Peilan, and her son, Deming, develop two identities. At one point they even glimpse a mother and son who are their doppelgängers. Would you agree that this novel, among other things, is a study of how identity is formed as a function of family and culture? What did you learn about that process during your research and writing?

LK: Definitely. I think it's also a study of how identity, culture, and even family can be fluid, at both a gain and a loss. In some cases, we can choose to mix identity up to our advantage—Peilan chooses a new name for herself. We can choose our own families. In other cases, we have less agency—Deming's name is taken away from him. A name is more than just a name, of course, and for my characters, their new names are tied to geographical, linguistic, and cultural changes. There's this melting-pot fantasy in the United States that immigrants can seamlessly melt into the dominant culture while simultaneously bestowing it with a dash of flavor—a recipe here, a restaurant there. But in reality, assimilation can be a lot more violent. With the doublings, I wanted to explore what's betrayed in this, and at what cost.



BK: Your novel certainly personalizes the effects of a hardline immigration policy in the United States. Did you realize the issue of immigration would be front and center in our politics when this book came out?

LK: I started writing *The Leavers* in 2009, but looking back on the articles that inspired it, so little has changed. We're still deporting hundreds of thousands of immigrants each year, or imprisoning them at one of the many for-profit detention facilities outsourced from the U.S. government to private prison corporations. (One thing that has changed is that there are more children being imprisoned.) You can be authorized to work, your legal status can be pending after you've followed the law and submitted your applications, and you can still be jailed and deported. Nearly a quarter of those deported are parents of U.S.-born children who remain in the country, so you have all these families that have been permanently fractured.

And these things don't happen in a vacuum: trade agreements and the U.S. backing of wars and oppressive governments have helped create the need for people to seek economic opportunities elsewhere.

I'm often bothered by this notion that literature shouldn't be political. How can you separate art from the world it's created in, and why would you want to?



A Better Life

An essay by Lisa Ko

I HAD BEEN WORKING on my first novel, *The Leavers*, for a little over a year when I cashed in a decade's worth of airline miles and flew from New York City to Fuzhou, China. I checked into a hotel and spent a week wandering the city by myself, hoping to spark some insight into my characters.

I'm ethnically Chinese but have zero personal connection to China. My parents were born and raised in the Philippines; they arrived in the United States shortly after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which reversed nearly a century of racist quotas that effectively prohibited immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean while allowing European immigrants to enter the country legally. Timing enabled me to be born in New York, to grow up middle class and "legal" in America. My parents and I lived in a nearly all-white suburb and took regular trips to Manhattan Chinatown for groceries, but we felt like we didn't belong there either, among more recent immigrants. "You're lucky," my parents said, and I knew I was supposed to be grateful for something, but *lucky* also felt like a warning—how precarious status could be.

I couldn't read, understand, or speak Chinese. In Fuzhou, shop owners and cab drivers eyeballed me and asked, "What kind of person are you?"



when I stammered nonsensically at them. I didn't blame them. Each night, I got lost on my way back to my hotel. As I walked, I thought of the many Fuzhounese immigrants who had moved to New York. Unlike many of them, I had the privilege of a U.S. passport, the freedom of mobility.

When I started writing *The Leavers* in 2009, I had a folder stuffed with newspaper clippings about immigrant women and their children. I was fascinated by how these women were represented in mainstream media, as tragic victims or evil invaders. And I was furious at the for-profit detention facilities—outsourced to private prison corporations and functioning, in many ways, as above the law—that jailed hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants.

I was drawn to stories of individual mothers, fathers, and children. There was Xiu Ping Jiang, an undocumented immigrant from Fuzhou who'd been stopped by immigration agents while taking a bus from New York City to Florida. When a *New York Times* reporter found her, Jiang had been held in an immigration detention jail for over a year, often in solitary confinement. What struck me the most was that she had tried to bring her eight-year-old son into the United States from Canada, but he was caught by officials and adopted by a Canadian family.

There was Cirila Baltazar Cruz, a Mexican immigrant discharged from a Mississippi hospital after giving birth, but without her baby. The baby had been declared neglected because Cruz had failed to learn English, and a court gave custody to an American couple. There were Jack and Casey He, Chinese immigrants who'd signed papers for temporary foster care for their baby daughter, Anna Mae, after Jack lost his job. But Anna's foster parents, the Bakers, refused to give her back and wanted to adopt her. A Tennessee judge terminated the Hes' parental rights, the Bakers' lawyer arguing that the Hes were unfit parents, and Anna would have a better life in the United States: "What kind of quality of life is the child going to have in China?" But no one asked what kind of life the child would have in the United States, separated from her family.

I based my character Polly, very loosely, on Xiu Ping Jiang. Then I gave her an eleven-year-old son, Deming; a home in the Bronx; a job at a nail salon. One morning she leaves for work and never comes home. Polly's



voice, her hustle, her journey—she pays \$50,000 to be smuggled into the United States in a box—came to me in a flash. But by the time I traveled to Fuzhou, her narrative had been stalled for months. I was so worried about misrepresenting China that I was avoiding writing critical chapters that took place there.

On my next-to-last day in Fuzhou, I decided to venture out of the city, boarding the first bus that came past my hotel. An hour later, I got off at the last stop and realized I had arrived in the town on which I'd based Polly's village. Here were the half-constructed mansions Polly passed on her daily walks. Here was the snack vendor, the school, the market.

Back in New York, I used the details from my trip to propel new chapters of my novel, adding Polly's life into the buildings I had seen, the buses I had ridden. Yet I kept returning to the children in the news clippings, the ones separated from their mothers and adopted by Americans. Why did these mothers have to be deported while the children stayed behind? Why were wealthy white American parents deemed "fit" while immigrant parents who wanted to raise their own children were deemed "unfit"? And what, exactly, constituted a better life? The adoptive parents in these cases seemed to believe that they were—that America was—entitled to these children. Anna Mae He's foster mother, Louise Baker, said, "If [Anna's mother] truly loved her daughter, she would leave her with us."

Gradually, I realized the crux of my novel lay not just in Polly but also in Polly's son, Deming. I needed to tell both stories. I decided to intersperse Deming's story of being adopted by a white couple and moved upstate with Polly's story of why she left China, her early years in New York, and what happens after her separation from him. At twenty-one, ten years after his mother's disappearance, Deming moves back to New York City and starts looking for Polly. I won't spoil it for you—you'll have to read the novel to see if he finds her—but it's Deming's search for his mother that is the heart of *The Leavers*.

After being profiled in the *Times*, Xiu Ping Jiang was released from prison and later received asylum. She was lucky. Nearly a quarter of the 316,000 immigrants deported from the United States in 2014 were parents of children



who were U.S. citizens, and there are currently more than 15,000 children in foster care whose parents have been deported or are being imprisoned indefinitely. *The Leavers* is my effort to go beyond the news articles, using real-life details as a template to build from, not to adhere to. It's the story behind the story, a tribute to sweat, heart, and grind. But it's really the story of one mother and her son—what brings them together and takes them apart.



Questions for Discussion

1. What were your initial impressions of Polly? How did they change by the end of the book?
2. How does Deming react to his mother's disappearance? How does it influence his choices and relationships? How did knowing from the very beginning of the novel that his mother leaves him affect the story for you?
3. How would you describe Deming's relationship with Polly versus his relationship with Kay and Peter? What is Polly able to give to Deming that Peter and Kay cannot, and vice versa? Do you think one family was better for him than the other?
4. Compare the apartment in the Bronx where Polly and Deming live with Leon, Vivian, and Michael with the Wilkinsons' house in Ridgeborough. How are they different spatially and emotionally?
5. The setting of New York City plays a large part in *The Leavers*. What does New York mean for Deming? How is living in a city different for him than living in Ridgeborough?



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6. What is the significance of names and name changes in this novel? Have you ever changed your name, and if not, would you? Is your name really who you are?
7. Throughout the novel, Deming struggles in school. What do education and academic success mean for Peter and Kay, for Polly, and for Deming?
8. What do you think *The Leavers* is saying about immigration and identity in America? Did reading it change your opinion on undocumented immigration?
9. How is transracial adoption portrayed in this novel? What do you think it would be like to be adopted as a child and raised in a culture different from the one you were born into? Have you ever lived in a culture that is different from your culture of origin, and what was it like?
10. Both Polly and Deming are continually searching for a sense of home and belonging. How do you define “home” and “family”? Where have you felt the most at home? Do you feel that “home” can only be a physical place, or can it be psychological as well?
11. What does Polly want for her life when she is a young girl in China? Does she attain it? Do her goals and dreams change throughout the novel?
12. The novel moves between Deming’s point of view and Polly’s point of view. How did this shift in perspective affect your reading? How does reading Polly’s story change your understanding of Deming’s story and character, and vice versa?
13. Why do you think Deming becomes addicted to gambling? How do risk taking, chance, and gambling play out as themes in the novel for both Deming and Polly?



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14. What is the significance of the title? In what ways do the characters leave, and in what ways are they left?
15. Why do you think the author chose to tell Deming's story in third person and Polly's story in first person? How did this affect your understanding of the characters and story?
16. Deming is a musician who has synesthesia, or the ability to see colors when he hears certain sounds. How do music and synesthesia affect Deming's life and his identity?
17. Do you speak more than one language, or wish you did? How are language and fluency portrayed in the novel? How are Polly and Deming's lives affected by their knowledge—or lack of knowledge—of Chinese and English?
18. This novel was initially inspired by real-life stories. Does knowing this change your reading of the book, and if so, how?



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Lisa Ko's writing has appeared in *The Best American Short Stories 2016; Apogee Journal*; the *New York Times*; *BuzzFeed*; *O, the Oprah Magazine*; and elsewhere. She has been awarded fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the MacDowell Colony, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. She was born in New York City, where she now lives. Visit her at lisa-ko.com. For speaking engagements, contact speakersbureau@workman.com.