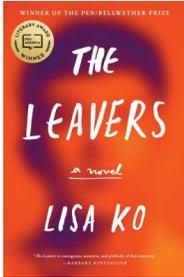


Books by the Stack



The Leavers by Lisa Ko

One morning, eleven-year-old Deming Guo's mother, an undocumented Chinese immigrant named Polly, goes to her job at the nail salon and never comes home. Deming is eventually adopted to live with two white college professors who move him from the Bronx to a small town upstate. This novel explores what it means to be a family and the duality of lives, especially through adoption.

Why you'll like it: *Coming-of-age. Introspective. Sympathetic. Intricately plotted. Richly detailed.*

About the Author: Lisa Ko is the author of *The Leavers*, a novel which won the 2016 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction and was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for Fiction, the 2018 PEN/Hemingway Award, and the 2017 Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award. She has been awarded fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and the MacDowell Colony, among others. Born in Queens and raised in Jersey, she lives in Brooklyn.

Questions for Discussion

1. What relevance, if any, does *The Leavers* have to the immigration issues dividing much of the world today? What are your opinions regarding immigration. Did this book alter those opinions...or confirm them?
2. How is Polly Guo portrayed in this work? Do you admire her...or not? Does she engender sympathy? Does your attitude toward her change during the course of the novel? Early on she is ambivalent about Deming's birth, placing him in a bag and leaving him underneath a city bench...only to return to him, of course. Is she to blame for her ambivalence?
3. Talk about Polly's turbulent past and how it shapes who she has become. She seems driven by dreams of her own. What are those dreams?
4. How would you describe Deming when he arrives back in the U.S. as a six-year-old? What kind of family do Polly and Leon provide for Deming and Michael? What kind of life do they lead in the Bronx? Consider Polly's job at the nail salon.
5. Deming is utterly bewildered by his mother's disappearance. Talk about the effect it has on him as he grows into adolescence and young adulthood? Consider this observation: "If he held everyone at arm's length, it wouldn't hurt as much when they disappeared." Or this one: "He had eliminated the possibility of feeling out of place by banishing himself to *no place*."
6. What role do Ko's music and his gambling play; how do they help assuage his pain? At one point, after a performance with his band, Deming slips out, thinking to himself, "It felt good being the one making the excuse to get away." What does he mean?
7. What do you think of Kay and Peter Wilkinson? Are they clueless? Insensitive? Well-meaning?
8. Polly's story is told in the first person while Deming's is in the third person. Why do you think the author made that choice? Is Polly's tale meant to be a journal for Deming?

9. Polly is the one who sees the nature of the immigration system firsthand. How is the system portrayed in the novel?

10. Lisa Ko says the novel was inspired by a May 4, 2009 New York Times article about an undocumented immigrant from China who spent 18 months in detention. She had been arrested at a bus station on the way to Florida for a new job. Does knowing that the novel has its roots in a true story have any impact on how you understand it?

11. How does the author portray international adoption in this novel? How does she portray transracial adoption?

12. This novel brings up very real concerns regarding for profit detention centers. Discuss the concerns addressed by this novel. Under the current administration, these detention centers are increasing in number. What effect do you imagine the current administration's policies will have regarding these institutions?

(Questions provided by litlovers.com)



www.grpl.org/BookClub