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THE LEAVERS DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1 From Deming to Daniel and Peilan to Polly, do you think the name changes of the main characters helped them to find a fresh start, or further complicated their search for belonging?
- 2 *The Leavers* asks us to grapple with a complicated image of motherhood in Polly's experience. Did you empathize with her? Did your view of her change as more of her story is revealed?
- 3 A major theme throughout the book is the fantasy of alternate selves. As Polly accepts that she is having her child, Ko writes, "Peilan continued on in the village, feeding chickens and stray cats and washing cabbages, as Polly lived out a bonus existence abroad. Peilan would marry Haifeng or another village boy while Polly would walk the endless blocks of new cities." Likewise, Polly and Deming have a game of finding their "doppelgangers" and imagining the lives the alternate Deming and Mama would lead. Why do you think Polly and Deming keep returning to these ideas?
- 4 Similarly, as Polly and Deming make choices, face different situations, and develop in their stories, Ko continually asks us to consider the way we move into differing versions of ourselves and how those selves must co-exist, sometimes painfully. Have you had a life experience that brought you to a different version of yourself? What truly changes and what stays the same about Polly and Deming?
- 5 The novel often goes backwards and forwards in time, and the viewpoint changes with Polly's story in first person and Daniel's in third person. How do you think structure relates to the larger narrative, and how did it affect your connection with the characters?
- 6 Discuss Deming / Daniel. How is he personally accountable for his choices? Are they a result of nature or nurture? Whose actions toward him left the greatest impact, for better or worse – Peter and Kay's, his mother's, Roland's, Vivian's, even government policy?
- 7 What was your first impression of the title of this book? How did revisiting *The Leavers* inform what you might suspect to happen as plot twists appeared throughout the story? Discuss the power a title has in reference to a greater book.
- 8 This book is inspired from a real headline and true story, and the issues of immigration it raises continue to be relevant. Did Polly and Deming's story affect your thinking on this topic?
- 9 *The Leavers* won the 2016 PEN/Bellwether Prize, an award that was "created to promote fiction that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships." What did you get out of this novel? If applicable, compare it to other novels written on a similar subject.
- 10 Deming plays a concert at the beginning of the novel and again at the end, neither of which could be considered a success by most standards. Compare these performances and consider what they convey about the journey he has been on.

