



Discover. Read. Share.

## 9 QUESTIONS WITH LISA KO

**hoopla digital:** *The Leavers*, your debut novel, has been published for about a year and has received prestigious awards and widespread acclaim. After working on the novel for seven years, what has the last year been like for you?

**Lisa Ko:** It's been an incredible experience to have people reading *The Leavers*. When you work on a novel for so long, you're doing the writing alone, obsessing over it in your head, and when you publish it, you release it out into the world to share with others. I've been fortunate to connect with readers online and in person, both in the U.S. and abroad.

**hd:** We know that the story of *The Leavers* was inspired by a news article you read of a woman from China who becomes ensnared in the immigration system and her son who had been adopted to a Canadian family. What was it about this particular headline that was so powerful for you?

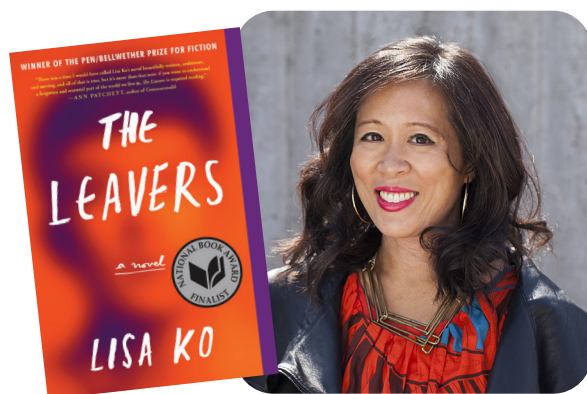
**LK:** As the child of immigrants myself, the article, and others like it, said so much to me about identity and assimilation in the U.S.; who gets to be American and why; and the links between the prison industrial complex and the criminalization of immigrants.

**hd:** Can you tell us about the process of writing this book? What was your research like?

**LK:** I did a large amount of reading and interviewing in my research, including traveling to China to visit Polly's hometown. The novel began as Polly's story—and I knew going in that I would have the characters of a mother and a son and they would be separated—but I started writing Deming's story when I found myself wondering what it would have been like for him to be raised in his adoptive, all-white community. The book started to come together when I realized it was less about the external circumstances that impact my characters and more about their internal journeys: their search for family, home, and belonging.

**hd:** Can you tell us about your decision to write Polly's story in first person, while Deming's is written in third; does Polly create a "time capsule" for Deming?

**LK:** It took me several drafts to figure out the best way to tell the story. I wrote it with two first-person narrators, two-third person narrators, past tense, present tense. But when I started writing Polly in the first person, addressing her son as "you," something clicked. It gave her story a more intimate, testimonial quality, where Deming finds out about what happened to her at the same time that the reader does.



[theclub.hoopladigital.com](http://theclub.hoopladigital.com)



Discover. Read. Share.

## 9 QUESTIONS WITH LISA KO *cont.*

**hd:** What was the hardest scene for you to write in *The Leavers*?

**LK:** The scene where Deming and Polly reunite, for its emotional as well as structural weight in the book.

**hd:** For some of your readers, I'd say your book was particularly powerful in that it connects them to a specific community that they may encounter on a surface level all the time, perhaps while at a nail salon with a nail technician like Polly, who might otherwise be underrepresented. Can you talk about the issues of responsibility and representation that you had to deal with in creating these characters and telling their stories?

**LK:** Absolutely. I was conscious of the responsibility you have when you're a writer writing about an experience that isn't yours, and I wanted to do the work to treat these experiences with respect. For me, that meant reading and listening to the stories of immigrants and transracial Asian adoptees and researching things like nail salon working conditions and for-profit immigration prisons, and then using this research in creating characters that feel fully human.

**hd:** If you had to name one central impetus that drives you to write fiction, what would it be?

**LK:** I want to write the books and stories that I want to read.

**hd:** What authors would you say influenced you in writing *The Leavers*? What are you reading now?

**LK:** The novels of Toni Morrison, Junot Díaz, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie were influences in writing *The Leavers*. And I've been reading Sesshu Foster's new poetry collection *City of the Future*.

**hd:** What will we be reading next from you? Anything on the horizon you can share?

**LK:** I've been busy with book tour events, but hope to start working on some new writing soon.

