



The Leavers (Ko) - Discussion Questions

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Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use these LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for The Leavers...then take off on your own:

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 in 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 2009 [New York Times](#)

[\(http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/04/nyregion/04immigrant.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/04/nyregion/04immigrant.html) 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?

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