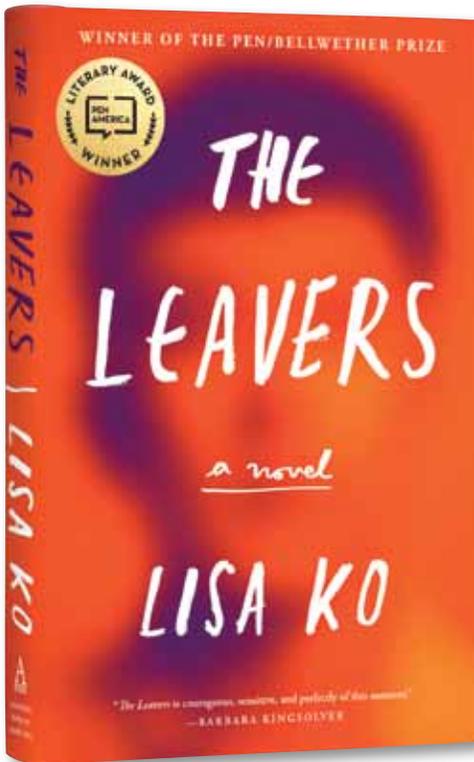


A CONVERSATION WITH

LISA KO AND BARBARA KINGSOLVER

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.



“The Leavers is courageous, sensitive, and perfectly of this moment.”

—BARBARA KINGSOLVER

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.

"When I founded the Bellwether Prize, I hoped to find and support writers who had the courage to tackle exactly the kind of risky, sensitive, topical subjects that you've undertaken in *The Leavers*."

—BARBARA KINGSOLVER

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? ■