

BV Intern Journal: Lisa Ko

By Barbara Padilla

“Did you think that when I was growing up, a small girl your age, I thought: hey, one day, I’m going to come all the way to New York so I can pick gao gao out of a stranger’s toe? That was not my plan,” said Polly, from *The Leavers* by Lisa Ko. Imagine a mother and her son walking down Madison Avenue in New York City together after school. Now, adjust your focus a little bit and see the mother as an undocumented Chinese immigrant at risk of deportation. Ko creates a moving novel tracking the separation between a mother, Polly Guo, and her son, Deming Guo. She tactfully fleshes out the anxieties surrounding immigration in the U.S. by drawing out the voices that are not highlighted, such as immigrants, adoptees, and adoptive families. She connects us to these voices while also letting their narratives speak to each other.

As for Lisa Ko, she has always been interested in writing stories and journaling according to *NBC News*. Being the only U.S.-born citizen of her Chinese family, she grew up wanting to hold onto her own family’s story of immigration to the Philippines, and then to the U.S. While in adulthood, she had learned about the detention of Xiu Ping Jiang, which sparked her interest in exploring detention cases of immigrants and their U.S.-born children through her writing. As a result, she wrote *The Leavers*, winning her the 2016 PEN/Bellweather Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction and getting her to be a 2017 National Book Award Finalist.

Despite all the recognition this novel received, I did not know what to expect when I first read *The Leavers*. At first, I made guesses about the title, because I decided to start reading the book without looking at descriptions or reviews. *Maybe the characters would be just be going somewhere together and have an interesting, life-changing experience?* I was somewhat, correct. Then, as I read, I discovered something more present: the need to understand another person’s experience. Shortly after, I realized that I somehow related to the smallest of Deming and Polly’s feelings, like uncertainty and missing someone you are close to. As a result, I felt the urge to explore more of my own family’s past. Overall, I was not expecting to exercise an immense amount of empathy and feel connected to an experience I have never gone through.

Oftentimes, a novel displaces us as readers, but true craftsmanship, in my opinion, is writing that tugs at our hearts and thoughts, while stitching us to characters and their narratives. Because of that craftsmanship, I think that Ko and her novel do what fiction should always do: challenge us. Now, I could go on, but I think it would be better for everyone to read and experience this debut novel themselves, because it is truly illuminating and relevant. With national discussions about immigration, I think that *The Leavers* asks us to sincerely engage with those who are unseen, struggling, coping, and human.

With that said, I am beyond excited, along with the other interns, to welcome Lisa Ko to our Winter With the Writers Literary Festival this week. All of us look forward to her Master Class, where the interns’ stories will be workshopped with this fantastic author, and attending her joint-reading, interview, and book signing. Lisa Ko’s Master Class will be held on Thursday, February 22, at 2 p.m. in the SunTrust Auditorium, and her joint reading with, author, Elliot Ackerman, will be held on the same day at 7:30 p.m. in Bush Auditorium. We invite Rollins College, Winter Park, and outside communities to join us on this special occasion!