

The Leavers

Lisa Ko

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The story's most heartbreaking disclosures are powerful in their indictment of the unrealistic expectations placed upon struggling families.

In Lisa Ko's *The Leavers*, departure is sometimes a matter of fleeing, and sometimes a matter of being pushed, and it is often the opening that enables better understandings of our origins.

Deming—known as Daniel, after his preteen adoption by staid New York academics—is lost at twenty-one. He wants to be a rock star, but finds himself as dissatisfied in his band as he was in academia. He is also recovering from a gambling addiction and grappling with his expulsion from college. Underlying all of these troubles is the trauma that no one truly lets him talk about: the mysterious departure of his mother from his life ten years previous.

Ko lets Daniel's pain take center stage before shifting focus to his mother, Polly; the result is a story that unfolds with ever-surprising emotional blows. Daniel's feelings of desertion come to fit imperfectly with his mother's truth: that choices for Chinese immigrants are never easy.

Polly finds herself alone in New York as a pregnant teen, hoping for a better life. But expenses pile on top of the toils of single motherhood; family troubles pervade; and the cruelty of a system that is happy to exploit undocumented workers, but that finds little sympathy for them in their toughest times, comes to be the wedge that no one properly names. The story's most heartbreaking disclosures are powerful in their indictment of the unrealistic expectations placed upon struggling families.

So, too, are New York City's less postcard scenes captured, including the cramped apartments and hot workspaces still occupied by those with few choices; the stark conditions of ICE camps, even in ostensibly kinder eras, are a brutal reveal. China's villages, and the implications of its single-child policies for young women, are drawn with similarly harsh and vivid colors. Deming's adoptive parents, the Wilkinsons, serve as a blunt denunciation of forced multiculturalism that lacks understanding.

As Polly and Daniel go back and forth—between China and New York; to and from each other; in and out of spaces that look like they could offer something new—questions of true belonging emerge, with implications that are emotionally staggering.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May/June 2017)

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