



RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
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Award-winning Author Lisa Ko Delivers Ramapo College Opening Convocation Address

MAHWAH, N.J. — Author Lisa Ko delivered the keynote address at the Ramapo College Opening Convocation on September 4. Ko discussed her award-winning book, *The Leavers*, which was chosen as the summer reading selection for first-year students. A coming-of-age story that explores issues around immigration and deportation, as well as cross-cultural adoption, *The Leavers* was a 2017 National Book Award for Fiction finalist, won the 2016 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction, and was a finalist for the 2018 PEN/Hemingway Award and the 2017 Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award.

In the convocation address, Ko discussed her path to becoming a writer and her childhood as an Asian-American daughter of immigrant parents, as well as the themes of the book including immigration, deportation and cross-cultural adoption. Ko recounted fond childhood memories of her family telling stories around the kitchen table. Hearing these stories “taught me there is a great power and a gift in being able to tell your story – to be able to document and remember and preserve,” said Ko.

Ko noted the lack of Asian characters in the books she read growing up, and how she was strongly influenced once she read a book with an Asian-American protagonist. It encouraged her to begin creating characters in her own stories with which she more closely identified. Ko said, “When I began to read and write about people who were more like me, it expanded the possibilities for my own life. I saw who I could become.”

News articles she had read with stories of real life people were the “springboards for the characters,” Ko said. “The characters themselves really kind of grew out of the situations that I had read about, about a mother and a son who were separated because of immigration policies, detention and adoption as well.”

When asked how she thought the book would impact students and what she would like them to learn from it, Ko said, “I think the themes of belonging and identity and assimilation are things that really everybody can relate to in a way...so I think that through reading fiction we can learn

a lot, not only about the world around us and about other people, but learn about ourselves. We can see ourselves reflected in a lot of different stories and in the characters' journeys to find that sense of belonging.”

Ko commented on the current immigration situation in the U.S. and how that is part of a complicated history of immigration, detention, assimilation, and adoption in the U.S. She said, “We’re especially living in a time when these stories of family separation continue to be very, very timely. Currently, there are about 7,000 parents of U.S. born children who are being deported every month. Of course that has huge reverberations across the country – socially, economically, psychologically.”

What advice would Ko give to students transitioning from high school to college? She said, “All the characters have to push up against this kind of struggle to live on their own terms when there are a lot of social and familial and cultural expectations that are being put on them. . . My advice would be to figure out a way to stay true to yourself, to what you want. Be aware of what those expectations are and what you want for yourself.”

Ramapo’s Summer Reading Program is academically linked to its First-Year Seminar (FYS) course. First-year students read a common pre-selected book over the summer and start the fall semester prepared to discuss the book with their FYS classmates. They are also assigned an essay question in their FYS class based on the book that asks students to exercise their critical thinking skills, their reasoning and analytical thinking skills, and their writing and communication skills. This year’s FYS students will have the opportunity to participate in a follow-up video chat event with Lisa Ko where they will be able to ask specific questions that have emerged from their initial class discussions.

Ko’s writing has appeared in *Best American Short Stories 2016*, *Apogee Journal*, the *New York Times*, *BuzzFeed*, *O. the Oprah Magazine*, *Narrative*, *Copper Nickel*, the *Asian Pacific American Journal* and elsewhere. She has been awarded fellowships and residencies from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the MacDowell Colony, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Writers OMI at Ledig House, the Jerome Foundation, and Blue Mountain Center, among others. She was born in Queens, raised in New Jersey, and now lives in Brooklyn.

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Ramapo College of New Jersey is the state’s premier public liberal arts college. Ranked among the top colleges in the region by College Choice and recognized by, among others, U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review, Colleges of Distinction and also designated by Victory Media as a “Military Friendly College,” Ramapo College is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding.

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include business, education, nursing and social work. In addition, the College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels, and offers graduate programs leading to degrees in Accounting, Business Administration, Educational Technology, Educational Leadership, Nursing, Social Work and Special Education.