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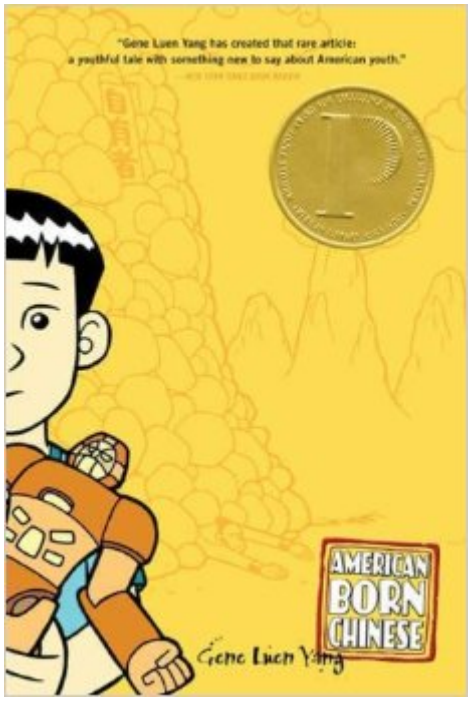
American Born Chinese



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Synopsis

Gene Luen Yang is the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature.Jin Wang starts at a new school where he’s the only Chinese-American student. When a boy from Taiwan joins his class, Jin doesn’t want to be associated with an FOB like him. Jin just wants to be an all-American boy, because he’s in love with an all-American girl. Danny is an all-American boy: great at basketball, popular with the girls. But his obnoxious Chinese cousin Chin-Kee’s annual visit is such a disaster that it ruins Danny’s reputation at school, leaving him with no choice but to transfer somewhere he can start all over again. The Monkey King has lived for thousands of years and mastered the arts of kung fu and the heavenly disciplines. He’s ready to join the ranks of the immortal gods in heaven. But there’s no place in heaven for a monkey. Each of these characters cannot help himself alone, but how can they possibly help each other? They’re going to have to find a wayâ •if they want fix the disasters their lives have become.American Born Chinese is a 2006 National Book Award Finalist for Young People’s Literature, the winner of the 2007 Eisner Award for Best Graphic Album: New, an Eisner Award nominee for Best Coloring, a 2007 Bank Street Best Children’s Book of the Year, and a New York Times bestseller.

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Customer Reviews

I’ve made it my personal quest to find a children’s graphic novel that can prove to naysayers anywhere the literary possibilities of the genre. When, "American Born Chinese", was placed merrily into my hands, however, I fairly ignorant of its potential. The name Gene Luen Yang didn’t mean anything to me. The style was not one that immediately leapt out at me. But I’m a sucker for a good

graphic novel and this book had something going for it: The Monkey King. I love love love any stories, legends, picture books, what have you, that contain that most legendary of all gods and goddesses, the king of the monkeys himself. Lured in by the promise of some serious fantasy (as, I am sure, many kids who pick up this book will as well) I found a story about assimilation that is so brilliantly penned and carefully plotted that it rivals every notion of what a graphic novel can and can't do. Do you know someone who couldn't care less about this new format? Someone who thinks comic books can't convey the weight and intelligence of a proper novel? Thrust "American Born Chinese" into their arms immediately, if not sooner. If I were to choose a single graphic novel to grace every library's children's room nationwide, you can bet that this is the puppy I'd put my faith in.Three storylines. Three different characters. One single idea. At the heart of our first story is Jin Wang, the son of Chinese immigrants, who just wants to fit in. He wants to date the cute blond girl in the overalls and to perm his hair. What he wants, and how far he's willing to go to get it, is the center of the story itself. The second storyline concerns the tales of the Monkey King. Not content to be merely a monkey, the Monkey King did everything in his power to become a Great Sage, Equal of Heaven. This was all well and good until he was informed by Tze-Yo-Tzuh, creator of all existence, that he was a monkey after all. It's not until the King can accept what he is that he is able to free himself from his own self-induced prison. The third storyline is the riskiest of the three. It plays out like a bad sitcom, with a kid named Danny and his cousin Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee is every horrible Chinese stereotype ever concocted and rolled into a single character. His story slowly continues until it becomes clear that the three different tales we've been reading have merged into a single narrative. And at the heart of the narrative is the idea that assimilation is a question of forfeiting your soul. A forfeit that no one should want to make.Yang skillfully brings together all kinds of elements that relate to the idea of wanting to become someone you're not. When we first see Jin Wang, he's just a little kid playing with a Transformer. Jin Wang loves Transformers so much that he wants to be one when he grows up. It seems like a typical kid-like thing to say, but Yang understands the essential lure of what a Transformer was. It changed from one thing to another according to the situation. So when you see Jin and his young Chinese-American friends gathered on Saturday mornings with their Transformers to watch the tv show of the same name and then act it out, you know precisely what Yang's saying. The book is full of small details like this that kids, even if they don't entirely understand what is being said, will contemplate on a much deeper level.My husband snatched up and read this book just before I was able to (he's a grapic novel fan), and he complained a little that the Monkey King storyline wasn't in more of the book. I feel torn on the issue. On the one hand, I think that Yang has given just the right amount of weight and time to

each tale in this book. On the other hand, it’s hard not to want more Monkey King. I’m kind of ashamed to say it, but the first time I ever heard of the legend was when I read, "The Sign of Qin" by L.G. Bass. After that I found other Monkey King picture books, and came to the slow realization that here was an amazing character. A trickster, but with a kind of gravity that makes him a more understandable character than your usual Pucks, Pans, and Coyotes.The art itself is simple enough to lure in the kiddies right from the start, without ever becoming too simple or failing to convey the storyline. In the end, this book is one of the subtler discussions of race, racism, and trying to fit in. Fellow author Derek Kirk Kim is blurbed as saying, "As an Asian American, American Born Chinese is the book I’ve been waiting for all my life". The book goes beyond just the Asian American community, though. It’s a smart witty treatise that needs to be read and understood by all kids. The best graphic novel of 2006 for children, bar none.

This book is a truly stellar contribution to the graphic novel genre. Jin Wang’s coming-of-age story is pitch-perfect in its attention to visual detail as well as its "feel" for adolescent dialogue. Not content to tell this story "straight," Gene Yang introduces two other narratives -- those of the legendary Monkey King and of the sitcom characters Danny and Chin-Kee -- to add multiple layers of meaning to Jin’s struggles to fit in.It shoud be noted that, even though Yang balances three stories (which ultimately converge) in this book, Jin’s story serves as the emotional core of the novel. The Monkey King’s and Chin-Kee’s stories represent different poles of Jin’s identity as a Chinese American -- extreme, identity-negating self-reliance, on the one hand, and extreme, caricatured self-hatred, on the other. The novel does a brilliant job of drawing us into the world of a teenager who engages these extremes as a matter of "growing up Asian American" -- a paradoxical subject of repulsion and desire, exclusion and belonging.Don’t get me wrong, though: while Yang’s themes are undeniably powerful, his writing is just really, really funny. The Monkey King is raucously self-involved; Chin-Kee is both sad and strangely self-aware of his own caricaturedness (i.e., his "kung fu" moves are all named after "Chinese" dishes, like "Mooshu Fist"), and one scene involving Jin, bathroom soap, and his love interest Amelia had me in stitches. Which is to say it’s nice to see that important themes of identity and cultural belonging can be explored in such a playful manner.Credit to Yang, then, for not taking himself so seriously, and for giving us a profound meditation on "growing up ethnic" that looks, sounds, and *feels* right.

This beautifully produced graphic novel contains three storylines which come together in a well-constructed final chapter. The first storyline concerns the classic Chinese tale of the Monkey

King (Sun Wukong) and his egotistical quest to become a god above all others. The second storyline is a about a Taiwanese-American kid raised in San Francisco's Chinatown who moves with his family to the suburbs. There he tries to fit in at his new elementary school, and goes through the usual loneliness of the outsider, endures bullying, makes friends with the other two Asian kids, and falls in love with a pretty white girl. The third storyline is delivered as a tasteless sitcom about an all-American high-school boy whose life gets turned upside down when his bucktoothed stereotype of a Chinese cousin comes to visit. Although the tone is very different in each storyline, they all have something to say about being different and coming to terms with one's identity, and the way they morph into a single climax at the end is quite clever and effective. It's a nice book to give any kid who's struggling with trying to find their place in the nasty world. The artwork is very clean and simple, with traditional lettering, crisp colors, and very simple paneling (which is nicely framed by generous white space above and below). The printing is beautiful and the paper and binding is top-notch.

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