



American Born Chinese

Written by Gene Luen Yang

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This award-winning graphic novel about Chinese and Chinese-Americans focuses on the difficulties of being part of a culture that is often misunderstood or stereotyped. The novel follows the stories of three seemingly unconnected characters: the Chinese Monkey King, one of the most beloved characters in Chinese folk stories Jin Wang, a young Chinese-American boy whose family moves from Chinatown in San Francisco to a mid-western town where he is an anomaly and Danny, a nondescript teenager who has to endure the yearly visit of his inappropriate Chinese cousin, Chin-Kee. Each of the three stories deals with the difficulty of being an “outsider.”

The Monkey King desperately wants to become a member of the immortal deities, but when he tries to crash their heavenly dinner party they reject him because he is, well, a monkey. Even after he masters the twelve disciplines of kung-fu, which include developing powers of flying on clouds, changing size, and becoming invulnerable to heat or cold, he is reminded that, in the end, he is still just a monkey.

Jin Wang is the second Asian-American child in his new school the other, Suzy Nakamura, is Japanese-American. Of course the kids at school don’t make that distinction and think they are betrothed to each other, so, as Jin Wang says, “We avoided each other as much as possible.” When Wei-Chen arrives from Taiwan, Jin immediately tries to distance himself from him as well, but their shared experiences finally bring them together as best friends.

Danny seems to be a popular kid at his school, but when his cousin Chin-Kee arrives from China for his yearly visit, Danny must bring him to school with him. Later, we learn that Chin-Kee’s totally exaggerated “Chinese” behavior has embarrassed Danny to the point that he has already been forced to change schools three times within one year.

All three characters represent the experiences of Chinese-Americans living in the American culture where they are a small minority. Their experiences also speak to kids who feel they don’t belong, whether they are attending a new school or putting up with embarrassing family members, or kids who wish they could be someone else — someone taller, or shorter, or smarter, or more handsome. At the end of the novel, the three stories converge in a surprising conclusion — one that reminds us to accept ourselves as we are, rather than trying to change our basic nature to fit in.

American Born Chinese is laugh out loud funny at times. The teachers in Jin Wang’s new school quickly spread their own stereotypes about Chinese people and culture when they mangle Chinese-American students’ names and claim they all came directly from China. Chin-Kee (say his name really fast) is a completely over-the-top representation of all the negative stereotypes about Chinese people, from his fractured accent to his choice of food to his knowing all the answers in his cousin’s Danny’s classes. As a graphic novel, the text is written in a way that adolescents will appreciate, with

kids speaking the way they typically would with each other the Monkey King in particular is something of a punk who challenges authority with the kind of violence found in comic books.

Gene Yuen Yang was born in Alameda, California, the son of Chinese immigrants. As a child, he loved hearing his mother's stories about the Monkey King, to whom he refers as "the Asian Mickey Mouse." Since the Monkey King isn't part of American culture, he gradually gave up his fascination until he found a copy of Arthur Waley's translation of *Journey to the West*, which re-introduced him to the Monkey King. For more information about Yang and the Monkey King, visit Yang's Web site.

The winner of the 2007 Michael Printz Award and a National Book Award Finalist in 2006, *American Born Chinese* could be used very effectively in a classroom to discuss the stereotypes those of us who are members of a Western culture have of Chinese people in particular and Asian people in general, whether they are American or not. While some of the stereotyping in the book might be considered offensive, it successfully highlights the experiences of Chinese-Americans. Derek Kirk Kim, who has collaborated with Yang, is quoted on the back jacket as saying, "As an Asian-American, *American Born Chinese* is the book I've been waiting for all my life." I'll bet he's not the only one.

American Born Chinese can be read alongside two other autobiographies that illuminate the experiences of Chinese-Americans and Chinese in developing a sense of self. *The Lost Garden* (1996) is Lawrence Yep's autobiography of growing up as a Chinese-American boy who didn't fit in with either culture, and in *Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter* (1999), author Adeline Yin Mah shares the heartbreaking story of her treatment at the hands of her stepmother in Shanghai.

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