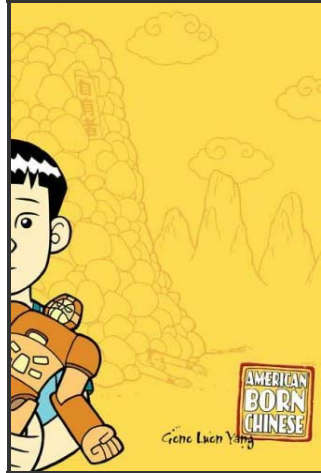


INTERVIEW WITH

## GENE LUEN YANG

Author of *American Born Chinese*  
(First Second Books, 2006)



On November 7, 2007 at a café inside a Borders bookstore in Fremont, our editors sat down with Gene Yang to discuss his graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, a finalist for the 2006 National Book Award and recipient of the 2007 Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature.

There was no debate that *Kartika* wanted Gene Yang to be the first author interview we published. The editorial board unanimously held *American Born Chinese* in the highest regard. To say the editors were excited about meeting Gene would be an understatement. After this interview, the editors at *Kartika* admire him even more.

In person, Gene exemplified one of the most unpretentious writers in the literary community. He spoke candidly about his opinions and life experiences and it is no wonder he has gained a wide following of fans in just two years.

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*SUNNY WOAN: Assimilation is a major theme in American Born Chinese (“ABC”). One view on assimilation, as espoused by Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian* defines assimilation as “becoming whiter.” Have you reached any conclusions regarding the duality of being Asian American?*

GENE LUEN YANG: No, I’m still trying to figure out what it means to be Asian American. I think I’ve progressively gotten away from shame in my own culture, although it’s still there. Even as an adult, there are still times I feel a gut reaction, such as when I meet a new immigrant and he speaks a certain way and there are other people around, I can feel it inside of me. There’s a little jump. There’s definitely a temptation to become fully assimilated, fully a part of America, but as Asian Americans, we have to constantly struggle against that.

*SW: You have said in prior interviews that your personal upbringing is not the same as Jin’s upbringing in ABC. Since the story is not autobiographical,<sup>1</sup> was your goal then to tell an “Asian American” story?*

GLY: Yeah, Jin spent a portion of his childhood in San Francisco Chinatown. I was basically born and raised in the suburbs. The community that I had Jin grow up in wasn’t as complex as the community I grew up in. I grew up in Saratoga, which is a suburb of San Jose, and a fairly affluent neighborhood. It is now 50 or 60, maybe even 70 percent Asian, but when I first got there, we were just one of a handful of Asian families in the area. As I grew up, though, more and more immigrants came in. In the story, Jin’s community is almost homogenously white, with the exception of these three Asian families in this white culture. The community I grew up in was constantly evolving, dynamic, not limited to only Asian immigrants, but also Middle Eastern and South Asian families as well.

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<sup>1</sup> See a republication of an interview of Gene by *The Pulse* in Comicon, [http://www.comicon.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get\\_topic;f=36;t=005901](http://www.comicon.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=36;t=005901), where Yang states, “It’s not autobiographical” in reference to ABC.

*SW: In telling Jin's story, what facets of the Asian American experience did you know you definitely wanted to include?*

GLY: There's a principle in cartooning where you try to capture the essence of something with the fewest number of lines. You figure out which lines are most important and those are the ones you draw. I was trying to do that with writing as well by focusing on this isolated experience of shame and figuring out what the most important lines of the story were.

*SW: Your interpretation of the Monkey King story in ABC adopts a Christian context, replacing the original Buddhist context in the myth. You have been quoted to say this was "necessary" in making it an Asian American re-telling. Why do you think that is?*

GLY: Did I use the word "necessary"? <sup>2</sup>

*SW: I think I have it in quotations.*

GLY: Well, that would probably be the number two most controversial part of the book. Chin-Kee would be number one and the Christian element would be number two. I think I was really intimidated by the Monkey King story. I really liked it when I heard it as a bedtime story in my youth, but when I started thinking about incorporating it into my comics, I was very intimidated because in Asia, pretty much any comic book artist worth his or her salt has done something with the Monkey King, so I didn't think I could bring anything new to it. So then ultimately I hit onto this idea of doing an Asian American take. Now within my own experience of being an Asian American, religion does play a part in the way I view life. Also, I see a trend in Asian Americans converting to Christianity, more so than folks of other ethnicities. I went to Berkeley for college and if you went to any Christian fellowship or student group, it was

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: *Kartika Review* could not locate any sources online where the author was quoted as using the word "necessary" in this context. There was, however, a response to an interview question in *The Pulse* posed by Alex Dueben about Yang's Christian reinterpretation of the myth. See: [http://www.comicon.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get\\_topic;f=36;t=005901](http://www.comicon.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=36;t=005901).

almost all just black hair and yellow faces. It was a weird thing. Even groups that were traditionally white up through the 80s are now all-Asian. Reflecting on that, I think part of what attracts Asian Americans – I don't even know if I should generalize – but in my personal experience as an Asian American and what attracted me to Christianity, there is an idea within Christianity of intention behind your identity, that there is this outside agency that actually attended you to be who you are. Asian Americans tend to be caught in a place where we don't fit into our culture of origin and we don't fit into the culture we find ourselves in. Thus, this idea of intention is very powerful and that was what I wanted to explore.

*SW: In a book review of ABC by Ned Vizzini that appeared in the New York Times, Vizzini described your book as “needlessly crass,”<sup>3</sup> citing that it opened with a joke about breasts and peaches. Since ABC is often categorized under the children's or young adult's section, what would your response be to Vizzini's statement?*

GLY: There are some of my friends who have said the same thing, that my comics are a little bit crass. My parents have, and my dad especially, a crass sense of humor and I think that is just part of the DNA of my family to make body jokes and fart jokes.

*SW: ABC has gotten a lot of acclaim. Has your life changed in any way since publishing ABC or its National Book Award nomination?*

GLY: It has. Well, first of all, I'm doing stuff like this. Nobody wanted to talk to me before. I've also gotten the opportunity to travel to many library events and school presentations. That's been great. Also, the biggest thing would be that I am able to justify this part of my life now. Before when I did comics, I was losing money at it. Only two years ago did that turn around and now I'm not losing money from it. I have a four-year-old boy and a seven-month-old girl. Before, I think if I had continued to lose money at drawing comics, at this

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<sup>3</sup> “High Anxiety,” Review of American Born Chinese by Ned Vizzini, New York Times, May 13, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/13/books/review/Vizzini-t.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/13/books/review/Vizzini-t.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)

point I would have had to give it up or at least scale back drastically. With the nomination [of the National Book Award], it eases my mind as a dad to be spending this much time on it.

*SW: On your website, there are sites where you use comics in education. Now that you've gained literary acclaim, you would be able to launch any personal goals or ambitions to pursue comics in education.*

GLY: I have a couple more stories I want to do in comics. Both comics and education are passions of mine. They're just now beginning to come together, but at this point I don't have any definitive plans.

*SW: Any plans to do a sequel with Jin Wang, Wei-Chan, or Suzy Nakamura, like you did with Gordon Yamamoto and Loyola Chin?*

GLY: No, I don't. [laughs] I have other stories, but they don't revolve around them at all.

*SW: It's been said that some writers subconsciously write to please a particular person. If so, then who do you write for?*

GLY: When I first started working on ABC, the comic book industry was falling apart. That was around 2000. My friends and I would go to comic book conventions and listen to these talks by publishers, artists, and writers and they would say that comics were at the end of the rope and that they would go the way of poetry, becoming a niche medium that just a few people read and a few people work on. Then we would all go to McDonald's and cry over milkshakes about what we're doing and how we should go into animation. Since then, though, there's been this huge turnaround. I started ABC within that context so when it first published, I had it on the web and in mini-comics. There is this whole underground culture of mini-comics. Mini-comics are just hand-printed comics. You would draw your comics and take them to Kinkos, got them Xeroxed and stapled, then either trade them with your friends or take them to shows and try to sell copies. Maybe if you sold 12, then you've done really well. So initially, my audience was just my mom, my brother, and a couple of friends. That's who I was thinking of when I created ABC.

*SW: Have you ever considered writing a traditional novel, i.e., not in the graphic novel format? Or do you want to continue to focus in comics?*

GLY: I love comics and I want to keep working in comics. I have an idea that might work better as a traditional novel, but I'm not sure if I'll ever get around to doing it. I did a lot of prose in college, since I minored in Creative Writing. However, the prose was always just practice for comics, since I had comics in mind.

*SW: One project you're working on is Three Angels with Thien Pham. How has collaborative work differed from working on ABC on your own? Also, could you offer us more details on that project?*

GLY: The title "Three Angels" is up in the air right now. It's been a rougher project than ABC, but not because of Thien. It's probably because I tried writing in a different way [for "Three Angels"] and it didn't really work, so I'm going through a series of re-writes right now.

*SW: How do you two allocate who does what?*

GLY: That's also sort of in flux right now, too. I'm doing the thumbnails while he will be doing the finishes and colors.

*SW: When is that book anticipated to be released?*

GLY: I don't know, man. But I do have another book that I collaborated on with another friend that will be out late 2008 or 2009.

*SW: The project with Derek Kirk Kim?*

GLY: Yes. That one was a lot easier. It's called tentatively "Second Lives." The project consists of three short stories about the connection between reality and fantasy. It's a little bit inspired by Second Life and that whole subculture. I have a lot of students who are into World of Warcraft and that kind of stuff, so that sort of opened up to that project. [Also,] Derek is an amazing artist, absolutely amazing. The work he did on this project is the best work I've ever seen him do. He's

like a real artist. There's some of us who are just cartoonists, like I'm just a cartoonist. But [Derek is] an illustrator. He actually knows how to use other media.

*MIKE LEE: You mentioned earlier that you had tried one approach first for *Second Lives*, then abandoned that approach. What was that first approach and how did it differ from your approach to *ABC*?*

GLY: This is what happened. With *ABC*, I basically wrote from the gut. I had an outline of where I wanted the story to go and then each piece I wrote from the gut. Then after I got signed on with First Second and they started talking to me about doing a second book, I got a little freaked out because I was like, man, writing from your gut—there's no method to it. It's not something you can easily control. It's not a skill. So I started reading all these books about story construction and writing novels. Then I wrote the second story based on all these techniques I had read about. It just didn't work out so hot. It just kind of sucked. I was trying to devise a formula and treating creativity as a technique and it just didn't work out.

*SW: For *ABC*, how long was the idea just in your head and how long did it take you to write?*

GLY: It was an idea for a couple of years. It started off as three separate ideas, then I decided to weave them together. The actual putting down of the ideas on paper took about five years in total, but *ABC* wasn't all I was doing in those five years.

*SW: This is just a tangential question, but I looked up the comic book *The Rosary*. And I was wondering if you planned on pursuing comics in religious studies as well?*

GLY: Well, I think for myself, the two biggest pieces of my identity are my ethnicity and my religion. One I don't have any choice in and the other one I do. I think there's also this tension between the two, too. As a Roman Catholic, Catholicism is really foundational within the Western world and there are things that grew out of Catholicism that are not necessarily definitive of the Eastern way of thinking, even antithetical. We constantly have this East-piece and West-

piece fighting and struggling within ourselves. That's definitely something I want to explore. I've always been interested in religion, not just religion itself, but also religion's tension with the other pieces of a person's identity. Even with the Rosary comic, there was some tension about the skin tones that were used. Lark colored it and we tried to use a wide variety of skin tones for both the humans and the angels. There was some tension that arose about the use of varied skin tones within the distribution chain.

*SW: What is the hardest part of your craft?*

GLY: The whole thing is really hard, man. Comics – I love comics, but it's really time-consuming. Writing is probably the worst, though, since that is the stage where something is made or broken. If you don't do a good job in your writing, then everything else that follows is just crappy. The best art in service of the worst story is still just...crap. I think every medium has its challenges. There are definitely some things easier to do in comics than in pure prose, such as setting up a scene. In comics you can do it with a single image whereas in prose you have to figure out how to describe things in a way that would carry the reader along.

*SW: In a book around the same length as ABC, how long would it take you to draw?*

GLY: It takes me between 4 to 8 hours per page. I have a simplified drawing style so I can go faster. Derek, for example, can take up to 2 to 3 days to do a page, depending on the page.

*SW: Do you have any words of advice to young artists or writers who aspire to do what you're doing now?*

GLY: Get a day job. Honestly, I've been thinking about this, especially since I became a dad. A lot of my comic book friends have asked me if I'd let my children be comic book artists if they want to. I just don't know. I think that early on, if you want to pursue art, you have to make this choice of whether you want to do it as a way of expressing yourself or doing it as a way of feeding yourself, because those things don't always go hand in hand. In fact, most of the time they don't go hand in hand. So if you want to feed yourself with your art, then you pursue it in one way. If you want to use it

as pure self expression, then you pursue it in a different way. To feed yourself, you would become an animator, an illustrator, a web designer, or that sort of thing. And you would have to let go of your art to a certain point where you're okay with other people telling you what to do and how to create and having someone else have the final yes or no over your creation. But if you want to pursue it as self-expression, I think you really need to find a good day job. Because if you don't have that day job, then the practical need for money is going to end up pushing you in a direction you don't want to go. It's going to end up pushing yourself into feeding yourself with your art. I think that's a struggle I see in myself and in a lot of my comic book artist and writer friends. There's always this tension between business and art and I think the ones who have navigated through that the best are the ones who have day jobs that are flexible that allow them to pursue their art on the side.

*SW: What are you currently reading?*

GLY: I've been reading a lot of books on the Boxer Rebellion. I recently read a book called "The Origins of the Boxer Uprising" by Joseph W. Esherick, which is sort of an academic book, and this other one called the "Ho Chi Tuan Movement."<sup>4</sup> It was this little pamphlet put out by Communist China in the 70s as propaganda. I'm also reading an audio book...ha, "reading" an audio book...called "The Good Earth" by Pearl S. Buck. I'm almost done with that.

*SW: Are you currently reading any graphic novels?*

GLY: You know, I haven't gone to the comic book store in a really long time. The last graphic novel I read was one called "The Mourning Star," by [Kazimir Strzpepek]. It's on the border between a mini-comic and an independent comic. It's all about this dystopian world. Also, Jeff Smith is one of my favorite comic book artists. I recently read one to my son which he really liked, "Shazam" by Jeff Smith. I also read "Regifters." It's a graphic novel by Mike Carey and Sonny Liew [and Marc Hempel] targeted at teenage girls, but I still liked it.

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<sup>4</sup> The editors could not find an accurate spelling for the movement referenced here by Gene. Thus, the transcription from an audio recording of the interview is done phonetically.

*ML: Who are your favorite artists?*

GLY: I have a list as long as my arm. I love Jeff Smith who did “BONE.” I like this guy named Jason Little who does a comic series online called “Bee.” Then there’s Derek [Kirk Kim], of course; Jason Shiga, another Bay Area cartoonist; Lark Pien; and Osama Tezuka, who did “Astro Boy.” Adrian Tomine, Lynda Barry...

*SW: One last thing. What was your inspiration behind the illustration on the very last page?* <sup>5</sup>

GLY: Oh. The Backdorm Boys.

*SW: They have a name? I didn’t even know they had a name.*

GLY: Did you see their little video? <sup>6</sup>

*SW: I did. That was how I knew the reference behind that illustration. It made me laugh so hard because it was just one of those subcultural references you either got it or you didn’t.*

GLY: For the Backdorm Boys, I think they’re hilarious, first of all. And it’s sort of a part of American culture, even though they’re Asian-Asian. But I think they provide a really good contrast to William Hung. These are both Asians that are singing American pop songs and they’re both funny, but I think the reason why they’re funny is really, really different. For the Backdorm Boys, they mean to be funny and I think they are actually in a sense lampooning American culture and making fun of Backstreet Boys and boy-bands. On the other hand, William Hung is almost like a victim. He doesn’t mean to be funny. In Backdorm Boys, the funniness comes out of them, but in William Hung, the funniness comes from outside, from his context, from the way American culture perceives him.

*SW: That feeling of shame you mentioned in the beginning of this interview, that little jump you talked about, is what comes to my mind.*

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<sup>5</sup> See page 88 for a reproduction of the referenced image.

<sup>6</sup> The “Backdorm Boys” video referenced here may be viewed on YouTube.com at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=YBICtqsat-w>

GLY: Yeah, exactly.

*ML: So any last word on future projects we can look forward to?*

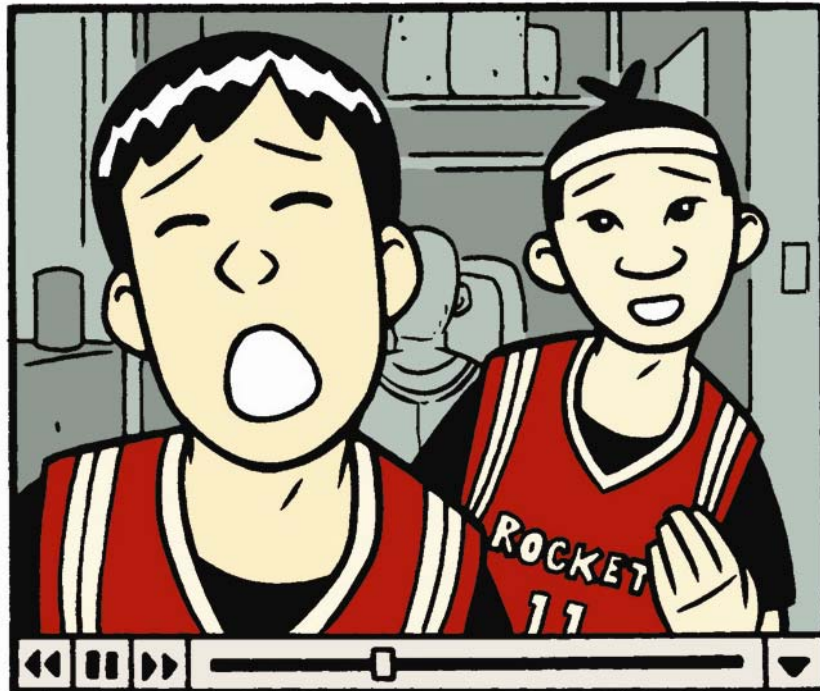
GLY: There's the short story collection, there's the book that used to be called "Three Angels" which we don't have a name for yet, which is based on my brother's experiences as a medical school student. Those are both collaborations with other artists. The next story I will be drawing myself will be a historical novel set in China in the late 1800s, early 1900s.

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For more information on the author, visit Gene Yang's website, "Humble Comics" at **<http://www.humblecomics.com>**.



Reproduced below with permission from First Second Books is the “Backdorm Boys” illustration referenced in the interview on page 86:



By Gene Luen Yang...



The original...