

Gene Luen Yang, National Book Award Nominee, Makes Publishing History

... in more ways than one ...

An Interview by Terry Hong

Gene Luen Yang's latest book, *American Born Chinese*, has made him famous. Most definitely. And for a good long while, he's going to be carrying around some version of the much-deserved moniker "author of the first graphic novel ever to be nominated for the National Book Award."

So Yang didn't win this time around—just wait! He did score big-time in the world of publishing. In fact, M.T. Anderson, whose *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Vol. 1: The Pox Party* took the 2006 Award in the Young People's Literature category, specifically lauded Yang during his acceptance speech. Anderson responded to "a lot of dithering in the blogosphere" questioning Yang's graphic novel as deserving of a National Book Award nominee nod by praising the nominating panel for including *American Born Chinese* on the shortlist, certainly an important first in the NBA's 57-year history.

The controversy all began when Tony Long, *Wired* magazine columnist of "The Luddite," wrote half of his October 26, 2006, column on why graphic novels are not NBA-worthy. Even as he admitted to not having read *American Born Chinese* (although he grudgingly noted, "I'll bet for what it is, it's pretty good"), he unequivocally announced, "Comic books should not be nominated for National Book Awards, in any category." Just to add a bit more salt, he threw in "The comic book does not deserve equal status with real novels, or short stories." Uh-oh.

Not surprisingly, Long set off a still-growing list of incredibly outraged responses. Many quickly recalled that that "other really famous graphic novel," Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, won a Pulitzer back in 1992. Way too many others just ranted right back at Long's inane, unfair comments. Yang himself posted two incredibly thoughtful replies, one specifically to Long and the other in the *Wall Street Journal*. Let's just hope that by now, Long has at least read the book in question.

What Long will find—as so many already have—is that *American Born Chinese* is, in a word, remarkable. To read it fresh and unbiased—which I was lucky enough to do, but is probably not even possible anymore unless you've been living in total isolation—is a true discovery. So I'll just say that Yang manages to weave three very different story lines—the challenges facing a young Chinese American boy entering a predominantly white school, a unique new version of the legendary Chinese mythological

figure of the Monkey King, and the adventures of an over-the-top stereotypically offensive figure called (what else?) Chin-Kee—into a perfectly melded, poignant whole by book's end. Not to mention those clean, clear graphics that add a seemingly fully realized, three-dimensional quality to the flat pages.

ABC's popularity has caused a run on Yang's older titles, including *Gordon Yamamoto and the King of the Geeks* and its follow-up, *Loyola Chin and the San Peligran Order*. In both titles, without being preachy in any way, Yang manages to throw in a social lesson or two for the angst-ridden adolescent years. As a high school teacher by day—he teaches computer science, runs information systems, and leads the Asian Student Alliance for Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, California—Yang's definitely in touch with today's youth. Not that he's so old himself.

For the native northern Californian, life for now is about finding balance amidst his newfound fame. He teaches, he goes home for family time with his wife and young son, and when the rest of the house is asleep, it's his turn to get out pen and ink for a few hours to make more of his amazing dreams come true.

The Bloomsbury Review: *I understand that you've been drawing since you were a child. What prompted that interest? And how did you eventually choose to become a comic artist?*

Gene Luen Yang: Honestly, I'm not sure why I got interested in drawing when I was young. My mom tells me I started when I was two, so I don't really remember much of anything about that time period.

I've always been attracted to stories. As a kid, I loved hearing stories, reading stories, watching stories, and telling stories. The only two media (as far as I know) that allow you to tell stories through drawings are animation and comics. Between the two, comics is much more intimate. A single storyteller with a single storytelling voice can create an entire comic. Animation is so labor-intensive that that isn't really possible.

TBR: *How did American Born Chinese come about?*

GLY: I started work on ABC about five or six years ago. I'd done a couple of graphic novels starring Asian American characters, but I hadn't done a comic specifically about Asian American identity. Because my ethnicity is such a large part of who I am, I really wanted to tackle the issue in a project.

Beyond that, though, I'd always wanted to do a comic book about the Monkey King, ever since my mom told me his stories when I was young. He's a monkey! He does kung fu! He's a little boy's dream come true!

TBR: *How would you describe your creative process? Do you write/draw every day? What sort of preparation do you do for each new project?*

GLY: I don't write and draw every day, but I do most days. I teach high school full-time, and after becoming a father three years ago, I've had to drastically restructure my creative life. Nowadays, I work from my son's bedtime, around 8:00 or 9:00, into the night.

Sometimes I'm tired and can only get in an hour or two; other times I can go until 1:00. If I fall behind on a project, I try to catch up on weekends.

For *American Born Chinese*, I read a couple of translations of *Journey to the West*, the Chinese novel that tells the story of the Monkey King. I also drew from pictures I took during a trip to China. About a year or two before starting the project, my wife and I took a group of my students to China for an educational tour. It was the first time I'd ever set foot there. It was amazing.

TBR: *Has your process changed from your first published graphic novel to your latest?*

GLY: It's completely different. For my first graphic novel [*Gordon Yamamoto and the King of the Geeks*], I made it up as I went along. I'd finish a chapter and then make up the next one. And as far as art goes, I was experimenting all over the place—different brushes, different fonts on the computer, different drawing techniques. By the time I got to *American Born Chinese*, I'd settled down on specific materials and techniques.

TBR: *Will we see Gordon and Loyola again? Can we hope that you might be going back to Quiggenberry High School in the future?*

GLY: I actually tried writing one more story for that “universe” a few years ago and it just didn't come out right. I have a few other projects that I'm much more passionate about right now. But who knows?

TBR: *Right now, your titles appear in the young adult/middle grade category. Do you think you might create graphic novels for the adult market at some point?*

GLY: When I started doing graphic novels, I didn't really have an age range in mind. I just did what I was interested in. The categorization came later, from the market itself. I imagine that I'll continue to work in that way.

TBR: *Okay, National Book Award ... let's just say that some of us Asian Americans tend to be rather driven by our parents' expectations. What do your parents think of all this?*

GLY: My parents were ecstatic. My dad told me he couldn't sleep for a couple nights after [he heard about the nomination], he was so excited.

TBR: *What do you think you might tell your son about the whole NBA experience when he's a little older? And what might you tell your grandkids about the time you do win the NBA? Or Pulitzer? Or Booker?*

GLY: I'll tell him that ceremony was the fanciest thing I've ever been to. I'll also tell him how lucky I was to be in the right place at the right time, with the right people supporting me. As for other awards, I still dream of winning the Eisner [comic book award] someday.

TBR: *Here's what I read about your initial reaction to the NBA nomination in that “blogosphere”: “I can't say it's a dream come true because it never even would have occurred to me to dream it. It wasn't in my reality. I was speechless.” Post-award announcements, with NBA winner M.T. Anderson lauding you at the actual awards ceremony, what's your reaction now?*

GLY: M.T. Anderson is an amazing guy on multiple levels. He's been working as a professional author for

several years now, and this was the second time he was nominated for a National Book Award. His book, *Octavian Nothing*, had a couple of the most memorable scenes I've ever read in any book. It was an honor to be mentioned by him.

TBR: *Besides having to deal with even more curious demands on your time, how has life changed since the NBAs?*

GLY: More than anything, it empowers me as a comic book creator. For a while, especially after getting married and starting a family, I wondered how much longer I could go on making comics. It's such a time-consuming art form, and it brought in so little money. Now I think I can make comics for at least a while longer.

TBR: *I've read in detail about the errant Luddite Long. What's happened since you posted your thoughtful response to him? Not to mention Anderson's lauds? Did he ever get back to you after all that?*

GLY: I haven't heard a thing from Tony Long since I responded to his column. *Wired* magazine did ask to reprint my response on their website, though.

TBR: *Just after the Luddite incident, I saw a piece in The New York Times that DC Comics is launching an all-girl-power graphic novel line called Minx—yet another imprint in a growing list of graphic houses. Major publishing houses are definitely hopping the bandwagon. Manga's been around for decades—you could say centuries—in Asia, but it's going Western more quickly than one can count the titles, not to mention imprints. What do you think of this latest craze? Why is it now that the Western mainstream's finally catching up?*

GLY: It seems like graphic novels have reached a tipping point. When Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won the Pulitzer in the early 1990s, the book trade came looking for other, similar novelistic comics. There were a few notable works like *Love & Rockets* [a multivolume series by brothers Gilbert Hernandez and Jaime Hernandez, with occasional contributions by brother Mario Hernandez] or *The Watchmen* [by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons], but not enough to build a section at Barnes & Noble on. Now it's completely 180-degree turnaround. Over the last decade and a half, we've seen a renaissance of strong graphic storytelling in all genres. I think the book market is responding to that.

TBR: *I've read how your Christian beliefs play a large role in your stories, because your Christian foundation is such an integral part of your life. In this overhyped, media-driven world that—at least on the surface—seems to either denigrate religion or be blinded by it, how are you balancing your beliefs with your growing prominence, especially in the seemingly godless world of pop culture?*

GLY: It's something I constantly struggle with: What does it mean to be a Christian artist? Does a work have to be about Christ to be Christian? How do I write sympathetic characters who have belief systems that are radically different from my own? When I was in college, I had an Italian American Buddhist creative writing professor who told me to just write from my heart. Don't concentrate on an agenda. If my religion is as

central to me as I say it is, it'll come out naturally. And if not, then at least I'll be honest. That's advice I've tried to follow.

TBR: *How are you balancing fatherhood/family life with your career as both a teacher and a writer/artist?*

GLY: This is something else I constantly struggle with. I'm just so busy now. But I guess busyness is a blessing in many ways. I'd rather have things to do than not. I just have to be careful I still leave some pockets of silence in my life. My wife and my friends help with that quite a bit.

TBR: *Could you ever see yourself leaving teaching and writing/drawing full-time?*

GLY: I think I have both extroverted and introverted sides. The teaching and the creating provide a good balance for me. I don't know if I could just sit at my drawing table all day, every day, every year. I think I'd go crazy. But I would like the time to be divided more evenly, though. Maybe I'll be able to teach part-time at some point. Who knows? It's more complicated with a family.

TBR: *Speaking of teaching, how have your students reacted to your growing fame? Do they read your books?*

GLY: Overall, my students, and my school community in general, have been very supportive. A few of my students have even brought copies for me to sign. It's nice. Usually, the only things I get to sign at school are detention slips.

TBR: *Have you ever considered writing a book in prose?*

GLY: I've thought about it, but I have many, many more graphic novels I'd like to do first.

TBR: *When you're not writing or drawing, what else do you like to do?*

GLY: To be honest, there's not much time for anything else. I like watching movies and reading books and comics and going to the park with my son.

TBR: *Who are some of your favorite writers? Favorite artists? Influences?*

GLY: Right now, I'm plowing through the works of Shusaku Endo, a Japanese Catholic author. He's phenomenal. He's kind of my model of a religious storyteller. I also like C.S. Lewis, though he doesn't get as much dirt under his fingernails as Endo does.

For comics I have a long, long list: Carl Barks, Jeff Smith, Osamu Tezuka, Jay Stephens, Alan Moore, Gilbert Hernandez, Joann Sfar, Lynda Barry, Kyle Baker. I also have many personal friends who have influenced my work: Derek Kirk Kim, Lark Pien, Jason Shiga, Jason Thompson, Jesse Hamm, Thien Pham, Andy Hartzell, Jesse Reklaw ... I could go on for days.

TBR: *Could you imagine ABC or any of your other novels becoming a film? Film seems to be a logical next step. Leila Lee animated her Angry Little Asian Girls; Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis 1 and 2 are coming to the big screen. Have the studios come calling? When they do, what will be your response?*

GLY: I've had an inquiry or two about *American Born Chinese*. I am interested in having something translated into film. I just don't know if *American Born Chinese* is the right project. It'd have to be a director I really trust,

probably an Asian American. I'm really freaked out about finding short, decontextualized clips of Chin-Keen on YouTube.com.

TBR: *And the proverbial final question: What might you be working on now? When can we expect your next book? We need more!*

GLY: I'm currently working on another graphic novel for First Second [publisher of *American Born Chinese*] called *Three Angels*. It's a collaborative project with Thien Pham, another Bay Area cartoonist. It's about a video game addict who gets called by three angels to go to med school. We're trying to explore the tension between passion and destiny. ■

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BOOKS BY GENE LUEN YANG

American Born Chinese

First Second/Roaring Brook Press,
\$16.95 paper, ISBN 1-5964-3152-0

Gordon Yamamoto and the King of the Geeks

Slave Labor Graphics (SLG) Publishing,
\$9.95 paper, ISBN 0-9431-5195-3;
577 S Market St, San Jose, CA 95113

Loyola Chin and the San Peligran Order

SLG Publishing, \$9.95 paper,
ISBN 1-5936-2005-5

The Rosary Comic Book

Pauline Books & Media, \$5.95 paper,
ISBN 0-819-86479-X; 50 St Paul's Ave,
Boston, MA 02130

The Motherless One

Distributed by Global Hobo Distribution,
\$2.00 handmade, no ISBN

Duncan's Kingdom

Written by Gene Yang,
Illustrated by Derek Kirk Kim
Image Comics, available online at
www.LowBright.com.

Visit Gene Luen Yang's website at
www.humblecomics.com