



## American Born Chinese

*Gene Luen Yang*

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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 way—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.

## American Born Chinese Details

Date : Published December 23rd 2008 by Square Fish (first published September 1st 2006)

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Author : Gene Luen Yang

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## From Reader Review American Born Chinese for online ebook

### **alexandra says**

this book was WAITING for me to give it a five-star review, until the ending left me thinking, "wait, what? THAT'S IT???" it's a contemporary-type ending where the end is implied but i wasn't expecting that and i wanted a cohesive conclusion!

but other than the last page, this book was... really inspirational and lovely. i've never ~actually~ read a graphic novel and i wasn't expecting it to make such a huge mark on my perspective of life.

i think it's mostly because my personal experience in elementary school was similar to jin's, one of our main characters. he talks about moving to a new city where the majority is white and we see the teasing he gets for being chinese (or just, asian in general). this sort of thing happened when i moved to a new city, a new school, but i wasn't entirely conscious of the racist remarks. jin, however, begins to feel like he needs to BECOME white and blonde and blue-eyed. the whole experience and story follows that and it made me a bit *sad* at how relatable and true the story is.

i felt this novel on a personal level, and that doesn't happen very often anymore. because of that, i'll always cherish this tiny book of wonder. i think i'll be reading more graphic novels in the future, as this one was a quick, but long lasting read. (also, i think the art is lovely, so graphic novels!! yay!!!)

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### **Terry says**

This took all of about an hour to read and was totally worth it. Three stories of quiet power unfurl--the Monkey King, who undertakes a quest for dominance after a slight by the gods; Jin Wang, the title character and one of a handful of Asian students at his elementary school, trying to maneuver through bullies, love, and American culture; and Danny, a white teenager, and his Chinese cousin, Chin-kee, the embodiment of the racist Chinese stereotype. All three stories intersect in the climax, with one twist that is predictable (but powerful) and another that is completely unexpected.

This graphic novel is a page turner, with three stories of identity that are brilliantly plotted, paced, drawn, and scripted. There is no weak link--instead all flow seamlessly together to make a point that is both specific and that any reader can relate to. If I had to choose the best of the three, however, the half-dream, half-reality story of Danny and Chin-kee is masterful. The presentation and deconstruction of the stereotype is pitch-perfect. The whole time I knew what the author was up to, but his point has an amazing visual power with the way it is presented. (Deliberately vague here so as not to ruin anything.)

From the intimate story that allies the reader with the protagonists, but never makes the reader awkwardly uncomfortable (there are uncomfortable scenes, but in a good way; this is no Napoleon Dynamite) to the fantastical but real characters, this graphic novel is a great exploration of identity told through three exciting, and, more importantly, non-didactic, stories. Only quibble--the climax happens too fast; this is saved, however, by the quiet beauty of the ending--this is a novel that ends not in fireworks but in the importance of culture and a friendship.

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## **Jan Philipzig says**

I liked Gene Luen Yang's *The Shadow Hero* a lot, so I had to finally check out the author's most well-known graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. Both books are about the immigrant experience, a topic difficult to write about in ways that are (more or less) politically correct but not too obvious and predictable. In both cases I had my doubts early on as to whether Yang would be able to pull it off, but both times he eventually won me over with surprising plot twists and a flood of well-observed details.

Yang's willingness to take the risk of boring or disconcerting the reader during the early stages of the reading experience is testament to his confidence and maturity as a storyteller, as it allows him to ultimately undermine the reader's expectations and preconceptions--often to astonishing effect. In the case of *American Born Chinese*, story elements that initially seemed offensive miraculously fall into place when Yang finally weaves the book's three narratives into one. The results feel unique, down-to-earth yet highly imaginative--wonderful stuff!

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## **Jessica Abarquez says**

Reference information:

Title: American Born Chinese

Author: Gene Luen Yang

Publisher: First Second Year: 2006

# of pages: 233 Genre: Graphic Novel

Reading level: 6th grade Interest level: 15 yrs old

Potential hot lava: some racist language, some violence

General response/reaction:

I was surprised at how quickly I finished this graphic novel. This book was so easy to read (probably because it was a graphic novel). When I read the inside flap for the plot of the book, I was surprised to read that there were three different stories going on. Then the flap said that all three of those stories would converge and I was even more interested.

I enjoyed the stories because it definitely showed the identity crisis that many minorities feel in the United States. While many people would like to think that those minority stereotypes disappeared a long time ago, this book was published in 2006 and absolutely shows that those stereotypes still exist.

Subjects, Themes, and Big Ideas:

- Identity
- Racism
- Friendship
- Acceptance

Characters:

- The Monkey King: He is a king, born in an unorthodox manner, and he wants to be hailed as a deity. He practices kung fu and the different ways to become immortal, but in the process, he loses his identity. As his punishment, the Monkey King is buried under a rock mountain.
- Jin Wang: He was born in American and barely had any friends when he moved from Chinatown in San

Francisco to another part of California. He soon made friends with a boy from Taiwan and falls for an American girl. Eventually, things go bad for Jin and he wishes to be someone else.

- Wei-Chen Sun: A boy who moved from Taiwan. He becomes best friends with Jin Wang and dates the only other Asian in the class, Suzy Nakamura.
- Danny: A boy who has transferred to his third high school. He finally finds his niche in school by making the basketball team and talking to girls. Unfortunately, his crazy cousin, Chin-Kee comes to visit and ruins everything. However, Danny turns out to be someone else.
- Chin-Kee: Danny's cousin who comes to visit once a year. He draws such attention to himself and embarrasses Danny so much that Danny has to transfer schools. Chin-Kee turns out to be more than just Danny's cousin.

Plot summary:

The Monkey King wants to be hailed as a deity but the gods will not allow it. He then practices different ways to become immortal and when he achieves it, he challenges the Creator himself. However, the Creator is not happy with the Monkey King's disrespect and buries the Monkey King under a mountain of rocks for 500 years.

Jin Wang is a Chinese-American kid who doesn't feel like he fits in anywhere. He thinks school is boring until he falls in love with an American girl. That relationship doesn't work out and he takes his frustrations out on his other two Asian friends. Jin Wang wants to become someone else and he soon gets his wish and transforms into another person.

Danny is an American boy who has transferred to three different schools in the past few years. The reason for the transfers is because his cousin Chin-Kee visits every year and the embarrassment from those visits follow him everywhere. Danny finally has enough of the antics and confronts Chin-Kee.

Although these three stories seem to have nothing in common, they flow together in the end. The Monkey King is taken on a quest with a monk to help mankind. The Monkey King's son wanted to live among the humans and became best friends with Jin Wang. When Jin hurt Wei-Chen's feelings, Wei-Chen turns his back on serving the humans and decides to live as a human for his own gain. Jin transforms into Danny and lives his life in another form. When Danny confronts Chin-Kee, his cousin fights back and then reveals himself to be the Monkey King. Since the Monkey King learned to accept his true form, he tells Danny to accept his true form as Jin Wang. The Monkey King explains everything to Jin. Then he explains that his son did not want to see him anymore, so the Monkey King started visiting Jin to always remind him of where he came from and what his culture is.

Strengths (including reviews and awards):

- It is a different kind of book (graphic novel)
- It shows a minority's perspective
- Winner of the Michael L. Printz Award
- National Book Award finalist
- Publisher's Weekly Best Book of the Year
- Booklist Editors' Choice Book

Drawbacks or other cautions:

- Some people might not know how to read a graphic novel carefully

Teaching ideas:

Pre-reading:

- Journals: Identity
  - o How would you describe yourself?
  - o How would others describe you?
  - o What are the traits that make up your personality?
  - o Where are you from?
  - o These questions will help the student understand their whole self.
- How to read a graphic novel.
  - o I would want to help them understand that reading a graphic novel is quite different from reading a normal book or even a comic book. Some authors are very picky about having their work be called a “graphic novel” rather than a comic book.
  - o We would discuss the differences between a comic book and a graphic novel.
  - o Just like other works of literature, graphic novels have become movies. We could possibly watch and compare movies to the graphic novel.

#### During Reading:

- Journals:
- o Myths:
  - ? What are some myths that you have heard?
  - ? Is this myth (monkey king) like any other one you've heard or read about?
- o Stereotypes:
  - ? What are the stereotypes depicted in this book?
  - ? Do you feel that they are accurate?
  - ? How can one fight stereotypes and ridicule?
- o Crazy family members:
  - ? Do you have a crazy family member?
  - ? What makes them embarrass you?
- o Identity:
  - ? Did you ever want to be somebody else?
  - ? Who? Why?
  - ? What was the outcome?
- We would discuss all these topics as well if they were comfortable doing so.
- Compare stories with other well known stories:
  - o Jin Wang/Danny: sort of like Peter Parker/Spider-Man
  - o Monkey King: Beowulf (?—I've never read Beowulf so I'm not 100% sure there's a relation here, but maybe there is from the small bit that I've heard)
  - o Monkey King: Odyssey

#### Post-Reading:

- Create your own graphic novel
  - o Or at least a few pages of a graphic novel
  - o The students can either make their own story or use a well known story and illustrate it
- Switch day
  - o Have students switch identities for a day
  - ? Sort of like “Principal for a day” only different
  - o See if the students really liked being someone else or if they prefer their old life
- Family ties
  - o Get to know your crazy family member, maybe there is more to them than just crazy.

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### **Leanna says**

I've been hearing about Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* for months. The book won the Printz Award, was a National Book Award finalist, and was chosen the best book of the year by Publishers Weekly, School Library Journal, San Francisco Chronicle, etcetera, etcetera. This book has amazing credentials.

Considering all the buzz, all the acclaim, my expectations were so high that perhaps I could not help but be disappointed. The book is good, but is really great?

This is only the fourth graphic novel I've read this year, so I am far from an expert on the genre. However, I find both *Deoratias* and *Persepolis* far superior in both story and content.

In *American Born Chinese*, Yang interweaves three seemingly unconnected stories: the main plot about a young Chinese-American boy, Jin Wang; a subplot about an exaggeratedly-Anglo teenager, Danny, and his extra-exaggeratedly-Chinese cousin, Chin-Kee; and the legend of the Monkey King.

The graphic novel is ambitious, addressing identity struggles, racism, and learning to accept one's heritage. All the topics are important and worth discussing. However, the book lacks subtlety and the ending feels flat. Those two flaws keep a good novel from being a great one.

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### **karen says**

this book is the perfect antidote to the "graphic novels aren't real books" crowd's poison. it takes full advantage of the medium (lgm with the local boy scout troops), and just runs with it. this story could not have been told as well or as broadly using a more traditional narrative structure. and at the end, there is a perfect collapse - the three storylines streamline so perfectly into one message about cultural acclimatization and race-shame. and why it is bad. but not in a preachy way. it is not rah-rah asia, it is just quietly, "don't be an asshole; this is who you are." so it doesn't exclude roundeye from appreciating the message, like me at chinese new year at my ex's. I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE SAYING ABOUT ME, GRANDMA TSUI!

so the stories include the traditional tale of the monkey king:

a very tasteful depiction of a chinese gentleman come to america:

and this cute young chinese-american boy with a perm:

that's what the art looks like. and if i didn't have to read this for class, i would have missed out on it, because

it is not the kind of art i am immediately drawn to. me and art, we don't understand each other. museums leave me cold, and with graphic novels, i am always drawn to certain ones and repulsed by others with not one whit of rhyme nor reason nor consistency. i am the worst at art-appreciation. but i am the queen of making thanksgiving dinner. and writing drunken book reviews. and white trash fixing of silverware drawers:

recognize!!!

but yeah, a totally charming book. i have no personal immigrant experience from which to draw as a way of relating to the story, but it works on any level of "appreciate thyself and don't wear shoes just because the humans are doing it" kind of thing.

where did that wine go?

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### **Brierly says**

*American Born Chinese* is an exceptionally well-executed novel in so many ways. Visually, each page contains one square panel surrounded by a large amount of white space, with a red Chinese character in the upper center. The artwork is straightforward and does not vary much between the three interwoven narratives.

When you begin the novel it is unclear how Jin, Danny, Chin-Kee, and the Monkey King will all fit together, but when the pieces of the puzzle are slowly revealed, I was so impressed with how the three stories transformed into one. Yang's use of stereotypes throughout all three narratives, most apparent with the character Chin-Kee, also provide scathing commentary on representations of Asian characters in visual media. Even the speech bubbles for this character read in a stereotypical manner (i.e. broken English). But when you finally learn that (view spoiler), the purpose of this stereotyping becomes all too clear.

I like reading novels that challenge my thinking and surprise me. I expected *American Born Chinese* to be good, but out of all the graphic novels I've read in the last three months, it is the best. (I must note that *The Arrival*, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery": The Authorized Graphic Adaptation, and *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* were all read/reread in this period of time).

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### **Michael says**

I wrote a poem many years ago about wishing I was black so I could have an afro. How do you beat afros as a hairstyle? About the only way is by having afro puffs, which white dudes also can't have. Partially because they are white, and partially because they're dudes.

I used to skip over that page of job applications that asks your ethnicity. I thought it was stupid that anyone would care what my race, or my sex, was before deciding whether or not to hire me. Hahahah, I was soooo naive!

Since then, I've realized to what a great extent the law attempts to make that pesky *All men are created equal* clause actually true. I've also read some statistics that make it pretty clear those laws aren't getting the job done. Racism, sexism, ableism, sexualpreferenceism, attractivenessism, sizism, there are a fuckton of isms that people still engage in. They aren't conscious of doing them, but they have a sense that the slightly heavier, balding guy my own age isn't going to be as much of a go-getter as me, so they hire me. If he's also black, well FUCK! The job is as good as mine.

I believe in the idea of race even less than I used to. But, I have an awful confession to make. I now fill out that page of the application because I now understand that--although it's not *technically* legal--my whiteness helps me get jobs. Which begs the question, WHY ARE PEOPLE SO FUCKING STUPID?

Anyway.

[image error]

*American Born Chinese* is the story of an American boy who struggles with the stigma that comes from his Chinese ancestry. He's treated like a second-class citizen, bullied and made fun of. This book also tells the story of Chin-Kee, a Chinese stereotype who comes to live with his white cousin, making the whiteboy's life a living hell as he starts being ostracized by his friends and the girl he has the hots for.

This graphic novel is a fast read, yet has a complex story, weaving three tales together that don't unite until the climax. It's my favorite combination of elements in a book: constantly funny, but funny and sad at the same time. The ending was relatively satisfying, and the intricacies of the plots make the book more complex than some novels. This book carries more literary weight than a lot of other books, despite the fact that it's a graphic novel. (I'm still prejudiced against this genre. "It's perry good....fer a graphic novel!")

I could use this to launch into yet another political tirade about how instances of "reverse racism" are now given a lot more attention in the press than instances of real racism. If anyone really wants that kind of tirade, though, maybe it'll happen in the comments. OOhh, maybe I can attract a troll! I'll try a little bit harder to do so: REVERSE RACISM IS A TERM MADE UP BY RACISTS WHO ARE SICK OF BEING TREATED LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.

I have a headache. Oh, and by the way, Goodreads.com, I'm about to plunge back into another semester, so I may not be around much at all, other than when I'm on here experimenting with you guys. But, I will be thinking of you longingly, and I look forward to the time when we can again be together for more than a quick trist.

And I'm also looking forward to those trists.

Adieu.

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### Thomas says

A graphic novel with a wonderful overarching message about identity and a solid representation of Asian-American characters. In *American Born Chinese*, Gene Luen Yang details the story of Jin Wang, the only Chinese-American at his new school. Yang intertwines Jin's struggle with the tale of Chin-Kee (say this name aloud), the ultimate negative Chinese stereotype, as well as the legend of the Monkey King, one of the most famous Chinese fables. These three plots come together in an unexpected way to conclude the novel with a bang.

Yang does a great job of deconstructing stereotypes about Asian-Americans by tackling them head on. He delves into Wang's emotions and his vulnerability as an insecure outsider when compared to his peers. He highlights the pressures to assimilate to the predominate culture, even at the cost of one's individuality. Though I found the twist at the end of the book abrupt and a bit too absurd, I appreciated how Yang kept the focus on the intricacies of Asian-American identity in a humorous, accessible way.

Recommended to those interested in graphic novels or stories featuring diverse characters. A three star read I would still encourage others to check out, in particular to those searching for something different and fun.

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### Ariel says

#### SO FLIPPING GOOD!

Quite a quirky book, but it benefits from it. It does it's own thing and completely does it well. The themes were powerful and well delivered: I loved seeing the three different stories comment on racism, but more than that, self acceptance.

The art wasn't /necessarily/ outstanding, in the terms that I didn't find myself ogling over the illustrations. BUT, it was perfect for this story. It was wonderful! I liked it! Don't get me wrong! The monkey pictures were so cute!

I'll definitely be reading more by this author!

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### Seth T. says

It's funny that the most notable thing I can tell you about this book is that it's in colour.

That might not strike you as odd, but really, for the type of story Yang tells, the comics industry has almost universally awarded such stories a black and white printing. If not autobiographical, *American Born Chinese* is the kind of story that might very well be.

Examining the difficulty with which a child born in one country from parents of another country, the author

explores the kind of dissatisfaction common to many in similar circumstances. The desire to blend in, the need to eliminate traces of heritage. I've never felt these things in my life, but through Yang's story, I could begin to understand in a manner other than pure academic assent.

Yang weaves three narratives together in a masterful way and each sings of a different life's lesson. There is the story of the Monkey King (the classic Chinese figure), the story of Jin and his difficulty fitting into a school in which he is the only student of Chinese descent, and the story of Danny, who is plagued by his ridiculous cousin Chin-Kee (who appears as a stereotyped caricature complete with affected speech - Ls for Rs and vice versa). Strangely, the Chin-Kee episodes actually carry a laugh track.

It should be notable that the only bad thing I have to say about the book was that I didn't find it as good as its hype. Yang's book picked up a fistful of worthy awards last year. Not just Best Graphic Novel awards but several Best Book Awards.\* As good as it was, I'd read better and while I would recommend it to anyone, I can't see myself reading it more than a couple more times if I live to seventy.

\*note: Best Book Awards from Publisher's Weekly, School Library Journal, and San Francisco Chronicle. Plus piles of other awards from elsewhere.

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### **Xueting says**

One thing that stood out most is that the author focused on exploring the inner self-conscious shame of the immigrant or non-Western, instead of making his main characters perfect, full of mature pride for his identity. In fact, the students around Jin Wang and Wei Chen were portrayed pretty realistically too - some of them were disgusting bullies seeing only one stereotypical image of the Asian, some were more subtly bigoted, and some others don't treat them any different. Although I'm Asian, not an Asian-American, I believe this kind of more complex identities are the real thing everywhere, so I really like how the author told his story this way.

Oh, and the twist in how the three stories connect? WOW THAT WAS COOL.

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### **Zoë says**

Read for my young adult literature class.

A unique message and vivid writing - I loved how he was able to weave together three stories in such a short story!

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### **Dolly Ou says**

Gene Luen Yang does a good job telling his story about his life (or not his own maybe) as a Chinese American. I was very excited to read this book because first it was a graphic novel and second his story sort of connects with me since I am a Chinese American myself.

Yang chooses an interesting title, "American Born Chinese". Its not one of those clever, thought provoking titles, but it is a rare one that you don't come across often. I sort of anticipated on what this story will be

about, but what I didn't expect was the form of the story. Basically there are three story lines: a story about an American Born Chinese who moves to a new area and goes to a school as the only asian kid, a popular chinese myth called "Monkey King", and a story about a chinese kid who has all these negative chinese stereotypes and ruins Danny's life. There is no chronological order to these stories. Yang goes back and forth with all three stories, but in the end everything ties together.

One thing that I really like about this book is that everything is in color, unlike the other graphic novels that are black and white. The color adds more life into the stories which constantly reminds me that I am reading a biography (or autobiography). The writing is easy to understand but the main point of the book is the meaning it is trying to convey. It is always hard to live in two cultures at the same time, something like living two lives. In this book Yang mainly focused on the struggles of being a Chinese American, but I believe all minority groups experience the same thing. People who refuse to accept others and differences always make it harder for immigrants and maybe this book can change some minds.

I especially like this book because I went through the same struggles Yang did. Identity checks, negative chinese stereotypes, isolation, things like that I felt before for being in the skin I am in, but that tells me more about the world and gets me into the real world faster. I appreciate that finally there is a chinese voice out there that feels and thinks like me. We need more of these kind of books to share the pain and tell others they're not alone, especially in the chinese community.

This book has won the Michael L. Printz Award and is a national book award finalist.

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### **Nat says**

I started reading this in the middle of the night because when you can't fall asleep after a certain hour, you surrender and pick up a book.

And for once in my life I was pretty happy about being awake in the early morning hours because I realized rather quickly that **American Born Chinese is one of the best graphic novels I've read so far.**

This review contains **\*spoilers\***.

All Jin Wang wants is to fit in. When his family moves to a new neighborhood, he suddenly finds that he's the only Chinese American student at his school. Jocks and bullies pick on him constantly, and he has hardly any friends. Then, to make matters worse, he falls in love with an all-American girl...

The writer captured the feelings of having a crush so damn perfectly. It was like someone was reading my mind.

It perfectly captured the essence of it.

And along the way, we smoothly follow the story of the Monkey King:

Born to rule over all the monkeys in the world, the story of the Monkey King is one of the oldest and greatest Chinese fables. Adored by his subjects, master of the arts of kung-fu, he is the most powerful monkey on earth. But the Monkey King doesn't want to be a monkey. He wants to be hailed as a god...

Chin-Kee is the ultimate negative Chinese stereotype, and he's ruining his cousin Danny's life. Danny's a

popular kid at school, but every year Chin-Kee comes to visit, and every year Danny has to transfer to a new school to escape the shame. This year, though, things quickly go from bad to worse...

I kept thinking throughout my reading experience how Danny was going to be relevant in any way. I didn't know if we're supposed to feel sorry for him... because I certainly didn't. He kept acting like an entitled white boy with little to no problems.

Entitled white boy or what??

But then.

Then the three stories get connected and it completely knocked my socks off. Because it seemingly follows three unrelated tales until it all comes together for an epic - truly epic - twist that I didn't see coming from a mile off.

It was pure brilliance.

I was all, NOW WAIT JUST A DAMN MINUTE.....

Literally applauding Gene Luen Yang for this reveal that I did not see coming at all!!

And here's a pretty accurate visual of me when the reveal came:

I was shaking.

And praising the writer even more for that ending and how intricate and well-plotted everything was thought out to the last detail. I seriously cannot stop thinking about everything that went down. There's so much to discuss: from white privilege to stereotypes to what it means to accept yourself... And everything was handled with brilliance.

P.S. Wei-Chen is one of the best!!!

It's really been such a long time since a graphic novel has captured my heart like this. I read **American Born Chinese** in one breath and now I cannot stop raving about it.

*\*Note: I'm an Amazon Affiliate. If you're interested in buying **American Born Chinese**, just click on the image below to go through my link. I'll make a small commission!\**

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