

American Born Chinese Study Guide

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang

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Plot Summary

This multi-narrative graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang, tells the story of Jin Want, a young American Chinese boy struggling to find and reconcile his identity as both someone of Chinese descent, and as an American.

As the novel opens, the setting is not one of modern times, but of ancient times, in China. It is a version of the Monkey King tale. In the opening chapters, the gods and goddesses are having a party. It is so loud and so plentiful that the wonderful smells drift down to the people below, where the Monkey King is the supreme ruler of the lands. He is upset because he has not been invited to the party and decides to crash it. He is stopped at the door, being told that he is 'just a monkey'. This infuriates the King and he goes on a rampage, breaking expensive pieces of art, furniture, and even strong-arms some of the gods in his anger. Humiliated and upset, he leaves the party and returns home.

Meanwhile, back in the present day (or at least the 1980s) Jin Wang is in the third grade. He lives with his family in a portion of San Francisco called Chinatown. It is his normal routine to go with his Mom to the local herbalists store. This time, when his mother is taking too long in the store, he begins talking with the herbalist's wife, who always seems to be click-clacking on her abacus. Mysteriously, without looking up from her abacus, she tells Jin that he can become whomever he'd like to be, but he may find himself giving up his soul in order to do it. Jin considers her to be a little off her rocker, and they soon leave. However, her words will stick with him as he ages.

The next couple of years see Jin and his family move out of Chinatown and into the Bay area where he and one other Chinese American are the only ones like them, there. The other Asian, a girl, is too shy and doesn't like to speak to anyone, even Jin. It is a very lonely year for Jin, until the next year when a Taiwanese boy, named Wei-Chen Chang, starts attending the school. At first they don't get along at all, which depresses Jin, but later, they are able to set aside their arguments and become friends.

The novel leaps forward in time, to the 1990's. This portion of the graphic novel features a new character named, Danny. Though he is blonde haired and blue-eyed, he has a cousin named Chin-kee who is coming to visit. Danny is appalled. His cousin is the embodiment of every Chinese stereotype known to exist. Danny's sure that he will embarrass him, especially in front of Jenny, Danny's girlfriend. When Chin-kee arrives, the reader sees that he's drawn to be almost apelike in appearance, speaks with a thick accent, and is crazy good with math. It is as Danny has feared, and he is embarrassed.

Flashbackward...the novel jumps back to the tale of the Monkey King. In this section the King has locked himself in the royal chamber in order to train himself to become a transcended master of kung-fu. He calls himself The Great Sage. He takes it upon himself to punish the gods for their prejudice and insult to his person at the party. Lord-Above finally confronts the 'Great Sage' and challenges him to a task. It does not end well as the Lord-Above imprisons him under a mountain for his insolence.



Meanwhile, back at the Monkey King's prison. Lord-Above has imprisoned the Monkey King for 5,000 years, and finally he's feeling forgiving. He sends the most righteous in the land, Hsuan-tsang, to visit the Monkey King. He's to make the Monkey King his disciple. After a discussion about the true nature of humility and power, the Monkey King is freed. He agrees to lead his Master into the desert.

Back in Jin Wang's life, the reader sees him in middle school and having his first crush on a girl, named, Amelia. With some help from Wu-chen, Amelia agrees to go out with Jin. His first date with her is to the amusement park. They seem to get along great, but the next day she dumps him when the popular boy asks her out. Later, the same boy, named Timmy, gives Jin a look as if to acknowledge what he'd taken away from him. He calls Jin a dog-eater. Upset, Jin goes to find Wei-Chen to tell him what has happened, but runs into Suzy, Wei's girlfriend. They talk about what happened and they end up kissing, just as Wu walks into the room. He realizes that he has just done to Wei-Chen what Timmy did to him, and he is ashamed. Later that night, the herbalist's wife comes to him Jin a dream, telling him that he has forfeited his soul and that he will be granted his wish. When Jin wakes up the next morning he has been transformed into a blue-eyed blonde haired boy....and he calls himself Danny.

Danny finds Chin-kee in the school's parking lot and they begin to fight. Danny is tired of Chin-kee coming every year and embarrassing him. Chin-kee, in the course of the fight begins to transform. He eventually becomes the Monkey King. He tells Danny/Jin that he cannot hide who he truly is and that his dyed hair and colored contacts are only an illusion. He tells Jin that Wei-Chen was really the Monkey King's son, and his final task had been to take human form and to remain uncorrupted for forty years. He had failed when he began to hate Jin for kissing Suzy. This angered the Monkey King enough that he chose to haunt Jin in the form of Chin-kee until Jin apologized to his son.

Jin realizes that he not only needs to reconcile with Wei-Chen, but he needs to reconcile with himself, just as the Monkey King urged. The novel ends with Jin finding Wei in an area of Chinatown in Oakland. They sit down at a local cafe and begin to talk.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1

The graphic novel begins the story in ancient China. It is nighttime and the gods and goddesses are having a party. The noise, smells and enticing music make the Monkey King want to attend. He wonders that he was not invited. However, after standing in a very long line he is turned away at the door by the security guard who tells him he is 'only a monkey'. When the Monkey King tries to tell him that he's 'no monkey' the guard points out that he has no shoes. Humiliated, angry, and embarrassed the Monkey King uses his Kung-fu skills and begins to wreck the heavenly palace. Afterwards, he leaves and declares that all monkeys must now wear shoes.

Chapter 2

This part of the novel is set in the 1980's California. The reader is introduced to a young boy, of about 8, who is living with his mother and father in San Francisco Chinatown. His parents came to the U.S. only a few years before he was born and had to take jobs working in factories and as a wig salesman to make ends meet. The Wang family moves around quite a bit in this first chapter, living near a marketplace, then a cemetery, and finally, near a University. With each different environment, Jin adjusts and acts differently, trying on many different activities and perspectives....none of them his own. Each Sunday Jin accompanies his mother to the local herbalist's shop. While he's there his mother is taking particularly long and he gets into a conversation with the herbalists wife.

She doesn't look up from her abacus while she talks to Jin. She tells him that he can be whatever he wishes to be as long as he's willing to forfeit his soul. Jin leaves and the reader sees that Jin has a hard time fitting in, opting at one point to befriend a bully named, Peter, simply to have someone to hang around. Peter treats Jin poorly, but he takes it without comment. Later, in the fifth grade another Asian boy comes to the school and this time he has a true friend in Wei-Chen.

Analysis

These two chapters set the tone for the entire graphic novel. The juxtaposition of one time and setting to a different time and setting forces the reader to draw conclusions and create comparisons about the plight of the two protagonists offered in each chapter. In the first chapter, the Monkey King is having an identity crisis because he has decided that he is not only the leader of the monkeys, but that he is a legend, a deity, in his own right. As such, he is incensed that he hasn't been invited to the party where all of the true gods and goddesses are.



Likewise, the reader sees Jin Wang, a young boy of 8, realizing that he is not like many of the other children that he sees at school and in the greater world outside of Chinatown. It is telling that he carries a Transformer toy with him when he accompanies his mother into the herbalist's store. The toy, itself, represents Jin's longing to transform himself, much like the Monkey King, into something that he perceives to be bigger, greater, stronger than who he really is. The herbalist's wife sees the Transformer toy and it is part of what makes her start a dialogue with Jin about what it is he wants in life. The symbolism of her abacus, an instrument of tallying up and organizing treasure, money, or important items, never stops the entire time she speaks with Jin, indicating that Fate is always in motion. She offers him the prophetic warning that what he wants is possible but that he will have to forfeit his soul in order to obtain it.

Both the Monkey King and Jin don't fit in where they currently find themselves, and long to be 'more' than they perceive themselves to be. They are both often humiliated, angry, and embarrassed. Both try to change and adapt themselves to whatever environment they find themselves. For example, Jin's mother and father move several times in the first chapter, and each time Jin changes to suit what he believes will help him fit in wherever they live, whether that is near the marketplace, a cemetery, or an university. None of these activities are those that he seems to enjoy, but rather does to fit in, or because it is what is expected. Likewise, the Monkey King decides that he needs to learn the deeper mysteries of Kung Fu and secludes himself to learn all he can learn....as a means to an end.

Later, when Jin meets Wei-Chen he finally finds a friend who is a true friend. The reader is introduced to a bit of foreshadowing from Wei-Chen when he shows Jin his robot monkey transformer. This toy of Wei-Chen's is not only a gift from his father, the Monkey King (though the reader doesn't know this at the time), but also represents that change is going to come to both of them, and that it will be through Wei-Chen's friendship that this change will occur.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the similarities and differences between Jin and the Monkey King.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Jin allow Peter to treat him like he does?

Discussion Question 3

What is evident about Jin's identity from his early days in school and the various neighborhoods where he lived?

Vocabulary

abacus, nectar, frolicked, watchful, deity, purged, flocked, discipline, steed, eternity, pardon, announce, embarrassed, descended, chamber, parable, marketplace, haggling, incense.



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3

This chapter shows the struggles of a boy named Danny, who is a blonde haired, blue-eyed boy. In the opening scenes he is studying at his house with his girlfriend, Jenny. His mother calls out to him to tell him that his cousin, Chin-Kee is coming to visit. Danny is mortified. His cousin always causes trouble when he visits from China because his cousin embodies every negative stereotype known about Asian people. When his mother tells him that his cousin can go with him to school, Danny is nearly in tears. Each year shortly after his cousin visits, Danny feels compelled to move to another school because of his cousin's embarrassing behavior.

Chapter 4

Back in ancient China the Monkey King has decided that he needs to become a complete Master of Kung-fu and he locks himself into a secret cavern where he masters all of the secret ways of Kung-fu. After four months he emerges and changes his name to: "The Great Sage, Equal of Heaven." He travels back up the mountain the palaces of the gods and goddesses and introduces himself with his new name. They all laugh at him and pay the price.

Finally, tired of being abused by the Monkey King, the other gods and goddesses complain to the Lord-Above. Lord-Above confronts the Monkey King aka The Great Sage, and challenges him to a task. He tells him that if can, indeed, flee the grasp of the Lord-Above, then the Lord Above will agree that the Monkey King is truly a Great Sage. The Monkey King takes him up on his challenge and speeds off on his cloud.

He speeds past all sorts of landmarks, past the moon, stars, planets, mountains, kingdoms until finally, he has to stop to relieve himself....which he does on one of five golden pillars. He also does it to prove that he has been there and has outrun Lord-Above. He returns to Lord-Above and boasts that he has outrun the old man. The old man only smiles gently and holds up his hand. There on the fourth finger is the Monkey King's pee stain. He tells him that the five pillars were his own hand and that no matter how far Monkey tried to go, he was never beyond his grasp. He tells the Monkey that he ought to embrace humility, but enraged, the Monkey King claims he was cheated. Sadly, the Lord-Above is forced to imprison him under a mountain for 5,000 years.

Analysis

These two chapters are subtle hints by the author that Danny and Jin are one in the same (without directly saying so), as Chapter 3 is followed by a chapter on the Monkey King. It is still a direct comparison of a 'modern' boy to the ancient Monkey King. These



two chapters show Danny facing extreme embarrassment when he realizes that his cousin, Chin-Kee from China is coming for his yearly visit. He dreads this because his cousin reminds him that he is related to someone from China, which Danny would rather forget. Not only is Chin-Kee a negative stereotype of Asians, but he is a physical reminder of Danny's heritage, which he refuses to acknowledge or claim. So, there it is...larger than life...to remind him who he is. In a direct response to this, however, Danny runs. Each year after his cousin visits, and creates such a scene for him at the school he is attending, Danny feels he has to leave that school and find a new one where no one knows him or his 'cousin'.

In comparison, the Monkey King has finished his training and believes that he is better than ever, and as such, should change his name to Great Sage. The Monkey King confronts many of the gods and goddesses and tries to convince them that he is just like them (much like Danny did with his school friends), but they won't accept him and complain to Lord-Above. Finally, Lord-Above sets a task for the Monkey King that Monkey King cannot hope to complete, in the efforts to get him to see the truth of himself. Instead, he runs...just like Danny, in an attempt to prove that he is who he has made himself out to be.

He fails, of course, and in fact is shown to be a worse fool than when he started. However, instead of learning from it, and taking the lesson as it was offered as an act of compassion, he becomes violent and angry. Literally, and figuratively, he is weighed down by his false identity and pride. Lord-Above tells him that until he learns humility he will be imprisoned under the mountain for 5,000 years. The symbolism of the mountain, then, is demonstrated in Chapter 4 and is shown to be both a literal, immobilizing weight, as well as a mental and emotional one. The Monkey King is not willing to accept himself as he is and still clings to his false identity, which keeps him imprisoned and unhappy.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Danny be embarrassed by his cousin, Chin-Kee?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the Monkey King change his name and confront Lord-Above?

Discussion Question 3

What does the Lord-Above want Monkey to learn from the art of humility?

Vocabulary

ironically, tuition, eventually, complex, reception, herbalist, allergies, appointment, calculate, disguise, forfeit, lingering, circulate, prerequisite, fervently, decree, transcended, tangible, pondered, jeopardize



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5

Back in the 1980's the reader sees that Jin is now in middle school and has developed a crush on a girl named Amelia. Wei-Chen is dating the only other Asian student (a girl named Suzy). He and Jin are still very good friends. Wei-Chen tries to help Jin meet and talk to Amelia but Jin is just too shy. At one point, Wei tries to get Jin to volunteer for a science project with Amelia, but instead gets selected by the teacher himself when Jin refuses to raise his hand.

As it turns out, this was a good thing. One afternoon when Wei and Amelia are feeding the lab animals they are locked into the supply closet together. Wei tells Amelia about Jin and how Jin feels so that she will like him. It works, and when they are released from the supply closet, she agrees to go out with Jin. Jin believes that he has finally begun to fit in with people who don't exactly look like him, but just to make sure....he gets a perm in his hair, mimicking a look that he's seen other boys wear.

Chapter 6

Danny's cousin, Chin-Kee has arrived from China and has followed him to school. He loses no time in embarrassing Danny, answering all of the teacher's questions, excelling in math, and proliferating all of the horrible stereotypes about Asians that exist....such as bad English, romantic overtures, and talking about the 'Yellow Nation'. He wears his hair in the traditional braid, wears ancestral clothing, and does nothing more than cause Danny severe distress. The day is capped off nicely when Danny's girlfriend breaks up with him because of Chin-Kee.

Analysis

In Chapter 5 the theme of friendship is demonstrated when Wei-Chen attempts to help Jin meet and go out with the girl of his dreams, Amelia. At one point he tries to get Jin to volunteer for a science project with Amelia, but Jin is just too shy and unsure of himself. Wei feels badly for his friend, and when Wei is trapped in a closet with Amelia he takes the opportunity to extol Jin's virtues to Amelia who admits that she would like to get to know Jin more. This shows how deeply Wei feels for his friend, and the supportive strength that friendship, true friendship, and offer everyone involved.

The symbolism of Jin's Afro comes into play in this chapter as well. He wants to look like the other boys and so he believes that getting a perm in his hair will be just the thing. Unfortunately, his hair doesn't hold the curl well and it ends up looking like a bushy mess. People laugh at him behind his back. This just further underscores Jin's desire to fit in and look like someone he is not, and to turn his back on his cultural heritage.



Conversely, in Chapter 6 the reader sees the theme of prejudice introduced. Hinted about in Chapter 3, Danny's cousin, Chin-Kee has arrived with his usual larger-than-life Asian in-your-face persona. The fact that he dresses in outmoded clothing, wears the traditional braids, has very yellow skin and buck teeth, speaks broken English, knows all of the answers to the questions the teachers are asking, and is overly and inappropriately sexual, underscores the negative stereotypes about Asian Americans for the reader to see..all in one character. The reader should also realize that this is how Danny also sees his culture and Asian people as well....which is why he doesn't even look Chinese, in the least. However, here is his cousin reminding him of who he really is....which annoys him.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Jin be too shy to speak to Amelia?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast the characters of Wei Chen and Chen-Kee.

Discussion Question 3

How does Wei-Chen demonstrate that he's a good friend to Jin?

Vocabulary

vagrants, impudence, behoove, emissaries, cudgel, befitting, servitude, repentance, muster, unmitigated, pinnacle, patron, immortal, pillars, jolt, stilted, sage, seclusion, profusely, peril



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7

Feeling generous after several thousand years, Lord-Above asks one of his most venerable priests, Hsuan-tsang, to take the Scriptures of Truth and visit an ancient Monkey-Demon who, if all goes well, will be his newest disciple. Hsuan does as the Lord-Above commanded and finds the Monkey captive under the mountain. Hsuan devotes much time to debating the power of humility and power. It is when the Monkey King realizes true humility that he is able to reduce his size enough to remove himself from the mountain. He agrees to serve and learn from Hsuan. They walk into the desert to begin Monkey's training.

Chapter 8

Jin and Amelia go on their first date to a movie theater, but while they are there Jin spends most of the time worrying that he's not 'doing things right'. When the lights go off in the theater he realizes that he's sweating profusely and may be smelly. He excuses himself to go to the bathroom where he takes soap from the dispenser and applies it to his armpits. When he returns to Amelia all is well for a short while until he realizes that he's sweat through his sweater and left soap bubbles on Amelia's shoulder. He is mortified, though she never seems to notice. She says that she had a nice time.

The next day in school, Amelia dumps him for Timmy, the popular blonde haired boy. Later, Timmy tells Jin that he did that, not because he likes Amelia, but because he felt like she needed to guard her reputation and could do better than to be seen with Jin. He leaves Jin feeling horrible, and adds insult to injury by telling him not to eat his dog.

Looking for Wei-Chen, Jin instead finds Suzy. She is sympathetic and they talk for a long time. Then, without thinking about it, Jin kisses her. She gets angry with him and leaves, but the damage has been done. Wei-Chen knows. Later, when he is at home and reflecting on the day's events, Jin realizes that he kissed Suzy because he felt that Wei didn't deserve her, much like Timmy said Jin didn't deserve Amelia. With that conclusion, his guilt about the entire ordeal is lifted. He has a dream later that night and recalls what the herbalist's wife had said to him so many years previously. When he wakes up he feels that something has changed....when he looks in the mirror he has been transformed into a blue-eyed, blonde haired boy. He changes his name to Danny.

Analysis

Both of these chapters demonstrate the theme of transformation. In one instance, it is a positive transformation, as the Monkey King is finally able to let go of his anger, his false identity, and to seek what is real and true in life. When Lord-Above sends Hsuan-tsang



to offer the Monkey King a way out, at first the Monkey King refuses. He and Hsuan-tsang quietly debate the differences between power and humility, with Hsuan-tsang offering that true power is humility. The definition of humility, in this instance, is viewing himself as part of the whole rather than being separate from it, or above it. The Monkey King refuses to accept that he is not a god above all other monkeys. But when he sees the venerable monk being attacked and tortured by trolls he realizes that his true strength is in being who he really is, a monkey, at which point he is able to release himself from the mountain and save the monk. The symbolism of the monkey's shoes and his willingness to shed them to follow the monk, is an outward sign of his inner transformation. Initially, he'd decreed that all monkeys must wear shoes because the gods and goddesses wouldn't accept them without them. This, of course, is a false narrative, as he discovers. By leaving them behind he has learned the power of humility and how truly effective he can be in the world when he is being true to himself and his own nature.

Chapter 8 also shows transformation, but not in a good way. For Jin the transformation is a realization of the 'prophecy' that the herbalist's wife has made. She had stated that in order for him to transform into that which he desired, he would have to forfeit his soul. When he finds Suzy, and then knowingly decides to kiss her - an act he knew would hurt his best friend - he is not only betraying his friend, but tarnishing his soul. He is also directly rejecting his own culture. That night, the transformation that had begun internally, manifests externally as well, and Jin, as the reader knows him, is replaced by Danny - a blonde haired, blue eyed boy, with a cousin named Chin-Kee that he cannot stand.

The theme of betrayal is also demonstrated in this chapter on several levels. First, there is the betrayal of friendship and trust by Jin when he kisses Suzy. But, on a deeper level there is a betrayal when Jin becomes Danny and betrays his true self and his cultural heritage. Wei-Chen demonstrates the devastation that betrayal can have on a friendship and, in later chapters, the ripple effect that this betrayal will have will cause even greater potential damage.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of identity in Chapter 8.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Hsuan discuss the subjects of power and humility with Monkey King?

Discussion Question 3

What does the mountain that the Monkey King is stuck under represent?



Vocabulary

legendary, inevitable, huff, related, buck-teeth, orthodontist, detention, achieved, status, singularly, meditations, eloquence, mortal, sovereign, seal, befitting, moronic, stubbornness, retrieve



Chapter 9

Summary

Chapter 9

Danny has had it with Chin-Kee and later that day in the parking lot at school he confronts Chin-Kee. Danny says that each year he has to change schools because of Chin-Kee's antics and that this year Danny is not going to stand by and let Chin-Kee ruin things for him. They fight. When Danny lands a particularly good blow to Chin-Kee's head, a mask falls to the ground. Chin-Kee transforms into the Monkey King.

He tells Danny that he started haunting Danny when he was a false friend to Wei-Chen, who as it turns out, is the Monkey King's son...who was in training to also serve Lord Above. His task was to live as a mortal person for 40 years without sin. However, when Jin was a false friend to Wei, his son knew hatred and refused to speak to him. Since then Monkey King has continued to try and teach him humility through the disguise of Chin-Kee.

With this declaration he smacks Danny hard and all of a sudden Danny sees himself as others do - as Jin with bleached hair and blue contacts. The Monkey King taunts him saying that he cannot disguise who he truly is. The Monkey King tells Jin that until he makes things right with Wei-Chen that neither of them will know peace. Jin searches and finds Wei-Chen in Chinatown at a Taiwanese-American cafe, talking and laughing.

Analysis

In a final confrontation Danny fights Chin-Kee. It is a very violent fight, literally and figuratively. As he literally battles Chin-Kee, Danny is also at war with himself, his nature, his culture, and his true identity. The theme of identity is exemplified heavily in this final chapter as the reader learns the true identity of Chin-Kee and Danny. Neither are as they appear to be. First, Chin-kee is actually the Monkey King in disguise. Danny is not really Danny, but Jin in disguise.

When Danny knocks Chin-Kee's mask off, revealing the Monkey King, Danny stops to listen to what he has to say. The Monkey King tells him that his betrayal of Wei-Chen, the Monkey King's oldest son, set his son on an immoral path, causing him to turn away from all that was good in life. As a result, he set himself the task of 'haunting' Danny until he realized his mistake, reconciled with Wei-Chen, and became who he was meant to truly be.

At this point Danny takes a good look at himself and instead of seeing the all American blue-eyed, blonde haired athlete, he sees an Asian boy with bleached hair, looking like a freak. He is ashamed and realizes what he's done to his best friend, Wei-Chen, and to



himself. In an outward manifestation of the inner transformation, Jin finds Wei-Chen and it is suggested that they are both back on the correct path.

Discussion Question 1

What has the Monkey King learned about humility that he's trying to teach Danny/?

Discussion Question 2

What does the author want you to believe has happened between Jin and Wei-Chen at the end of the story?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of identity in this last chapter.

Vocabulary

accompanied, ethic, forbidden, concentrate, clutched, confidence, dissipated, indicated, desperation, worthy, deserved, revealed, presence, virtue, installed, vice, aspired, parameters, strictly, petty



Characters

Jin Wang

Jin Wang is a Chinese American boy growing up in California in the early 1980-1990's. He is shy, feels like an outsider, and is shown, initially, to be friendless. He finally makes a friend when he is in the fifth grade, Wu Chen. They are 2 of the only 3 Asian Americans in their school. Wu will end up dating the other Asian American, whose name is Suzy.

As Jin progresses through his school years the prophetic words of the herbalist's wife haunt him. She's told him that he can have whatever he wants as long as he's willing to pay the price....which might be his soul, depending on what it is he wants. Finally, after his girlfriend Amelia is stolen from him by a Caucasian boy, Jin thinks that what he really wants is to be white, too. When he gets his wish, he finds himself turning against his own culture and part of his own identity.

He finally realizes that he's been making a fool of himself when his 'cousin' Chin-kee embarrasses him and challenges him to 'wake up'. When Jin does stop to assess what he's done to himself (dyeing his hair blonde and wearing blue contact lenses) he realizes that he's been wrong in the way he's been treating himself, and viewing others. This is the turning point for Jin and he begins to accept his cultural identity as well as realize who he is as a person.

Wei-Chen Sun

Wei-Chen Sun meets Jin when they are in the fifth grade, and Jin does not know Wei-Chen Sun's true identity. They grow up together, and Wei-Chen Sun ends up dating the other Asian American in their school, Suzy. Wei-Chen and Jin are true friends for many years, with Wei-Chen Sun even helping Jin by speaking well of him to Amelia, whom Jin had a crush on in middle school.

However, later, when Amelia dumps Jin after their first date, and he turns to Suzy for comfort, then kisses her, Wei-Chen Sun becomes angry and sullen. Jin doesn't think much about it until he begins to fight with his cousin Chin-kee in the parking lot and it is revealed that Wei-Chen Sun was actually the Monkey King's son.

Wei-Chen Sun had been sent to Jin to help him come to terms with who he is, both as an American and with being Chinese. Wei-Chen Sun's task was to live a sin free life for forty years as a human being, upon which time he would be inducted into the Lord Above's service. Now, of course, the Monkey King relates, Wei-Chen Sun will fail that task because he has hatred in his heart for Jin. It is only when Jin reconciles with Wei-Chen Sun that things, or so it is hinted, will be made right.



Danny

At first the reader does not know that Danny is actually Jin Wang, transformed. 'Danny' happens shortly after Jin kisses Suzy and destroys his friendship with Wu Chen. In a dream he hears the herbalist's wife telling him that he has now forfeited his soul and he may have his desire. When Jin wakes up he is blonde haired, and blue-eyed. He decides to change his name to Danny.

As Danny, he assumes the nature of the 'average' American teenager. He is intensely embarrassed by his 'cousin' Chin-Kee, who is SO stereotypical Chinese that it is almost laughable. In fact, Chin-kee appears every year and each year Danny has to change schools because Chin-Kee makes such trouble and creates such an embarrassing environment for him at school that he has to change schools.

Finally, in a showdown in the parking lot, it is revealed that Chin-kee is actually the Monkey King who has come to teach Danny a lesson about his true identity. Finally, Jin listens, and instead of seeing the 'average' American teen, Danny, he sees a Chinese American boy trying to make himself look like someone he is not. At this point, Danny disappears.

Chin-Kee

The embodiment of all negative stereotypes about the Chinese, Chin Kee is Danny's cousin who constantly embarrasses him at his school. He is depicted in the graphic novel as wearing a long braid down his back, the rice hat, a tunic, and speaking pigeon English. The author draws Chin Kee as having extremely slanted eyes, yellow skin, and buck teeth. He plays tricks on Danny's friends, and often makes sexually inappropriate comments, or actions.

Later, it is revealed that Chin Kee is actually the Monkey King, whose sole role has been to rescue his son from the sin that has been placed upon his soul. His son, is in actuality, Wu Chen, Jin's former best friend. The Monkey King explains at the end that Wu Chen was to spend forty years as a mortal without suffering from sin. When he started to hate Jin because of what he'd done with Suzy, he'd forfeited his quest. The Monkey King's task has been to get Jin to reconcile with Wu Chen, and to reconcile with his own dual and combating identities.

Chin Kee helps Jin to understand and 'see' himself for who he truly is, and how ridiculous he'd looked trying to be 'Danny'. It is when Jin realizes this that Chin-kee disappears and Jin is able to find Wu and make amends .

Tze-Yo-Tzuh/Lord-Above

In this tale, Tze-Yo-Tzuh, Lord Above, is the leader of all the deities, and the creator of all that is. It is he whom the Monkey King insults when he comes to the party in the sky.



As a result, the Monkey King is cursed with having to live under a mountain for five thousand years.

Amelia Harris

Amelia Harris is the girl that Jin Wang has a crush on in the 8th grade. She is a white American girl who ends up going on a date with Jin, has a great time, then dumps him the next day simply because the popular boy, Timmy, has asked her to. She gives no more reason than that and it devastates Jin.

Timmy

Timmy is the popular boy that Amelia dumps Jin for in the 8th grade. He later gives Jin a look which prompts Jin to seek him out. When he asks Timmy why he did what he did, Timmy tells him that he did it, not because he was really attracted to Amelia, but because he didn't feel that Jin deserved her. Jin is enraged and hurt by this, but later, he says the same thing to Wu after he kisses Wu's girlfriend, Suzy.

Suzy Nakamura

Suzy meets both Wu and Jin in the middle school, where she starts going out with Wu. She is depicted as incredibly shy, but kind. When Jin comes looking for Wu, after Amelia's betrayal, it is she that consoles her. Caught up in the moment, she kisses him. Later, even though she regrets it, Wu will not take her back.

Herbalist's Wife

The herbalist's wife, who is left unnamed, is the woman that Jin meets in the herbal shop that his mother frequents each week. She is constantly clicking and clacking on her abacus, weighing, measuring, calculating. She tells Jin, when he is just 8 years old, that he can be whatever he would like to be if he's willing to forfeit his soul. At first, Jin doesn't take much of what she has told him to heart. Later, she appears in a dream to him and he finds that the next morning he's been transformed into his idea of an American.

Peter Garbinsky

Peter Garbinsky is a boy that Jin meets in the fourth grade. He is the schoolyard bully, who walks up to Jin and tells him that if Jin will give him his lunch that he'll be his friend. Jin agrees and this sets Jin up for several months of doing whatever Peter said, including stealing things from Peter's mother's drawers. Finally, Peter moves away, releasing Jin from any further humiliation.



Hsuan-tsang

Hsuan-tsang is the master sent by Lord Above to help the Monkey King free himself and regain his true identity. He takes the Monkey King on as his disciple.



Symbols and Symbolism

Herbalist Wife's Abacus

An abacus is a way of keeping track of numbers, of organizing groups. In this novel, it is used as a device of judgement by the herbalist's wife. Like the FATES with their yarn, so, too, acts the old woman with her abacus. She is the one that tells Jin that he may have whatever he wants in this life if he's willing to forfeit his soul.

Monkey King's Shoes

At the beginning of the novel, the Monkey King believes that he's been refused entrance to the heavenly realms because he has no shoes. When he goes into seclusion to improve his fighting skills, he also dons shoes as an outward sign of his transformation. Later, when he accepts humility and releases his desire to fight, he is told by Hsuan to leave his shoes behind, as he will have no further need for them. This indicates that the Monkey King is walking away from his previous mindset and way of life.

Bathroom Soap

Jin is so nervous about not doing the right thing or acting the 'right' way on his first date with Amelia that he sweats through his sweater. To counter the smell, he goes to the rest room and slathers his armpits with soap from the dispenser. This is also symbolic of his desire to cover up and smother who he really is. Ironically, the soap bubbles embarrass him more as they also come through the sweater and stain Amelia's clothes. The author would seem to be offering foreshadowing with this object, in that later on, Jin will dye his hair and put in blue contact lenses in an attempt to disguise or mask who he really is.

Kung Fu

Kung Fu is a martial arts discipline that the Monkey King espouses. He fights at the drop of a hat and is his sole way of dealing with issues that frustrate him, at the beginning of the novel. Later, it is only after he releases kung-fu (his desire to fight) that he is truly freed from his problems.

Wei Chen's Toy Monkey

When Wei-Chen and Jin first meet, Wei is holding a monkey robot toy. He tells Jin that it was a gift from his father before he left.



The Mountain

The mountain that is used to imprison the Monkey King is literal as well as figurative. The Lord Above imprisons the Monkey King because of his hubris, but on a deeper level, the Monkey King has imprisoned himself. This is actually indicated when he frees himself to save the monk, Hsuan-tsang. It is when he lets go of his arrogance and elevated sense of entitlement that he is able to be effective and vital once more. This is a symbol, then, of the problems and affectations that the Monkey King adopted in order to become someone and something that he never was.

Banana

In the first few chapters, after the Monkey King returns humiliated from the god's party, he decrees that all monkeys must now wear shoes. The other monkeys are baffled as to why their king would ask them to do this as it is against their nature, would make life harder for him. In an attempt to remind him who he is, they offer him a dose of reality...a reminder, in the form of a banana. He rejects it as he rejects all attempts to remind him of who he is.

Five Pillars of Gold

In his attempt to outrun Lord Above, the Monkey King hops on his cloud and zips through all sorts of scenes and times, but when he gets to the end, he sees five golden pillars. In an act of defiance, he urinates on the fourth pillar, then scrawls his name on it...just to show he was there before Lord Above. Of course, the joke is on him, as those 5 pillars were actually Lord Above's fingers. When he holds up his hand to show the Monkey King, it is evident that the Monkey King has failed the task, that he has literally disrespected his creator, and that he is a fool.

Science Animals

The science animals were supposed to be a project that would afford Jin a chance to spend some alone time with Amelia, but he is too shy to volunteer. So, as a result, Wei-Chen takes the job, instead. However, it also offers him a chance to tell Amelia about Jin.

Jin's Afro

When Jin realizes that he'll be going out with Amelia, he determines to make himself look more like the other guys at his school. So, in order to do this, he gets a perm. However, the perm doesn't take very well and it ends up looking like a tangled mess. The students at the school call it his 'fro and laugh at him behind his back. Even Wei-



Chen asks why his friend has broccoli on his head. This just shows how far Jin will go to change and avoid who he is.

Transformer Toy

Introduced in the first two chapters, Jin's childhood toy was a Transformer. The slogan, it should be noted, is: Robots in disguise. This is very poignant because not only will Jin engage in a disguise, but so will Wei-Chen, and the Monkey King. It is the toy that the herbalist's wife sees and what sets off the conversation about change and losing one's soul.



Settings

1980's Chinatown/California

This initial setting shows Jin's family as they struggle to make a living, find a place where their son will thrive, and introduces some of the early issues that are going to recur in the following chapters.

Ancient China

This setting is set in ancient times when gods and goddesses, spirits, and demons were accepted. Set in a time and place that are more mythological than actual, this is where the tale of the Monkey King unfolds.

1990's suburbs

This is where the reader first meets Danny and finds that he's horribly afraid of visits from his cousin, Chin-Kee. The house he lives in and the neighborhood where he lives is like anyone else's.

School

Several schoolyard and hallway scenes take place in schools. First, the reader sees Jin as the focus of attention for the schoolyard bully named, Peter. Then, later, the reader sees Jin as he interacts with others in middle school and high school.

Movie Theater

When Jin takes Amelia on their first date to the movie theater, he is so afraid that he's not living up to expectations that he does not enjoy himself at all. He is too worried about whether or not he's sweating too much, has the right look, and then is upset when he realizes that he's soiled Amelia's sweater, too. Though she never mentions any of those things, Jin is sure that she noticed, as well as the whole world.



Themes and Motifs

Prejudice

Prejudice in the form of racial stereotypes is demonstrated in many of the chapters in American Born Chinese. The reader sees this most pronounced in the form of Chin-kee, who adopts all of the negative traits commonly used as slurs against Asians. The illustrations are key to propelling the stereotype forward as it shows Chin-Kee dressed in ancient and outmoded clothing and hairstyles. The emphasis on Chin's ability to be smarter than everyone in class is also offered as racial judgement.

Interesting to note are the repetitive ha ha ha's and the clap clap clap that is often placed at the bottom of the panels where Chin-kee is featured, which is meant to replicate old canned laugh tracks and studio audience sounds....like old racially charged sit-coms in the '70s.

The Monkey King also is used to illustrate racial prejudice toward his own race. He adopts and assimilates into the larger culture by shunning his own background as a monkey....the shoes, for example. Likewise, a very young version of Jin, faces bullies who call him names because of his race, and it is difficult for him to find a way to fit in. One child says that Chinese people eat dogs.

Prejudice happens on the part of the gods and goddesses who look at the monkey as an inferior being, incapable of being on their level because he is not like them. When he attempts to become like them, claiming that he is like them, he only makes things worse for himself. He is judged to be on equal footing only after he lets go of his anger and arrogance, and follows Hsuan-tsang to learn how to be himself in a way that would elevate him to a status that he truly deserves and would give him greater happiness.

Identity

The graphic novel, American Born Chinese, is at its very core a tale of trying to figure out one's own identity. It is offered and suggested that those who are not mainstream American, but rather are an ethnic minority to some extent, struggle with this notion of identity worse than the majority race. This is because they must reconcile the dual natures of their cultures, finding what can be blended and used, and letting other practices and beliefs go. There is no tried and true way to do this except self exploration and experimentation.

This type of experimentation is evidenced in the book many times. First, the reader sees Jin experiment and change his identity with each move he makes as a young boy. First, they live across from the marketplace, so Jin believes that he should practice haggling, selling, and buying as he sees those around him doing. Next, they move near a cemetery, where Jin, once again, adopts the habit of honoring the dead and burning



incense to their memory. Lastly, the Wang's move near a University, where Jin becomes a star student with a love of mathematics and literature.

Later, the reader sees Jin get a perm in order to change his Asian look to a more mainstream look. This backfires on him and ends up making him the laughing stock of those who see him. He is oblivious to this for a good while, until his final identity experiment where he changes his entire body, hair, eye color, and build, to more closely resemble those around him in high school.

Interestingly, identity is often a hidden aspect. For example, the Monkey King disguises himself as Chin-Kee. Jin hides his identity as Danny, and Wei-Chen disguises his identity as well. It is only through great confrontation and strife that the disguises can no longer hold up and are torn down to reveal the true individual underneath. When the Monkey King is revealed, he tells Jin that he didn't hide his identity to trick Jin, but rather to act as his conscience.

Transformation

There are several types of transformations that take place in American Born Chinese. First, there are the types of literal transformations that change the outward appearance of the character. Then, there are the inner transformations that follow from the revelation and understanding of a great truth.

An example of physical transformation is Jin's attempt to fit in, regardless of where he exists. This takes forms from adopting mannerisms and tasks of those around him, such as when he lived in the marketplace, to getting a perm so that he will look like the white kids in his school.

The Monkey King also goes through physical transformations. First, he determines that he will wear shoes, since that's what gods do. However, this doesn't work for him any better than anything else, so he determines that he must acquire more knowledge. He learns and masters Kung-fu and when he has completed the training, he has grown taller, bigger, and larger than the other monkeys. This is how he sees himself, now, and as a result it has manifested externally, too.

Jin, when he is willing to sacrifice his friendship to become more 'white', transforms into Danny with blonde hair and blue eyes. This transformation is marred by the fact that there is always a yearly reminder where he can't escape the presentation of who he really might be. This transformation of the Monkey King into Chin-Kee is also a disguise used to teach, and to work for the greater good of Danny and Wei-Chen.

As a result of the various transformations that the characters go through, Jin is able to reconcile both inner and outer transformations to become someone who is fully able to embrace the best of both worlds that he inhabits.



Betrayal

There are two types of betrayal going on in *American Born Chinese*, the graphic novel. First, there is the literal betrayal of a friend. Jin betrays his best friend, Wei, in an attempt to identify and emulate the white kids at his school. When Timmy 'stole' Jin's girlfriend, what he told him was that Jin wasn't good enough for Amelia and that her reputation would suffer. She didn't deserve him, Timmy said. Jin, then in turn, uses these very same words to describe why he'd done what he'd done to Wei-chen thus rationalizing his actions....and forfeiting his soul. In other words, he was not only betraying his friend, but he was betraying himself.

Self deception and betrayal are evidenced in both the characters of Jin and Monkey King as both refuse to acknowledge the truth and will go to great lengths to avoid facing it. It is only when both are willing to stop being insecure about who they are, what they look like, and where they come from that they begin to live 'real' lives.

Chin-Kee and Danny betray each other, too. First, Chin-Kee sabotages Danny's efforts to fit in and act white. He betrays his friendship in this regard, as well as that of a family member. Secondly, Danny betrays Chin-Kee because he is constantly talking badly about his own cousin to others around him. He especially makes fun of Chin-Kee's Chinese ways. This is also a betrayal of his culture.

Friendship

Friendship plays a crucial role in *American Born Chinese*. First, it is the absence of friendship that is featured as the reader watches a very young Jin forced to be a bully's target just so Jin can pretend he has a friend. When Wei-Chen shows up he at first tells Wei that he already has enough friends, in a type of self delusion. However, Wei overcomes this when he shows Jin his robot. It is then that Jin realizes what he's been truly missing and the boys are inseparable from that moment on.

Next, there is the proliferation of friendship. Jin is shown to be the one in the friendship who explains how things 'are' to Wei-Chen, who supposedly has just arrived from China. he shows Wei how to dress, act, speak, and how things are done. While the reader sees Wei Chen trying to accommodate his friend, the reader will also note that Wei does not change who he is, even if he also embraces new ways of communicating and living. it is through Wei that Jin meets Suzy, another Asian girl at the school, as well as meet the girl of his dreams, Amelia.

In this example, then, friendship has offered Jin a way to be happy with who he is. Unfortunately, he is unable to fully grasp its healing properties, and support structure. This is evidence when he willingly sacrifices his friendship in order to be more like Timmy, the most popular guy at school....and Amelia's new boyfriend.

In the end, it is a return to friendship that resolves the book and brings everything back into alignment for all of the characters. Wei-Chen will return to his pilgrimage to the

human race, Jin will embrace who he is, and the Monkey King will have fulfilled his mission to bring both boys enlightenment.

Styles

Point of View

As a graphic novel the point of view is spread across three different protagonists: Jin, Danny, and the Monkey King. Always offered in the first person point of view, each depicts different situations and scenarios all illustrating the same themes of identity, transformation, friendship, betrayal, and prejudice.

Since it is a graphic novel, there are also non-verbal cues given throughout the tale, from the Monkey King fighting to Jin's soul searching, the reader is able to view the inner struggle through the non-verbal point of view of the characters. The reader is often given insight into the motivations of the characters because it is first person, which may have been lost if this story had been told, for example, in third person omniscient.

Language and Meaning

The language used within the graphic novel, American Born Chinese, is alternately modern and ancient, depending on the character that is being featured. Since it is a graphic novel, the entire story is told using dialogue and illustrations that deepen the meanings. For example, at the very end of the novel, Jin has gone to find Wei-Chen to make amends.

The author draws both boys sitting together. The dialogue is sparse, and the language that is utilized is that of the drawings, themselves, to show Jin's apologetic nature, and Wei-Chen's willingness to listen. Then, instead of directly addressing the issue, Wei starts commenting on the terrible tea in the cafe and that in the future, they will have to go elsewhere. This lets the reader infer that the boys will be fine and that they will remain friends. The total effect is the combination of illustration with dialogue that come together to give the reader maximum information to determine what is being said (and not said) between characters.

Structure

American Born Chinese is a graphic novel with three sections, and nine chapters. The first section compares the Monkey King to Jin's life, and the reader can see the parallel nature of their problems. The second section compares Danny to the Monkey King, with the last section featuring all three in one large hurrah.

The structure is designed to give maximum impact, both visually, and in a literary manner. What is interesting to note is that despite the delivery vehicle (a graphic novel) the novel, itself, tackles significant themes that are present, and to be found, in larger bodies of literary works. Because a graphic novel is limited to word counts and space on

the page, the author was forced to choose the situations and conversations carefully, leaving many things unsaid, but easily assumable by the reader.



Quotes

My father sold wigs door-to-door.

-- Jin (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 25)

Importance: This quote indicates just how hard Jin's family struggled when they first came to the United States.

...you are still a monkey.

-- Security Guard (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 15)

Importance: This quote happens when the Monkey King tries to go to the deities party and is told that he can't come in, that he is a monkey. This shows and sets up the feelings of prejudice and humiliation which Jin, himself, also relates to. It also becomes the catalyst that changes the Monkey King.

Long ago, a mother and her young son lived near a marketplace. Every day when the son played he pretended to buy and sell sticks he found on the street, haggling over prices with his friends.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 23)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows that even at an early age, Jin was trying to assimilate and blend in to whatever surroundings he found himself in. When the family moves near a cemetery, Jin adopts other hobbies, and then, finally, when they moved near a university, the family stopped moving.

It's easy to become anything you wish....so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul.

-- Herbalist's Wife (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 29)

Importance: This quote is one of the key passages in the novel as it sets up the transformation that Jin will undergo as well as speak directly to one of the themes, which is self acceptance and identity.

Rong time no see! Cin Kee happy as Ginger root pranted in nutritious manure of well-bred ox!

-- Chin Kee (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 49)

Importance: This quote is important as a character device as it shows how embarrassing this character is to Danny/Jin.

I created you. I say that you are a monkey. Therefore, you are a monkey." "You are mistaken. I was born of a rock, created by no one.

-- Lord Above/Monkey King (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 69)

Importance: This quote in Chapter 5 parallels some of the same issues that Jin/Danny are facing in that they are not willing to see who they truly are and go to great lengths,



both ridiculous, in order to preserve this false identity. In this quote, the Lord Above sees him for who he is, but the Monkey King hears it as an insult.

Yes, I owe Jin very much. He has a good soul. If he was not here I don't know. I would have been so lonely.

-- Wei Chen (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 102)

Importance: This quote happens when Wei Chen and Amelia are trapped in the closet in science class after school. Wei Chen takes this opportunity to tell Amelia how Jin feels about her. This prompts Amelia to agree to go out with Jin.

Returning to your true form is not an exercise of Kung Fu but a release of it.

-- Wong Lai-Tsao (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 145)

Importance: Wong Lai-Tsao tells the Monkey King this so that the Monkey King will realize the error of his ways and stop trying to be someone and something he is not.

It's just that she's a good friend and I want to make sure she makes good choices, you know? We're almost in high school. She has to start paying attention to who she hangs out with.

-- Timmy (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 179)

Importance: This quote comes after Jin's first date with Amelia. Timmy asks her out just to take her away from Jin, not because he likes her.

Jin, how could you even think to do something like this? How could you have even let it enter your mind?

-- Wei Chen (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 189)

Importance: This quote is important because it shows the depth of Jin's betrayal of Wei Chen and it sets up the scene for the arrival of the Monkey King aka Chin-Kee.

Now that I've revealed my true form, perhaps it is time to reveal yours.

-- Monkey King (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 213)

Importance: In this quote Danny has just punched Chin-kee and the mask falls off to reveal the Monkey King. He reveals himself to Danny and confronts him with the double life that Danny has also been living.

I came to serve as your conscience..as a signpost to your soul.

-- Monkey King (Chapter 9 paragraph Page 221)

Importance: The Monkey King has revealed himself to Jin and tells him that when Jin betrayed Wei Chen with Suzy that his son ran away and would not speak to him any more, either. So, as a result, he decided to disguise himself as Chin-kee and haunt Jin until he saw the error of his ways. He tells Jin that it is because of his betrayal that his

son believes that all humans are worthless. It is this quote that finally makes Jin see the damage that he has done to himself, and to his friend.