

NEWSMAKER Author(s): GENE LUEN YANG

Source: *American Libraries*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (MAY 2016), pp. 20-21

Published by: American Library Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26380636>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



American Library Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Libraries*

JSTOR



NEWSMAKER: GENE LUEN YANG

Gene Luen Yang has been busy. The award-winning writer and illustrator of graphic novels *American Born Chinese* and *Boxers and Saints* is the 2016 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and the honorary chair of National Library Week 2016. *American Libraries* spoke with Yang about these two new positions, how comics shaped his youth, and the importance of comics in libraries.

What got you into writing and drawing?

GENE LUEN YANG: I've been interested pretty much all of my life. My parents are avid storytellers, and I grew up listening to their stories. I also grew up drawing. Comics was a way of combining those two things.

There are themes running through your work—of identity, of trying to find yourself, of confronting stereotypes. Was this intentional when you started? Do you think it's important for a young adult comic creator to address such issues?

Yeah, I have always been drawn to the idea of diversity, and maybe it's because of how I grew up. My parents are immigrants and, like most children of immigrants, I grew up navigating two different cultures. I lived with one culture at home, another one at school. I had one name at home, another one at school. One language at home, another one at school. So there was always this back-and-forth, and a big part of growing up was figuring out how to fit these two cultures together into a cohesive identity for myself. I think that's why it is something I return to again and again.

What role did the library play in your childhood?

I went to the library a lot. My mom took me there, me and my brother. I do remember, however, being in late elementary school and feeling like my local library didn't have much for me, you know? There wasn't really a young adult section the way there is now. Around that time is when I discovered comics. I had this friend in 5th and 6th grade who was a big comic book fan, and he showed me how we could get to the comic book store by having our parents drop us off at our local library, wait until they drove away, and then sneak out and walk to the comic book store. We would buy comics from the quarter bins, sneak back into the library, and wait for our parents to pick us up.

For a little while, that's how I got my comics. I'm kind of jealous of kids today because my local library now has a better and more diverse graphic novel section than my local comic book store does. I think if I were a kid today, it would be the exact opposite. I would be sneaking out of the comic book store and into the library because of its comics.

What current comics trends excite you?

Number one is diversification,

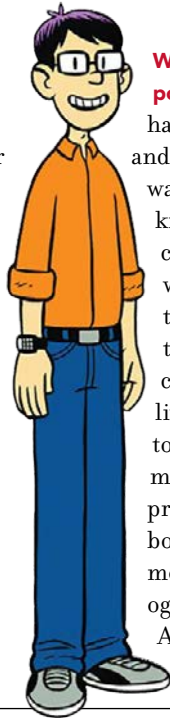
and I mean that in every sense of the word. When I was growing up, most of the comics that were available to me were superhero comics, and they mostly featured straight, white, male protagonists. The publishers thought of them as boy's stories, stories targeted to boys. Now, you can find comics in every genre, for every age demographic, reflecting a diversity of characters and cultural life experiences. I think all of that is just going to continue.

We're also seeing diversification in terms of creators. More and more people from different backgrounds are finding their voice in comics. All of those are very, very positive, encouraging trends. They give me a lot of hope.

Comics are also trying to figure out their relationship with technology. For a while, there was discussion within the comic book industry, and within the book world in general, that digital was going to replace print. Now, it seems like we've gotten to the point where we realize that digital actually reinforces print. Digital sales don't eat away print sales; digital actually brings people to print. People who first experience a comic digitally, if they like it enough, will start buying the print version.

What are your thoughts on comic books in the libraries? They've done studies that have found that the presence of a graphic novel section can actually increase the overall circulation of noncomics material. I think that was definitely true for me. When I got to a point where I had a hard time finding books that spoke to me, I started reading comics. Eventually

Yang's illustration of himself



when I got older I picked up prose books again, but comics were really this bridge to reading for me. I think that's true for a lot of kids. Comics can be a gateway into reading. For all those reasons, comics really do belong in the library. It's really rare now that I meet a librarian who doesn't agree with that. Librarians nowadays are so comics-positive. It's pretty amazing.

Were you excited when the Library of Congress chose you to be the 2016 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature? Yeah, I was excited, and I was intimidated.

What are your plans for this position? Every ambassador has a platform of some kind, and mine is "Reading without walls." I want to encourage kids to read outside of their comfort zones, to explore the world of reading. I want them to do three things: I want them to read books with main characters who don't look or live like them. I want them to pick books with topics that might be intimidating. My pet project in this area is STEM books—I want kids to read more about science, technology, engineering, and math. And finally, I want kids to read books in different formats.

If you're a kid who reads only prose, I encourage you to give graphic novels a try. And if you're the exact opposite—which is who I'm meeting more and more now; I'm meeting a lot of kids who read only graphic novels—I hope you'll give a prose book or a book in verse a chance.

What are your thoughts on being named honorary chair of National Library Week 2016? I'm thrilled.

Libraries are such an important part of my life. They're where I research, where I read, where I write, where I think. There's a feeling you get from standing in between two shelves of books—you're literally surrounded by knowledge. Every kid ought to experience that feeling. ■

**Special Discount,
no studying required.**

GEICO
#MemberDiscount

1-800-368-2734
www.geico.com/disc/ala

Some discounts, coverages, payment plans and features are not available in all states or all GEICO companies. Discount amount varies in some states. One group discount applicable per policy. Coverage is individual. In New York a premium reduction may be available. GEICO is a registered service mark of Government Employees Insurance Company, Washington, D.C. 20076; a Berkshire Hathaway Inc. subsidiary. GEICO Gecko image © 1999-2016. © 2016 GEICO