

**First Opinion: *The Shadow Hero:*  
Return of the Green Turtle**

Yang, Gene Luen. *The Shadow Hero*. Illus. Sonny Liew.  
Lettering by Janice Chiang. New York: First Second Books, 2014. Print.

*Karen Gavigan*



As a recipient of the National Book Award and the Printz Award for *American Born Chinese*, and the award-winning author of *Boxers & Saints*, Gene Luen Yang is an acclaimed graphic novelist for young adults. The vast popularity of his publications as well as his graphic novel advocacy efforts have done much to legitimize the use of graphic novels in schools and libraries. When Yang recently spoke as part of a graphic novel panel at the 2015 midwinter meeting of the American Library Association (ALA), he stated that graphic novels are a “medium flexible enough to tell any sort of story you want to tell.” What an engaging story Yang has told through the dramatic illustrations of Sonny Liew in their graphic novel, *The Shadow Hero*. In this compelling superhero tale of a first-generation Chinese American teen in the 1930s, Sonny often struggles with his nonmainstream identity.

The fascinating genesis for *The Shadow Hero* came from Yang’s desire to revive the story of the Green Turtle, a comic legend created by the Chinese American artist Chu Hing in the 1940s. Considered the Golden Age of American Comics, the 1940s were also a time of strong racial prejudice. According to the informative end notes, Chu’s publishers wanted the Green Turtle to be a Caucasian character in their Blazing Comics series. He rebelled, and his illustra-

tions presented the superhero in ways that did not totally obscure his Asian identity. For example, the Green Turtle's face often appears in the shadows, or readers see him from behind. Unfortunately for Chu, his Green Turtle series was short lived, with a run of only five issues. Seventy years later, however, in *The Shadow Hero*, Yang's innovative text and Liew's illustrations authentically portray the lives of the Green Turtle and other Asian American characters in a "dingy corner" of Chinatown in the fictional city of San Incendio.

*The Shadow Hero* is an often humorous adventure tale about Hank Chu, the son of a "modestly successful" grocer (Yang 6) and his overbearing wife, Hua, who reluctantly married Hank's father. Hua obsessively pushes Hank to become an improbable superhero, the Green Turtle. When martial arts lessons, exposure to radiation, and a visit to a mystic fail to impart superpowers to Hank, Hua informs Hank that she lives in a "house of cowards" (54). Only when a tragic event occurs in Hank's life can he overcome his reluctance to become a superhero. Ultimately, he decides to defend his family and friends who are victims of the local Chinese mafia. Along the way, he even attracts the eye of Red Center, the daughter of Ten Grand, the leader of the Chinese criminal underground.

Through his vivid illustrations, Liew does a powerful job painting the picture of what life was like in pre-World War II Chinatown. Whether it is a humorous exchange between Hank and his mother, an action-packed fight scene between the Green Turtle and Chinese gangsters, or the magical appearance of the mythological spirits of China, Liew's creative panels depict this coming-of-age tale in imaginative ways.

When speaking about his childhood and his early love for comics, Yang said that the "combination of word and pictures did something inside of me that words and pictures did not do alone." Through the drama of fighting crime, the magic of Chinese mythology, and a dash of romance, Yang and Liew have created a captivating tribute to Chu Hing and the Green Turtle. Teens who are avid comic fans, and even those who are reluctant graphic novel readers, will find *The Shadow Hero* a powerful superhero origin tale told through the storytelling power of sequential visuals.

\*Yang's fans can look forward to his upcoming book, which will be published by First Second Books in September 2015. *Secret Coders* (Yang, 2015) will be a graphic novel mystery about computer coding that targets middle school readers. Yang, a high school computer science teacher, collaborated on the book with illustrator Mike Holmes.

### **Works Cited**

Yang, Gene Luen, and Lark Pien. *American Born Chinese*. New York: First Second Books, 2006. Print.  
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Yang, Gene Luen, and Mike Holmes. *Secret Coders*. New York: First Second Books, 2015. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Karen Gavigan** is an associate professor in the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina. Her research interests include the use of graphic novels in K–12 schools. Karen and Mindy Tomasevich are co-authors of *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12* (Libraries Unlimited, 2011) and the column *Connecting Comics to Curriculum in Library Media Connection*. Karen and Kendra Albright are co-editors of *AIDS in the End Zone* (Young Palmetto Books, 2014), a graphic novel created by incarcerated youth as an HIV/AIDS prevention tool.