I’ve had a pretty amazing year. And really, that’s an understatement. Two years ago, I photocopied and stapled individual chapters of *American Born Chinese* to sell by the dozen at comic book conventions, usually to personal friends or my mom. Today, I’m standing here in front of you.

Along the way from there to here, I’ve had the privilege of talking to many, many librarians and teachers about why graphic novels belong in our libraries and classrooms. Without exception, my message has been met with unbridled enthusiasm. There’s no doubt about it. Librarians love graphic novels.

This past March, however, while I was still enjoying the afterglow of the Printz committee phone call, I began having serious self-doubts. I thought back to an incident from a few years ago, when one of my students, an aspiring rap musician, gave me a copy of his album. I brought it home and played it. Though I found most of it incomprehensible, I thought it had a good beat. The next day in class I told him I liked it, and immediately his friend remarked, “Dude, Mr. Yang is a teacher. If he likes it, it must kinda suck.”

This past March, after reflecting on this and many other similar experiences, I came to the slow realization that we adults who work with teenagers—we teachers and librarians—simply are not that cool. And really, the cooler we try to be, the more uncool we become. If you doubt me, try wearing a backwards baseball cap and sagging, extra-large jeans to work some time and take a good, hard look at the faces of the teenagers you serve. You will not find admiration, I assure you.

I began to wonder: By going from library to library and school to school evangelizing librarians and teachers on the virtues of graphic novels, was I robbing comics of their cool? Would a teenager stop reading graphic novels as soon as her classroom teacher or local librarian suggested that she start reading them for her own educational benefit?

Then a month later, something happened that completely shifted my perspective. MySpace honored *American Born Chinese* with the dubious distinction of being their April 2007 featured book. What followed was a furious online discussion about my graphic novel among MySpace users. Although there were occasional nuggets of wisdom, the vast majority of the posts made me regret ever putting my inking brush to paper. Let me share some examples with you.

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Post #1: Funnay. this book looks totally awesome. I know ppl who pee in Cokes and eat dead cats. Ba-haha

Post #2: RACIST BOOK. repost if u got any AzN pride. its practically racist against AzNz, even the dude's name is CHINK-kee and all dat s____. go to dis site and Place Bad comments, Destroy this son of a b____ book! Destroy it! Destroy it! Racist son of a b____ book!

Post #3: Shut up. its funny. leave it alone. ur mad cuz u aren't funny. ur just asian and not funny. Funny asians are better

Post #4: i think its funny hes making fun of chinks

Post #5: Heh. people still read books?

Before I went and burned my drawing table, I decided to compare these posts to posts from other online discussions on *American Born Chinese*. These other discussions took place on the Web sites of libraries and schools, and were guided by librarians and teachers. A few examples:

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Post #1: I had heard about stereotypes, but never really fully understood them. This book has taught me to at least get a little grasp on the pain and hurt that stereotypes can really cause.

Post #2: It is important to know everything about yourself. . . . It's important because knowing yourself allows you to see more clearly what you want, who you consider as friends, where you want to go, how you want to live, and what you really care about. That stuff matters.

Post #3: Sometimes we choose to give up certain values or things
that we believe in to get to a certain position. Part of who you are may get lost. . . . But you can always choose to get your soul back.

Post #4: [I] didn’t want to be a person who had ADHD. I wanted to be normal and I kept trying to find a way to do it, I searched for a few years, but couldn’t find a way to do it. Finally, I guess I just had to accept just who and what I was. Unfortunately, this urge still comes to me once in a great while.

Afterwards, I had an epiphany. In a data-rich society like twenty-first-century America, we need information experts to prevent complex ideas from condensing into polarized, essentially meaningless sound bites. We need these experts to teach us to sort good information from bad. We need them to save us from being drowned by the torrents of media we create. We need them to model for us how to think about what we read and watch and listen to. In short, my epiphany can be summed up like this: You librarians are all that stand in the way of the entire world turning into one big, no-holds-barred MySpace discussion board.

I suddenly appreciated how lucky I am to be able to count librarians among the most ardent supporters of *American Born Chinese*. My Cousin Chin-Kee character, especially, has the potential to be reduced to nothing more than a YouTube video clip in the mind of the reader. Now, it’s okay for you to find him funny, but I want you to laugh at him with a knot in your stomach. Without at least a passing knowledge of Chin-Kee’s historical roots, a young reader might not develop that knot.

To empower you to make knots in the stomachs of teenagers across the nation, I’d like to take some time now to deconstruct the Cousin Chin-Kee character with you. Chin-Kee stars in one of the three storylines in *American Born Chinese*.

With Chin-Kee, I attempt to tie today’s popular images of Asians and Asian-Americans with the more overtly racist imagery prevalent in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Here is a political cartoon from the 1880s, around the time the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted.

Cartoons like this sanctioned discrimination and violence against early Asian-American communities. It is from here that Chin-Kee got his outfit and hair style.

My next example shares something in common with one of my favorite span-dexed crimefighters. Batman began in a comic book series called Detective Comics, DC Comics’ flagship title. Few people know, however, that Detective Comics did not begin with Batman. In fact, twenty-six issues of the series were published before...
Batman reared his brooding, pointy-eared head. The inaugural issue of Detective Comics featured a character much more familiar and marketable to comic book readers in the 1930s.

This is Ching Lung, a cheap Fu Manchu knock-off. From him Chin-Kee inherited his leering eyes and menacing slouch.

Those are the origins of Chin-Kee’s appearance. His words and actions are much more modern. One of Chin-Kee’s most over-the-top lines is a word-for-word quotation from a political cartoon by an award-winning, nationally syndicated cartoonist. In a lunchroom scene in the sixth chapter of American Born Chinese, Chin-Kee offers Danny a bite of his “crispy fried cat gizzards with noodles.” On April 9, 2001, in response to the Chinese spy plane crisis, American political cartoonist Pat Oliphant drew a six-panel strip depicting Uncle Sam’s visit to a Chinese restaurant, where he is served “crispy fried cat gizzards with noodles” by a slant-eyed, bucktoothed waiter.

Chin-Kee’s lust for buxom American girls mirrors that of Long Duc Dong, Oriental comic relief in John Hughes’ 1984 film Sixteen Candles. Most Asian American men of my generation can vividly recall the sting of this character. In a strip drawn for Giant Robot magazine, Adrian Tomine, a fellow thirtysomething Asian American cartoonist, recounts his phone interview with Gedde Watanabe, the actor who portrayed Long Duc Dong. Tomine doesn’t just speak for himself when he ends the strip with an emphatic, “I hate that f***ing guy!”

Since the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, America has generally acknowledged that Fu Manchu and other historical caricatures of Asians and Asian Americans are racist. But what do we make of modern-day stereotypes? Often these are treated as little more than impolite jokes. After all, Asians and Asian Americans are largely seen as successful in American society.

Images, however, have power. And images have history. Today’s depictions of Asians and Asian Americans rest on a tradition. They draw on visual cues and shorthands already established in the mind of the audience. When we encounter John Hughes’ Long Duc Dong or Pat Oliphant’s Chinese waiter, we must remember who their grandfathers are. And we must ensure that the next generation does the same.

Getting the next generation to read and watch and listen with all their minds and all their hearts is no small task. Generation Next is constantly tempted to communicate through ten-letter text messages, make snap judgments based on two-minute video clips, and understand the world through a rotating set of Yahoo! homepage headlines, all the while having more information at their fingertips than was available to all previous generations combined. Whether you realized it or not, when you got your librarian’s degree and chose to work with teenagers, you enlisted yourself in the frontlines of this struggle.

So am I robbing graphic novels of all their cool by this very act of presenting to a group of librarians? That really isn’t the right question. Instead, I should ask, “Can graphic novels—and all young adult literature, really—nurture thought, passion, and understanding within our young people?” I believe the answer is yes, as long as librarians are at their side, encouraging them to not just laugh at the funny scenes and cry at the sad ones, but examine what’s behind their laughter and their tears.

I’d like to end by extending my gratitude to the people who made this possible. One does not go from photocopying and stapling comics by hand to making speeches in front of audiences like this one all by himself. First, I thank God for His many blessings upon me and my family. I thank my wife for her infinite patience and love, and my two children for just being cute. I thank my parents for instilling in me a love of stories, and my brother for sharing in the habit of comic book collecting.

To my fellow cartoonists, especially those in the Bay Area alternative comics scene, and most especially Derek Kirk Kim and Lark Pien, thank you for inspiring me to be a better storyteller, for opening doors, and for partnering with me in so many ways. To Mark Siegel, Simon Boughton, Lauren Wohl, Gina Gagliano, Danica Novgorodoff, Kat Kopit, and the rest of the First Second team, thank you for your vision, your passion for excellence, and your elbow grease. I cannot tell you how lucky I am to be published by such an amazing outfit. To my agent Judy Hansen, thank you for reading and explaining to me all that fine print I find so tedious.

And finally, I thank all of you here at the Young Adult Library Services Association. Thank you for the honor of this award. Thank you for your enthusiastic support of my graphic novel. And thank you for developing the intelligent, passionate, insightful readership for whom it is such a pleasure to write and draw.