What got you into collecting — and then creating — comics? The first comic book I ever read was DC Comics Presents No. 57, and it had Superman and the Atomic Knights in it. Pretty soon after, I started making my own comics. Nowadays any kid can make anything — movies or music, but back then, it seemed like there was such a low bar of entry into this way of telling stories.

Were you a DC Comics kid or a Marvel kid? Definitely Marvel. Even though my first comic was Superman, I thought the DC universe was kind of stupid. I remember learning that there was a character named Aqualad, and I was like, ugh, that is not for me.

Did your parents consider your interest in comic books respectable? No. My friends and I would get our parents to drop us off at the local library, wait until they drove away, then sneak out of the library and walk to our comic-book store.

Did you feel a sense of connection to those characters, even though a majority were white? There was a lot of overlap between my experiences growing up and the superhero genre — the genre was established by children of Jewish immigrants, growing up in New York and Cleveland. A lot of superhero stories are about being outsiders. Superman is literally an alien and an immigrant. And a lot of the superhero genre is about negotiating between two identities, which really mirrored my own life. I used one name at home, another one at school, had one language at home, another one at school. Something about those characters still resonated.

Your graphic novel “American Born Chinese” was a finalist for the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. Did that achievement persuade your family to take your comics career seriously? My dad stopped sending me want ads.

You are now the author of “New Super-Man,” a series about a Chinese teenager who becomes a costumed hero. These days, there’s inevitably backlash from a subset of the fan base whenever a familiar character gets remade with a different gender, race or ethnicity. What do you make of these reactions? In a sense, I understand it. So much of the monthly superhero market is driven by nostalgia. But at the same time, we live in
a world that’s very different than the one we grew up in. The larger readership wants our stories to reflect what America is today. If we care about diversity and representation, then the approach we need is two-pronged: We need new characters establishing new legacies, and we also need characters that use a pre-existing legacy to attract eyeballs. Ultimately, what you do is never going to please 100 percent of the audience. I do think if you tell a great story, maybe you’ll get some of them to switch over.

Where did that idea come from? It was not my idea; DC pitched it to me, and I really didn’t want to do it. Mostly I was really scared because of the cultural and political land mines that I felt were inherent in that idea. My father is from Taiwan, my mother is from mainland China, and as an adult, I’ve had to learn that the China that I grew up hearing about is very different from what modern China is today. Superman is supposed to be about truth, justice and the American way — what does that even mean in modern China? It felt like there were so many contradictions and so many potential hazards. But you just have to run directly at what you’re scared of, especially as a writer.

You were recently named a fellow of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation — sometimes known as a “genius” grant — which comes with an award of $625,000 over five years. Sorry to be gauche, but what do you do with the money? Partially, it’ll go to supporting young people’s literature. My wife and I have four kids, so a good chunk of it is going to go in a college fund. If I didn’t have kids, I’d buy a Batmobile or something.