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REVIEW

A Necklace is Still a Chain: A Review of Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers & Saints*

JAMES BUCKY CARTER

Gene Luen Yang. *Boxers and Saints*. First Second, 2013.

Those familiar with Gene Luen Yang's oft-praised *American Born Chinese* know that Yang shows no trepidation in mining the tensions between Western and Eastern cultures and traditions. His character Chin-Kee, a concomitant of various stereotypes regarding Chinese peoples and Chinese Americans, stands as strong testament to such. In contrast to the triptych that is *American Born Chinese*, Yang's latest, *Boxers & Saints*, is marketed as a diptych—a two-book set featuring a connected narrative—but Yang continues to offer squirm-worthy material that helps revision and redefine dynamics of history, culture and power.

Boxers, the first and longer of the books, begins in China in 1894, a few years before the Boxer Rebellion, the historical moment around which the entirety of the diptych centers. Within a matter of pages, Caucasian/European missionaries are referred to as disgusting foreign devils multiple times, and the sickening othering extends to those who are not Chinese or who are Chinese but have accepted the white Europeans' version of Christianity. The local missionary priest is seen as a destroyer of Chinese culture and religion, and the crucifixes that adorn the necks of the missionaries and those who embrace their work—be it for selfless or selfish reasons—are viewed as gross, satanic symbols. While Yang avers that degrading the other is not the domain of any one culture or race, his interpretation of the sign-signifier relationship will be troubling to some, but should stand as an eye-opener as well.

As often as religion and violence are partnered in *Boxers*, so too are ambition and singular drive. The main character, Bao, transitions from an opera-loving boy to a leader of a group of militants hell-bent on seeing “justice,” which begins as avenging perceived wrongs committed by those wearing the cross but escalates to vengeful, ritualistic, berserker murders—perhaps fueled by ingesting psychotropic papers which

feed Bao's notion that he and his warriors embody Gods of China's lore—against almost anyone who does not follow the sociopolitical beliefs of Bao's “Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist.” Bao's hubris is exacerbated by his growing disconnect from all humanity; othering of some has led to othering of all except most of his fellow-Gods/men-at-arms, and what starts out as a quest of justice and compassion becomes a parable of the problematics of power and drive when wielded by those with clouded, crazed judgment.

As Bao has rejected Christianity and its associated “barbarianisms,” Four-Girl (or Death-Girl, and later Vibiana) embraces its devilry as a means of finding her place. Like with Bao, Yang offers her spirit guides, either as manifestations of troubled psyches or as actual spiritual mentors, who push her toward the destiny she already wants. Joan of Arc becomes a metaphysical mentor for Vibiana just as are Master Big Belly and Ch'in Shih-huang for Bao, but while Bao began his ultimately-corrupting quest with sincere notions of the good and just, Vibiana has been led to believe she is evil and bad luck, a true devil, and turns to the religion of the foreign devils because she has internalized that label.

When the two protagonists have a meeting of substance in *Saints* (they have seen one another before in *Boxers*), Yang utilizes an abating narrative technique that he has employed before: He suggests a somewhat soothing resolution of the racial and ethnic tensions he has explored by offering a blending of Eastern and Western values, illuminating the essence of humanity's faith in, capacity for, and godly reverence for actual compassion regardless of land, lore, or laud. As the second book draws both narratives to a close, Christianity is depicted as saving grace, but Yang refuses to mollify and pacify completely, keeping the concept of religion—whether canonized or simply a protuberance of self-assurance in one's mission—and its effects firmly lodged as a troubling phenomenon with consequences and interpretations beyond what any one person might comprehend.

What is odd about this “the evil that men do” meditation is that Yang has chosen to express it as two books, and the packaging and marketing suggest an equal weight and import to the individual narratives and characters. In reality, though, *Boxers* is the longer work, and even when Vibiana gets her own book, she shares much more space with Boa in *Saints* than he with her, and *Saints* serves to resolve/entwine both stories. The binaries are unbalanced, and why Yang chose two books instead of playing with the comic medium’s unique propensity of simultaneity, or what I and Mark Bernard have called simultaneous, multitudinous dimensionality, fully interweaving the stories at the page and panel levels, may be confounding. After all, *American Born Chinese*’s constant comingling of narratives doesn’t keep it from being a triptych any more than doing so with *Boxers and Saints* would have kept it from being a diptych.

But Yang has already proven himself a great American cartoonist. His work is well-respected by comics connoisseurs and the casual reader of graphica. He has attained the coveted “cross-over appeal.” Yang has the ethos to make such choices, perhaps asserting to readers that this two-book boxed set is to be viewed as more about perplexing character, motivation, and the universal forces that drive us and can derail us than about the singularities of the comics form. Whether it is a pure diptych must remain under debate. We can leave deeper analysis of the marketing of the book versus its formal attributes for another time. What is undeniable is that, as a whole, *Boxers & Saints* satisfies without satiating, ignites without engulfing, and is destined to either stand beside or supplant *American Born Chinese* as Yang’s greatest and most controversial comics accomplishment to date.

James Bucky Carter is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English Education at Washington State University. His scholarly interests include young adult literature, multimodality, and comics and multiple literacies. His books on comics and literacy include *Super-Powered Word Study*, *Rationales for Teaching Graphic Novels*, and the edited collection *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*, a National Council of Teachers of English best-seller.