

This toolkit was created as part of the *Superman's Cleveland: Lineage and Legacy* celebration.

Superman's Cleveland honored the 85th anniversary of the creation of Superman by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1938 in their hometown.

The program was organized by the Rust Belt Humanities Lab at Ursuline College and the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library with support from Ohio Humanities.

Get Graphic! Toolkit

Superman Smashes the Klan

By Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru

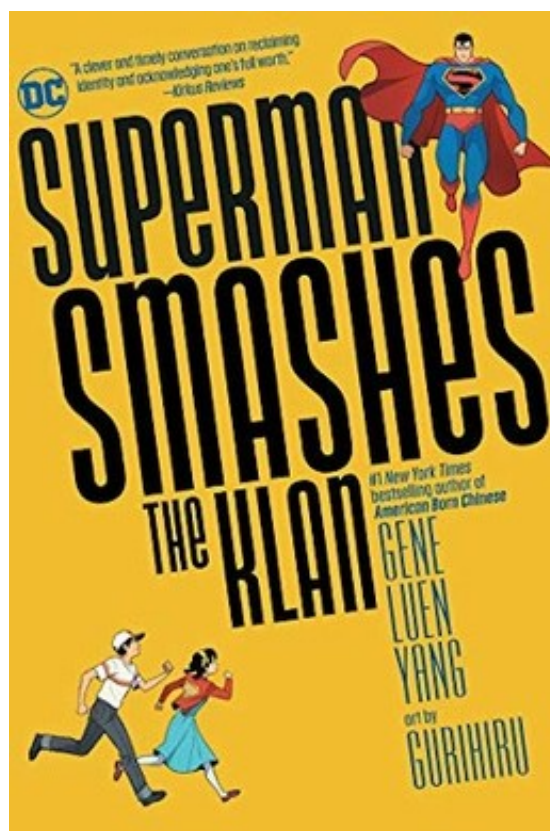
About the comic

Superman Smashes the Klan is a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru Inspired by the 1946 Superman radio serial "Clan of the Fiery Cross."

This story, set in 1946, shortly after the end of World War II explores the American landscape after the war. The story opens with Superman fighting a leftover Nazi and links the Klan to the Nazis. We are soon introduced to the Lee family, who has just moved to the center of Metropolis from Chinatown. Dr. Lee is taking a job at the Metropolis Health Department where he will be head of Bacteriology.

Dr. Lee's children, Roberta and Tommy, are excited to live in the big city so they can see their favorite superhero, Superman. However, they are immediately confronted with racism when they arrive, as some members of the town believe they are taking their jobs and their positions in other parts of life, including on the junior baseball league. This leads to the Klan getting involved. Superman teams up with Roberta and Tommy with Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen joining in to help.

What follows is a powerful story of how racism can define a city, how sometimes you need a superhero from another planet to help people value differences and to see what makes us all the same.



Who are Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru?

Gene Luen Yang, an Eisner and Harvey award-winning comics creator, won accolades for *Superman Smashes the Klan* and *Dragon Hoops*. He is also known for *American Born Chinese* which was a National Book Award finalist. His other works include *Boxers & Saints* with Lark Pien (First Second), *Secret Coders* with Mike Holmes (First Second), *The Shadow Hero* with Sonny Liew (First Second), *Superman* with various artists (DC Comics), and *Avatar: The Last Airbender* with Gurihiru (Dark Horse). In 2016, He was named a Macarthur Genius Fellow and the Library of Congress' fifth National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, advocating for the importance of reading and especially reading diversely.

Gurihiru, also known as Gurihiru Studios, is a Japanese illustration team consisting of Chifuyu Sasaki and Naoko Kawano. Both live in Japan and work primarily with American comics creators. They are best known for their work on *Unstoppable Wasp* with Jeremy Whitley (Marvel), *Superman Smashes the Klan* with Gene Luen Yang (DC Comics), *It's Jeff!* with Kelly Thompson (Marvel), *The Unbelievable Gwenpool* with Christopher Hastings (Marvel) and *Avatar the Last Airbender* with Gene Luen Yang (Dark Horse).

Themes

There are several themes throughout the book that can help frame your discussion.

- **Post-War America** — This imaginary tale prompts us to think about the post-war American stories that did not make it into the novels and TV shows of the time. One way to frame this story is to think about how it offers readers an opportunity to think about history that has been ignored.
- **The immigrant experience** — Superman's story is of a refugee from a dying planet who finds a new life and power on planet Earth. This story focuses on the experience of being Asian American in America. The characters of Roberta and Tommy Lee offer a new entry point into the Superman mythos and a new way to think about Superman as a metaphor for "other."
- **Social reform** — Rather than fight a typical supervillain in this story, Superman takes on a very real villain, the KKK, which brings into focus how the superhero can play a role in social reform, echoing Siegel and Shuster's earliest *Action Comics* stories with Superman.
- **Racism** — As the title suggests, the villains of this story, the Klu Klux Klan, divide by racism. One way to discuss this story is to consider how the characters in the book are defined by their responses to those that are not like them and how they even fear their own differences.



Figure 1. From *Superman Smashes the Klan*, p.142 by Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru. © DC Comics

Questions for Discussion

1. Tommy and Roberta first see Superman when they arrive in the center of the city of Metropolis having previously lived in Chinatown. While Chinatown is a part of Metropolis, they note they never saw Superman there. What does this say about the superhero genre that the hero typically is seen in the city center and does not often venture into these ethnic enclaves?
2. We are offered two perspectives in the comic: Roberta's and Superman's. How do these two different perspectives provide us insight into what it means to be different in Metropolis?
3. When Superman first sees his parents, they look like aliens (Fig. 1) but by the end they resemble humans. How does Superman's journey of his own acceptance play out in the depiction of his parents?
4. The book opens with a Nazi leftover fighting Superman. How do Yang and Gurihiru make the connection between the Klan and the Nazis throughout the comic, and how does the comics form give us a unique experience of this journey?
5. The emotional journeys of many of the characters center around fear: fear *of the other* with Chuck Riggs and his family, and fear *of being the other* with Superman. What does this comic say about embracing vulnerability? What does vulnerability mean in the context of a superhero comic with an all-powerful hero?
6. By the end of the story, we learn that the leader of the KKK in Metropolis does not even believe in his own mission, it is rather about money. What insights into other real-life troubles does this bring?
7. *Superman Smashes the Klan* explores how racism emerges from fear of the unknown as with Chuck Riggs or Dr. Lee's negative reaction to Inspector Henderson. How does the comic help us to understand the roots of racism so that it can be unlearned?
8. In his prose Afterword essay, "Superman and Me," Yang shares that we have to meet the challenge of Superman, to stand for "tolerance, justice, and hope." How have you been inspired by Superman and his story?
9. In the Afterword, Yang refers to *Birth of a Nation*, which effectively revived the Klan. The images of the film inspired a new generation. In contrast, how does the cartoon style of the comic allow us to see the Klan differently than in film (Fig. 2)?
10. Journalism plays a significant role in this story as it is the entrance into justice for Roberta and other human characters like Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen. What does the comic say about the way that humans can expose and hold evil accountable through journalism and other methods?
11. This is an adaptation of a radio broadcast. What other Superman stories have you read or watched across other media? Share a bit about the different adaptations of these characters and how the different forms affected how you experienced the characters.
12. Superman does not fight a typical villain in this story but rather is focused on addressing a very real, human problem: the evils that racism creates. What other social problems can a superhero address? Where does their power end?



Figure 2. From *Superman Smashes the Klan*, p.92 by Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru. © DC Comics

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- Christian Holub, *Entertainment Weekly*. “Gene Luen Yang discusses Superman's battle against the KKK in new graphic novel.” (<https://ew.com/books/author-interviews/superman-smashes-the-klan-gene-luen-yang-interview/>)
- Alex Dueben, *The Comics Journal*. “‘I Think We’re All Scrambling:’ An Interview with Gene Luen Yang.” (<https://www.tcj.com/i-think-were-all-scrambling-an-interview-with-gene-luen-yang/>)
- Amy Kurzweil, *The Believer*. “An Interview with Gene Luen Yang.” (<https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-gene-luen-yang/>)
- Cinema Debate. “Why Superman Smashes The Klan is Brilliant - A Conversation with Author Gene Luen Yang” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkLQAJ_FPfE)
- Gene Luen Yang, TED. “Comics Belong in the Classroom” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjvTIP7pV20>)

Further Reading

If you are interested in other stories by Gene Luen Yang

- *Dragon Hoops* by Gene Luen Yang
- *Lunar New Year Love Story* by Gene Luen Yang and Leuyen Pham
- *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang

If you are interested in other comics by Gurihiru

- *Unstoppable WASP* by Jeremy Whitley and Gurihiru
- *Avatar the Last Airbender* by Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru
- *Spider-Man and Venom Double Trouble* by Mariko Tamaki and Gurihiru

If you are interested in other Superman related graphic novels:

- *Supergirl: Being Super* by Mariko Tamaki and Joelle Jones
- *Superman: The Harvests of Youth* by Sina Grace
- *Girl Taking Over: A Lois Lane Story* by Sarah Kuhn and Arielle Jovellanos