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Dennis Ouyang has always struggled in the shadow of his parents' expectations. His path is laid out for him: stay focused in high school, become a gastroenterologist. It may be hard work, but it isn't complicated ... until suddenly it is.

Between his father's death, his academic burnout, and his deep (and distracting) love of video games, Dennis is nowhere near where his family wanted him to be. In fact, he's just been kicked out of college.

And that's when things get ... weird.

Four adorable—and bossy—angels, straight out of a sappy greeting card, appear and take charge of Dennis's life. And so Dennis finds himself herded back onto the straight and narrow: the path to gastroenterology. But nothing is ever what it seems when life, magic and video games collide.

## Level Up Details

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Author : Gene Luen Yang , Thien Pham

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## From Reader Review Level Up for online ebook

### Scott S. says

As a fan of Yang's *The Shadow Hero* I approached *Level Up* - which nostalgically references some classic 80's-era video games in the plot - with certain expectations of similar quality. While the concept (in a nutshell - a video game addict attends medical school under familial pressure . . . and then weird things happen) was good and the ending was just perfect, the actual journey was a little uneven at times. Still, it's lively with some depth to it and would be effective for a teen / young adult audience.

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### Rain Misoa says

This is my second graphic novel that I've read by Gene Luen Yang, the first being *American Born Chinese* and it does NOT disappoint. I first heard of this comic from a YouTube video a few years back and I knew, me being a gamer, I would love this tremendously. After I read *American Born Chinese* and saw how much I enjoyed that story, it was a given that I was going to LOVE this book~ Well, the other day, I'm browsing the library and, lo and behold, there it was! On the shelf! In all its glory! I was ecstatic! I grabbed the comic with a speed faster than Sonic the Hedgehog and checked it out! And, boy, am I glad I did. This comic just SCREAMS for my inner gamer to grab all the video games in my house and play them all at once! This book is such an amazing coming of age story that anyone who feels trapped in their life can fully appreciate.

Gene Luen Yang is a fantastic story-teller... if a bit unconventional. However, I think because he steps out beyond the norm makes him a very unique story-teller in his own right. All of his stories have a message to them. There's always an underlying point he is trying to get across and he does it fairly well... most of the time. The message in this book is not so clear-cut and the comic suffers because of it. I think it's due to its length. The story felt short and I felt there needed to be a bit more in order for the message that he was trying to convey would have come across a bit more clearly. However, this is the only setback to the entire novel. Everything else about it was amazing! One of the best parts of this book is, of course, all the video game references! From *Super Mario Bros.* to *The Legend of Zelda* to even *Pac-Man*! It just pours all of the video game references all over you and if you are a gamer, like me, you will eat it up happily! The artwork is a bit cartoony but it works! For all the little jokes here and there, the artwork needed to be as cartoony as it was for it to actually make sense and I loved every minute of it.

The characters were a lot of fun to read about! The main character, Dennis, is a bit of a slacker and chooses to play more video games than to actually work hard at anything. He's goofy and a nerd but also tends to be very charming. He goes through so much growth by the end of the book that you are just cheering him on! You WANT to see him succeed in whatever he does. It's amazing! Kat, a friend of his, is badass in every sense of the word! She won't take anyone's crap and works hard for what she believes in. Ipsha, his first friend in college, is smart and caring. She wants to please her family more than anything. She's a lot like Dennis in that sense. He wants to please his father so he wants to do whatever it takes, even if it means putting aside his own happiness for it. Hector, another friend, is the perfect example of a person on the wrong track making a comeback and proving that he CAN make it in this world. I literally have nothing bad to say about these characters because they were all so colorful and fun to watch! I enjoyed them in everything they did. Man, what a riot they were!

What can I say? I love this book! This comic is one of the best I have read this year and I could continue to

read this for years to come because it is THAT good! As I said, the message it is trying to convey isn't done the best as it should have and might leave the reader feeling confused. (It's kind of sending mixed messages.) But I don't think that it ruins the reading experience in any way! There's so much more to this comic that you can find it enjoyable regardless! For the humor, for the art style, for the concept, for whatever! It's just that good! If you are a gamer, I know you will definitely enjoy this. If you like graphic novels, read this book! If you're just curious and want to see what it's about, then read it! I think everyone and anyone will be able to enjoy this read. I know that I am going to keep a look out on anything else Gene Luen Yang creates because he is proving to be a pretty awesome person!

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### **Calista says**

Let me say that I pretty much think that video games are a time sucking evil in this world, but I have played some of them in my life. So this was an interesting read.

I thought this was such a great story. This kid grows up and his parents won't let him play video games and that's all he wants to do. His father demands he becomes a doctor. The dad dies and the kid begins to play games and has a natural ability and does really well. Then 4 angels show up and force him into college and force him to study. He gets into med school.

I love the ending. I love love love it. I want to talk about it, but I will not spoil it. There is a simple wonderful twist at the ending. I will say that all the time he spent playing video games comes in handy. It's so beautiful - really

First Second came through again. They are amazing.

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### **Kim Clifton says**

An adorable, quick read that features a surprising amount of poop.

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### **Jan Philipzig says**

*Level Up* tells the story of a young Asian American torn between his passion for video games and his sense of obligation towards his parents, and it touches upon several potentially interesting topics: the meaning of family and community in an increasingly individualized society, the growing pressure to attend higher education, the delayed transition to adulthood, and the role of commercial culture in all this. Unfortunately, the book does not really have all that much to say about any of these topics, and the things it does talk about don't add up to much as far as I can tell. Luen Yang's storytelling is surprisingly clunky and directionless here, and it does not receive much support from Thien Pham's barely functional artwork. Disappointing.

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### **Seth T. says**

There was this one scene in Gene Yang's *Level Up* that struck truer for me than maybe any other two-panel

pair in the history of comics. In it, a friend describes the Nintendo Entertainment System to a young Dennis. Let's listen in:

The reason this scene resonated so strongly with me was that this was word for word my own response to the discovery that such a machine would be coming to American shores. I mean, give or take a word. The impact of gaming systems on my young life was indelible, stamping my day-to-day routines with their sizzling brand. I had owned game systems before the NES, but it was that particular machine that unveiled a whole new tone to the possibility of digital entertainment.

And like most of Dennis' friends (and therefore unlike Dennis himself), I was allowed to own a game system. Of course, probably unlike Dennis' friends, I had to earn the money with which to purchase said system (and later, *systems*). Still, this is where the similarities between my experience and Dennis' diverge. While Dennis' father prevents Dennis from enjoying frivolities in his youth (teaching him of the necessity of "eating much bitterness"), my own parents promoted more balance in my youthful endeavors, allowing bitterness to mix with enjoyable pursuits in both athletics and the humanities. The point being, I had a lot of fun growing up—while Dennis studied.

Honestly, I was a little sad that *Level Up* moved in this direction after such a strongly resonant scene. There's nothing wrong with the direction the book takes save for that now it was no longer telling the story of my life. Instead of telling a story charting a path I would have been familiar with, Gene Yang and Thien Pham navigate a life of extreme conflict. Dennis is either wanton in his digital gaming orgies or brutally weighed down by a desperate need to work toward becoming a gastroenterologist. It's a hard road, requiring endless hours of work, so it makes sense that the falls off the wagon are steep and from height. It doesn't help that Dennis feels driven by the Fates.

Destiny plays its heavy hand in Dennis' circumstances and hangs around like a turkey vulture, ready to pick at the carcass it intends to make of his life. Or at least the spectre of it does. Destiny gets referred to a lot. By Dennis and by the four cherubic angels that begin to haunt him, cracking the whip until he gets his work done—for destiny! Dennis is the child of immigrants and his father, having eaten much bitterness himself in order to give Dennis a good life in his new country, died when he was a senior in highschool. If there's an antagonist in this story, it's probably not destiny or the angelic quartet or even Dennis' dad. Instead, it's the memory of his father and what his father *probably* wanted for him.

Really, Dennis is just weighed down by a conscience that will cut him no slack and will demand everything from him.

Along the way, we're introduced to three actually human characters who each try to pull Dennis toward one extreme or another. Takeem would have Dennis join him in the professional gaming circuit. Ipsha emphasizes the essentiality of doing as one's parents request and/or expect. And Kat strikes the note of individualism, demanding that Dennis learn to be his own man and grow into the kind of person who does well by doing what he most wants.

It's a good story, but I wish we would have been given more time with any of the supporting characters who

didn't have feathers. There were about a million interesting conversations that could have taken place but didn't. Or maybe they did but simply occurred off-camera. *Level Up* is a rather sparse work that almost races toward its conclusion. More interaction with Dennis' friends may have only served as padding, holding off the climax for just that much longer, but I felt the book would have been stronger for it. Because of the story's rather pragmatic manner of unfolding itself, most of the characters sit shy of three-dimensional. Even Dennis. Which is a little bit too bad.

*[Really, I probably just wanted more of this.]*

It's a worthwhile story and pretty well-told. The art is well-conceived and the watercolouring a beautifully simple touch. It just that at the end of the day, because the characters weren't as well-developed as they could have been, it was hard to care for their struggles and needs. *Level Up* approaches greatness but runs out of quarters before it can get there.

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[Review courtesy of Good Ok Bad]

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### **Julia Sapphire says**

I liked the concepts with gaming and destiny. It definitely gives an interesting point of view on those two topics in particular.

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### **Rebecca (whymermaids) says**

After having read *American Born Chinese* earlier this year, I was excited to pick up more of Gene Luen Yang's work. I loved the simple art style, the Asian-American characters and themes, and the simple yet effective story.

*Level Up* hit those marks, but not quite to the extent *American Born Chinese* did. While it still focused on family and dynamics of the culture (this time discussing youth culture rather than that of Asian-Americans, though there is a bit of that as well), it didn't resonate quite as much with me.

Part of it was expectations: with a title like *Level Up*, and a cover that looks like a GameBoy, I was expecting more to do with gaming culture; perhaps the protagonist has to enter into a game or live his life as a game, or something... but instead, it was about sacrifices and honoring family.

In his heart, Dennis wants to be a gamer. He's been transfixed with them since he was a young boy, but his father would never allow it, saying sacrifice makes us who we are and there's no time for games if you want to succeed. Dennis swallows his hurt, as his Dad taught him, and focuses intently on his studies. When his father passes away, however, Dennis finally gets to game. Things happen, and Dennis is a man of extremes.

The ending lesson of happiness and finding what that means for you feels a little too on the nose and fortune cookie-ish, but it's a pretty solid examination of today's youth culture, or at least what older people seem to

think it is.

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### **J L's Bibliomania says**

Level Up predated the craze for graphic novel autobiographies by a couple of years (2011 publication date). While the story is fictional, and there are a few fantastical aspects, Level Up is close enough to a real-live coming of age story that it feels like an autobiography.

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### **Sasha says**

Cool concept - a son of Asian immigrants who have lived lives of "eating bitterness" is torn between his father's wish for him to pursue his "destiny" of becoming a gastroenterologist and his all-consuming need to play video games. The magical realism elements and the sparse watercolor art style allowed the emotional aspect to come through, since it gave me time to think about what was happening without overwhelming with a complicated style. I wish it was longer and explored the side relationships some more, plus more of a follow-up to the ending. As a work of coming of age and figuring out one aspect of one's life, however, this is quite a small gem.

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### **Justin says**

This trim little graphic novel has been picking up some buzz, much like everything else that Gene Luen Yang does. Plus, the cover looks like a classic Game Boy. Win. Seriously, though, I was pleasantly surprised by this graphic novel. What looked like and began as a familiar story about a disillusioned young person finding solace in video games turned into a quirky, profound morality play about coming to terms with your family and creating your own destiny.

Dennis Ouyang is on the verge of being kicked out of college. Pushed to succeed since he was a small child, Dennis has instead devoted himself to the video games he was entranced by as a child, and found solace in after the early death of his father. However, his lack of motivation and direction attract the attention of four cute, domineering cherubs, who insist they have arrived to help Dennis achieve his destiny. Dennis goes from slacker and college dropout to medical school student, back on the path to achieving the goals his father had set for him. But is that path really the right one for Dennis? Whose well-being are the angels really looking after?

I don't want to give too much of the story away, but Yang works with a very familiar theme and still manages to produce an original, heartwarming tale. Despite the cover design, video games are only an ingredient, adding spice to a savory mix of dry humor, magical realism, and introspection. Video games are a consistent theme, though, and effectively shape both the format of the book and the plot itself. Most impressively, though, Yang writes deftly about growing up as an Asian-American teen, something he has done quite well before, and yet does so with a universal approach that makes the issue understandable and sympathetic to just about anyone, regardless of ethnicity.

Pham's art is rough and cutesy, but honestly, it's perfect. The panels are always drawn and laid out in exactly

the right way to convey the humor or sadness in that particular part of story. The caricatures are simple enough to forgive any inconsistency, but vibrant enough to carry a genuine emotional impact. It took me a few pages to get on board with the art style, but I loved it once I did.

I can't really think of anything bad to say about this book, other than that it's short and the story resolves itself fairly quickly. It's a good read for graphic novel enthusiasts and reluctant readers who are inclined towards video games, but honestly, it's a good read for just about anyone.

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### **Cat says**

As always with Gene Yang's comics and graphic novels, the art was interesting and the story well-constructed. However, I was unsure about the overall message. The protagonist spends the whole time going back and forth between whether he wants to be a doctor or play video games, battling his parents' expectations and his own interests. Never does the story acknowledge that it's possible to do both.

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### **Shannon says**

It pisses me off when people vilify video games. You can go to med school and play games during your down-time. My brother is in grad school and he still finds time for his hobbies. Video games are not some evil time-waster that'll rot your brain, preventing you from graduating or excelling in school. You don't have to give up something you love to become a grown-up, and I find it insulting that this book insinuates that only lazy people who don't want to get ahead in life would play video games.

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### **KB Wayne says**

My smarty-pants nine year-old adores this book -- it'd come up on a "recommended for you" page on Amazon so I got it. He read it a few times one afternoon, so I grabbed it for a quick read as well. From my adult perspective I found it charming with more than a touch of melancholy.

Beautifully written and beautifully drawn.

In general the maturity of the book is (clearly) beyond a nine year-old, but it proved great fodder for us to talk at the dinner table about what we'd read and taken away from "Level Up." What parents of any / all nationalities / ethnicities / cultures want for their children and what children themselves want.

First generation Chinese-American Dennis is a college kid who loves to play video games and that's what he wants to pursue. His parents have other ideas, and because they are native Chinese they are not as touchy-feely as either Americans or the younger set. All Dennis hears is that he needs to be a dutiful son and that what he wants doesn't matter ... to \*them\*. It matters to him, but he tries to appease them.

He flunks out of undergrad but miraculously makes it back in and then goes on to medical school. He makes three good friends there and he seems to feel connected, even if his heart isn't in medicine.

The story is surprisingly quick considering how much ground it covers and how much Dennis learns about

his parents, himself, and his true desires. As a parent (nevermind as a reader) I liked that. I liked that Dennis tried different things. I liked that Dennis is smart. I liked that he made smart friends of different races / genders.

"Level Up" makes me glad I went ahead and got a few other books by the author, too. Highly recommend.

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### **Chris Walker says**

I had a lot of hope for this book, as it touches on a number of topics that I find really interesting. Specifically, I'm interested in stories where characters struggle to find what it is they're passionate about in life while navigating the expectations of others, especially parents. Also, growing up in the 90s, I strongly relate to video games, to the way they can become an all-consuming world.

Unfortunately, I feel as though the story never really dug into its themes. There's a lot of untapped potential here, Dennis' relationship with his parents being the best example. There are a number of touching scenes in this regard, but they're inconsistent and sporadic. This is even more true of his relationships with his friends. They just kind of come and go, and they never satisfactorily resolve. Granted, that is often the way things happen in real life, but I generally crave a bit more structure and meaning from stories. The last few story arcs feel especially slapdash. It's not that I don't like where it ends up, but the journey could have been a lot more satisfying. Finally, the art, while cute, didn't really hold my interest. I have heard many good things about Yang's "American Born Chinese" and I still intend to read it, but I found myself pretty unimpressed by Level Up.

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