

# CHINKSTAR

A NOVEL BY JON CHAN SIMPSON

AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE



When the king of Chinksta rap disappears, his younger brother, Run, must navigate the unstable underbelly of a musical revolution.

Chinksta rap is all the rage in Red Deer, Alberta. And the king of Chinksta is King Kwong, Run's older brother. Run isn't a fan of Kwong's music – or personality, really. But when Kwong goes missing just days before his crowning performance and their mom gets wounded by a stray bullet, Run finds himself, with his sidekick, Ali, in the middle of a violent battle between Red Deer's rival gangs – the Apes and the Necks – on the run from his crush's behemoth brother, and rethinking his feelings about his family and their history, his hatred of rice-rap and what it means to be Asian.

*Everything was about to change. In less than forty-eight hours, guy'd be taking the stage in Van City, owning an audience meant for some all-hype-no-talent new-money rapper, spitting next-level truths that'd have A&RS scrapping for him coast to coast.*

*He'd ink some paper and drop an album that the world didn't even know it had been waiting for. All with game and swag to spare.*

*To the kids gathered out there in the bush somewhere between Township Road 382 and the United States of MTV, this man was god. Chi-rhyme, nip-hop, zippa-flow, slanty, jaunedell, chinksta: all planets in a system revolving around its rising son, King Kwong, my brother.*



Chinkstar

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## Why Chinkstar? And for whom?

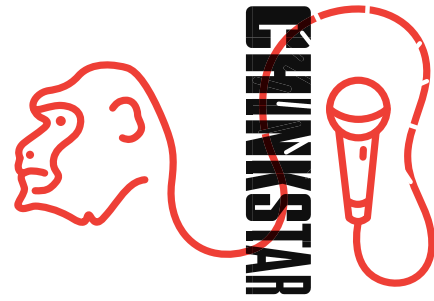
**The title is perhaps controversial.** But critics like Sue Carter of *Metro Toronto* find that *Chinkstar* ‘crushes stereotypes about Chinese hip-hop,’ and in the ‘fun action-movie mashup’ that results, a more serious reflection on cultural perceptions of race and racialized stereotypes emerges, one that ‘asks us to examine our own reactions to accepted cultural stereotypes.’

**This book has serious YA potential.** Simpson’s contemporary and playful style, along with his youthful protagonist and popular subject matter, make this book an easy crossover from adult (its initial intended audience) to YA fiction. *Chinkstar*’s protagonist is experiencing the usual pains of young adulthood – clashes with parents, first love (or lust) – and this is compounded by the constant spectre of his older brother and the racial and cultural politics of Red Deer, Alberta. Young teenage audiences will certainly relate to the misadventures of young adulthood as Run experiences them in this novel.

**The novel offers a contemporary take on the second-generation immigrant experience.** Think Junot Diaz, think Julia Alvarez – think even a more formally postmodern Gish Jen. Riffing on Asian stereotypes in an unstated manner, it’s a grittier *Crazy Rich Asians*, in a somewhat surprising Canadian setting. Matt Kwong writes in *Metro* that ‘lifestyles of the Asian diaspora generally aren’t typical narratives in pop-lit,’ but ‘genre fiction is probably richer for [*Chinkstar*], a novel that ‘begins as a whodunnit [and] later assumes the character of a graphic novel without the art panels, packing in kung-fu violence and the kind of macho, portentous dialogue that brings to mind comics writer Frank Miller’s 1980s work on Batman.’

**This book is like a graphic novel minus the graphic.** It’s an action-packed (partly imagined) rollick through a small town near the oil fields that is at the same time literary in its language. It is immensely readable 208 pages, and good fun. In a review of *Chinkstar*, *Edmonton Journal* reviewer Michael Hingston calls Simpson’s novel ‘a kinetic battle-rap sprint that mows down cultural stereotypes at every turn and presents something altogether more complex and dazzling in response.’

**This language is off the hook.** It’s inventive and fast-paced, full of neologisms, portmanteaus, new slang and rap battles. In a conversation with CBC Books about how he wrote his first novel, one that required him to



invent his own lexicon – from ‘kung pao reflux’ to ‘[chop]stick literacy,’ Simpson explains that the lexicon that emerges is the result of the ‘culture clash’ at work in the novel – a clash between ‘the experiences of one racialized group (Chinese-Canadian) being told in the voice of another (black hip-hop).’ The sometimes harsh language requires a degree of maturity and context, but that is something that educators can provide.

## Questions for group discussion

- Does *Chinkstar* really ‘crush’ stereotypes, as one critic puts it? How do Simpson’s portrayals of racialized groups subvert stereotypes, if in fact they do? What does this subversion reveal about racial identity? About our own cultural perceptions of race and racialized stereotypes?
- What Simpson began with is the ‘desire to mash together two stereotypes – Chinese and black,’ and what results is a language that, inspired by the fast-moving lyricism of rap and hip-hop, is a powerful expression of racial identity and empowerment. How does language in particular embody and convey racial and cultural identities in Simpson’s novel?
- From what kinds of places does Simpson seem to be borrowing his language in this novel (he says he invented his own lexicon – from ‘kung pao reflux’ to ‘[chop]stick literacy’)? What is the effect of this linguistic ‘mash-up’?
- As Simpson explains, the lexicon that emerges is the result of the ‘culture clash’ at work in his novel – a clash between ‘the experiences of one racialized group (Chinese-Canadian) being told in the voice of another (black hip-hop).’ Why might some people perceive this kind of cultural adoption to be problematic?
- Simpson’s use of language is painstakingly thought out in this novel; nothing is an accident, including the character’s names. Why do you think the protagonist is called ‘Run’?