Sample discussion points for The Great Stories Club (GSC) Workshop
The Art of Change: Creation, Growth and Transformation

The discussion points below will be explored during the GSC workshop, June 24th in Orlando, led by GSC project scholar Maria Sachiko Cecire, Director of Experimental Humanities and Assistant Professor of Literature at Bard College in New York.

Copies of selected sections of each book will be available as handouts during the workshop. Attendees are also encouraged to bring copies of the books for reference.

For each book, a small-group breakout session will also be offered to discuss ideas for reworking these questions for particular young adult audiences.

***Buck: A Memoir* by M. K. Asante**

- The American poet William Carlos Williams wrote:

  It is difficult
  to get the news from poems
  yet men die miserably every day
  for lack
  of what is found there.

  (from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower", 1962) What do you think this means? Do you agree or disagree? Do you think that Amina's suicide attempts have anything to do with the "lack of what is found" in art at various points in her life? What about Malo? Does this apply to him at all?

- Malo's father works with cultural, historical, and political ideas, Malo's mother is a choreographer, and Malo becomes a writer. How do their ways of encountering the world – through scholarship, dance, and language, respectively – shape what each character sees and experiences in the novel? What unique freedoms and limitations come with each?

- *Buck* incorporates lyrics from rap artists throughout the narrative, and in the final chapters begins to include quotations from authors that Malo reads and even Malo's own poetry. How do outside texts help Malo explain and understand his world? How would the novel be different without them? What do they tell us about Malo's intellectual and emotional life?

- At the open mic, Malo starts freestyling by playing with "buck," the word he used for his writing in school and the title of this book (p. 240). How many different meanings for "buck" can you identify in his lyrics? How do they relate to Malo and his life? What does it tell you about language – and about Malo – that a single word can have so many different connotations, histories, and meanings? What, if anything, ties them together?

***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie**

- Arnold often mixes humor, irony, and sincerity in both his words and drawings to express how he feels about the changes and events in his life. For example, think about the title of this book: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Which aspects of the title are humorous, which ironic, and which sincere? What does this combination tell you about Arnold's character and way of thinking? What are the benefits and drawbacks of using these different approaches to self-expression? Choose some of Arnold's drawings and discuss what the balance of humor, irony, and/or sincerity in each reveals about Arnold's world at that moment in the narrative.

- Gordy tells Arnold that "you should approach each book – you should approach life – with the real possibility that you might get a metaphorical boner at any point" (p. 97). What do you think Gordy means by having a "metaphorical boner" for knowledge, art, and life? How can excitement and desire for these things be like (even when totally unrelated to!) sexual excitement and desire? How is it different?

- Some of Arnold's drawings are in very different styles from one another. Find a few that seem noticeably different to you. What kinds of information and feelings do these various styles convey? How does Arnold use these "looks" to express the conflicting feelings and ideas that he carries inside himself? (You can read more about the styles that the illustrator Ellen Fornay used for Arnold's drawings, with examples, in her interview in the back of the book – but try to see if you can find the differences on your own, too.)

- Like Malo in *Buck*, Arnold often refers to outside texts that help him to process his own experiences. He calls the first scheduled basketball game between Reardon and Wellpinit "like something out of Shakespeare" (p. 142), relates to the joylessness of Euripides's character Medea after his grandmother and Eugene die (p.173), and suggests that "Tolstoy didn't know Indians" when he said that "every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (p. 200). Why do you think that Arnold turns to these "white" western classics to make sense of the changes and challenges in his "part-time Indian" life? Do you think that the novel's references to canonical

texts suggest that Arnold is rejecting his Indian heritage? Does it make a difference that Shakespeare, Euripides, and Tolstoy wrote in different cultures, time periods, and languages?

***The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi**

- During her childhood, Marji's thoughts and personality develop in ways that directly reflect or resist the changes happening in her country. For example, after the monarchy falls she and her friends plan to violently "teach a lesson" to Ramin, a neighborhood kid whose father was in the Shah's murderous secret police (p. 44-45), but her mother stops them and asks her to learn to forgive. When the new religious government kills her Uncle Anoosh, Marji rejects God and loses the religious bearings that used to be so important to her (pp. 70-1). Her parents decide to send her to Vienna after she clashes with teachers and administrators about religious and political ideas (p.144) To what extent do you think Marji is shaped by the unique circumstances of the time and place in which she lives? How much agency do you think she has in deciding what kind of person she will be?

- In certain frames, Marjane Satrapi uses images to illustrate scenes that do not literally reflect what is happening. For instance, the panel about going to Italy and Spain depicts Marji and her parents floating on a magic carpet surrounded by swirls and European-looking buildings (p. 77). Or when Marji returns to Iran as a young woman, Satrapi draws the ground as filled with gigantic corpses and broken windows (p. 251). Why do you think that Satrapi chooses to use visual metaphors at some moments? What information, if any, do they add to your understanding of what her words describe?

- Persepolis is Marji's story, but the novel also takes time to tell many other peoples' stories in both words and images: these include family members, friends, political activists, acquaintances, and even people she has never met. What is the effect of putting so many other people's narratives in one person's memoir? What do these tales tell you about how Marji came to be who she is, and what her society is like? Try looking at a few of these stories and discuss what Marji's character seems to take away from them. Do you think that individual stories (like the ones that Marji hears and shares, like Persepolis itself) have the power to change the world? Why or why not? Does it matter whether or not they are true?

- Compared to The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Marji's interest in art only really comes out in the last few chapters of the book, and then mostly just as part of her studies and work. As a teenager, Marji more often expresses herself through her appearance and through the kinds of books, music, television, and drugs that she consumes at different points in her life. How can self-invention be a kind of creative outlet? How is it different from writing or making

art? Do you think that any of the many different aesthetic “versions” of Marji that we see over the course of the novel more “true” to who she is than others?

Print page numbers
The Art of Change discussions

Buck

Page numbers	# of pages	Question
49-50	2	Q1 Amina using meds to "leave"; longing for "escape". Chaka wants a nonexistent magic pill Q2 Amina's clarity,
68-9	2	Q3 2Pac lyrics and tension between mother and friends; Public Enemy lyrics and Af-Am knowledge of Arizona Q4 Everybody (in gang culture) starts calling Malo "young buck" after Uzi's arrest
92-4	3	Q2 Chaka leaving; Amina hanging on physically, Chaka gesturing towards "later," "someday"; Malo trying to intervene with the power of his words; winter metaphor at the end
104	1	Q1 Amina calling Malo "Daudi," promising to get them out of financial trouble, losing basketball game
176	1	Q1 Malo missing his loved ones, on the run. Loving the night, embracing the change
192	1	Q1 Malo's mother missing him, vice versa – loneliness Q2 Malo's metaphor (like NASA, mom in space); Amina's need to grab him physically
202-03	2	Q1 Malo finding purpose in writing Q3 KOS text on knowledge and living Q4 Many meanings of "buck"
207	1	Q2 Amina choreographing two dancers, Malo recognizing his mother's joy - her face "glows like its backlit"
220-1	2	Q2 Malo and Chaka fighting physically to make up, eating together and sharing the history of their family – bridging words and bodies
224	1	Q3 Malo using his own rhymes to describe the world as he decides to become a writer
229	1	Q2, Q3 Collage of thoughts from American writers; Malo discovering the need to know words, read
240	1	Q4 Start of Malo's free-style
248-9	2	Q3 Bringing together memories, experience, history, Shonagon, Nas, Hughes to create Asante's own novel

Pages: 20

Part-Time Indian

Page numbers	# of pages	Question
4-5	2	Q1 – Irony of "me in all my glory," "you become a retard" language vs image
50	1	Q1 - white happy Pegasus and clouds
56-7	2	Q1 – "I didn't deserve to be there." Sincere? Ironic? Image of split identity Q3 – careful cartoon depiction, style 2, comparing white and indian kids
94-8	5	Q2 – (97) on metaphorical boner: joy, knowledge
112-13	2	Q3 - The bird, desire to fly away; Penelope in her father's hat
141-2	2	Q1 – Arnold as dorky Indian warrior (142) Q4 – Shakespeare ref (142)
166	1	Q1 – laughter and tears together Q3 – simple line drawing
170-3	2	Q1 – Comic about Eugene's death, making fun of God to mock back Q2 – metaphorical boner vs. books as solace Q4 – Medea on grief: joylessness and giving up
212-13	2	Q1 – "Burning love" image of his sister, following discussion of irony of drinking to mourn her Q2 – designed cartoon romance novel cover
229-30	2	Q3 – Books as understanding (vs boner) Q4 – Rowdy using books about Indians to understand Arnold; this book ending with text, not images, but using both

Pages: 21

Persepolis

Page numbers	# of pages	Question
44-45	2	Q1 - "teach a lesson" to Ramin, forgive Q4 – little Marji's "look" out of veil
58	1	Q3 – Fereydoon's child out of wedlock
70-1	2	Q1 – rejecting God after Anoosh's death Q2 – Marji "in space" after rejecting God
76-7	2	Q2 – Magic carpet of trip to Italy and Spain (compare to beatings on 76)
120-5	6	Q3 – Many intertwined stories: Uncle Taher's heart attack and need to go to England; hospital director's rise to power; chemical weapons patients; Khosro the publisher/passport maker; Niloufar, sister of Khosro's messenger boy.
130-3	4	Q4 - Getting American items from Turkey; wearing them with the veil even though it's dangerous, lying to her mother
144-7	4	Q1 – Marji getting in trouble, mother's conflicting response Q4 – Marji's adolescent "look" in veil
190	1	Q4 Marji's temporary punk look
194-7	4	Q1 - Marji denies her identity in Vienna attempt to escape Iranian-ness, then reclaims it
250-1	2	Q2 – returning to Tehran: compare actual urban appearance (250) with metaphor (251)
272-5	4	Q4 - Trying to commit suicide, failing, becoming a "sophisticated woman" and new destiny

Pages: 30