Great Stories Club
The Art of Change: Creation, Growth and Transformation

Essay, reading list, and sample discussion points developed by Laura Rogers, Director of the Writing Center and Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, New York

- *Buck: A Memoir* by MK Asante
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
- *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi

Change may be chosen or involuntary, accepted or resisted, and is one of the foundational issues of both our temporal human existence and literature. Writers have addressed the idea of change throughout history and across cultures, from the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh,* through Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and the Old English *The Wanderer* to more contemporary texts such as Malcolm X's *Autobiography* and Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir *A Place to Stand.* Baca's memoir chronicles the enormous changes he experienced during his incarceration that resulted from his determination to learn to read and his subsequent immersion in poetry and writing. Malcolm X similarly transformed his life from imprisoned criminal to civil rights leader by becoming literate and using that literacy to transform not only himself but society as well. These works by Baca and Malcolm X point to the importance of the arts and humanities as catalysts for change.

In his essay "Coming into Language," Baca recounts how poetry transformed his life. Imprisoned at an early age on suspicion of murder, he taught himself to read and write while in jail. His first attempts at writing poetry were life-altering. He writes, "From that moment, a hunger for poetry possessed me….But when at last I wrote my first words on a page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest: I had a place to stand for the first time in my life."

In *Buck*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *The Complete Persepolis*, the arts and humanities provide "a place to stand" for the young narrators as they transform their lives in response to personal and societal forces. These transformations invite readers to explore key questions: How does one work to achieve an understanding of the self through reading and creative production? What role do the arts play in navigating the tensions between

social and individual changes? And finally, what roles can the arts and humanities play in affecting social change?

The works of fiction and non-fiction memoir in this Great Stories Club series explore questions relating to change and the creative arts through the stories of their young narrators. The interdisciplinary field of narratology defines narrative, the principle mode of fiction and non-fiction, as "accounts of what happened to particular people in particular circumstances." Therefore, "stories have come to be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change" (Herman, Jahn and Ryan ix). Cueva and Kinley note the importance of storytelling to growth and change; they write that "storytelling is a powerful facilitator of cultural and spiritual identity and growth." The narrators of these Great Stories Club books tell stories in which they have to make decisions about how to respond to the great personal, social and cultural forces they encounter. All of the protagonists change or transform themselves; they achieve independence, gain knowledge and cultivate their creative talents in ways that allow them to express and tell their own stories by, among other factors, their involvement in one of the creative arts and/or literature.

Elliot Eisner, in his book *The Arts and Creation of Mind,* writes about how the arts allow us to experience the world through a fresh perspective and change accordingly. "Aside from promoting our awareness of aspects of the world we had not experienced before, the arts provide permission to engage the imagination as a means for exploring possibilities," Eisner observes. "The arts liberate us from the literal; they enable us to step in to the shoes of others and experience vicariously what we have not experienced directly" (10). The arts, then, can be used as a transformative force, which we see demonstrated in the lives of the protagonists of these books. This transformation can occur both on an individual and social level in even the most difficult circumstances.

Malcolm X, for example, writes in his *Autobiography* that learning to read transformed him from a prisoner considered so dangerous that his nickname was "Satan" to a literate intellectual who brought armfuls of books to his cell, reading long into the night by the glow of a light in the corridor. "Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened," he writes. "In every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. … Up to then, I had never been so truly free in my life" (188). Malcolm's immersion in books set him on his path as an activist and a writer. Malcolm's story, like Baca's, is an example of how the arts can be a force for both personal and social change. Similarly, the

protagonists of *Buck*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *The Complete Persepolis* emerge transformed from "desperate circumstances," aided by their involvement with the arts and their ability to "engage the imagination as a means to explore possibilities" (Eisner 10).

William Cleveland, longtime community arts activist and prison arts teacher, notes in his article "Arts-based Community Change: Mapping the Terrain" that "the arts can be a powerful agent of personal, institutional and community change." Through his work in a variety of community settings, Cleveland observed the drive for self-expression and necessity of the arts; he writes that through art, "we learned that the creative impulse cannot be destroyed and will even in the most desperate circumstances emerge as a resource for survival." The young adult protagonists of these works are confronted with events that range from challenging and changing family dynamics to cultural, social and political forces that, combined with the myriad changes and challenges of adolescence, motivate the narrators of these works to make choices and, therefore, change.

While we may think of life changes chronicled by memoirs as personal and individual, Daniel Mendelsohn tells us in a *New Yorker* article that memoir can address not only individual stories but larger social and political issue as well. For example, early "escape narratives," such as slave and captivity narratives, present chronicles of broader change in social, cultural and political contexts. More contemporary memoirs, such as those written by Holocaust survivors and "other government-sponsored genocides of the twentieth century," are "memoirs of political suffering" that remind the reader "what happened to me happened to many others" (Mendelsohn).While all three texts in this series chronicle changes in the narrators' inner and individual lives, they all may be thought of as what Mendelsohn calls "witness memoirs" that address issues of racism, poverty, intolerance, and war. *Buck: A Memoir* takes place on the streets of Philadelphia, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is the story of a young man growing up on a reservation in eastern Washington, and the narrator of *Persepolis* lives through the Iranian Revolution, a war, and the bombing of her home city of Tehran. These texts all raise questions about whether or not one needs to leave one's social environment in order to change, as all of the protagonists do at some point. Does one need to change one's home? One's community? These texts are grounded in particulars of time and place and yet witness the tribulations, changes, and upheavals experienced by a community, a tribe or a nation. How do individuals continue living their lives in the midst of changes forced on them by social forces?

All three of these young protagonists are able to use the arts and humanities — including drawing, writing and literature — to help themselves find meaning and establish order when faced with personal and social chaos. Eisner notes that the arts can convey "the experience and communication of distinctive forms of meaning, meaning that only artistically crafted forms can convey, the ability to undergo forms of experience that are at once moving and touching, experiences of a consummatory nature, experiences that are treasured for their intrinsic value" (xii). A 2011 report from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) states that "the arts are central to human development." Engagement with the arts, whether in a prison cell, a poverty-stricken reservation, a society torn apart by war, or in the inner-city streets, becomes the catalyst for the narrators of these works to redefine their relationships with themselves and their societies, and to making life worth living rather than merely surviving day to day. While each memoir is a powerful story of a particular life, collectively they can help us think about how we can positively negotiate the inevitable changes that come with being alive.

Buck: A Memoir

MK Asante's memoir chronicles the life of a young man growing up on the streets of Philadelphia, where he is forced to deal with the effects of poverty, addiction, and family mental illness. As Malo's life falls apart around him — his brother goes to prison, his father leaves the family, a friend is killed, and his mother retreats further and further into mental illness — the young protagonist must decide how to change in response to these devastating events. Ultimately, he turns away from life on the streets through the encouragement of family members and a supportive school environment. There, an understanding teacher encourages Malo to write, and through his engagement with literature he is able to find a way out of difficult circumstances. Drawing upon vernacular language and contemporary hip hop lyrics, *Buck: A Memoir* raises key questions about the role of the arts in effecting change in the face of such pressures as personal loss, peer pressure and environmental limitations, and invites us to consider what conditions should be present to support that change.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Junior, the narrator of the book and author Sherman Alexie's alter ego, changes in response to the many pressures of growing up on a reservation outside Spokane, Washington. Junior, a gifted cartoonist and artist, grows up in a very different setting than Asante but faces similar issues of loss, poverty, and racism. Alexie's Junior, like Malo, makes a life-changing decision to leave his home community; Junior decides to take his life into his own hands and attend a school in which he is the only Indian. While Junior is faced with devastating personal loss, his determination to change his life, his friends and family, and his gift for drawing allow him to improve his circumstances. The book incorporates Junior's drawings (by graphic novelist Ellen Fornay), illustrating his perception of the world and offering an opportunity to incorporate discussion of how visual elements complement and work with a text. Alexie's semi-autobiographical memoir raises questions of how one can change by moving out into the world while maintaining a relationship with the past and one's home community. Like Malo, Junior uses his gift for creative expression to work through the many changes he is both confronted with and decides to make. This text, with its incorporation of visual elements, provides a strong transition to Marjane Satrapi's appealing graphic novel, *Persepolis.*

The Complete Persepolis

Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel is set in Iran during the turbulent Islamic Revolution and war between Iran and Iraq. Although Satrapi's work takes place in a very different setting than Asante and Alexi's books, the young narrator of her memoir also faces many changes and losses. Marji is an outspoken and rebellious child and adolescent; her parents, who are involved in leftist and communist politics, fear for her safety and so send her to boarding school in Vienna. The cultural, political and social changes Marji must navigate echo the issues confronted by Malo and Junior as she faces personal loss, estrangement from her home community, and vast differences between her public and private life. While Malo and Junior experience racism and poverty in their youth, Marji encounters many gender-based restrictions growing up in the repressive post-revolution Iran. The engaging black and white illustrations emphasize themes of personal, political and social change, including: How might one adjust in order to grow up in an environment of war and repression? How can art help us make sense of devastating change that is out of our control? The simply but beautifully illustrated *Persepolis* provides an unforgettable story of personal growth in the midst of political upheaval.

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Sample Discussion Points

Buck: A Memoir by M. K. Asante

- Asante incorporates lyrics from contemporary hip hop and rap artists, his own writing, and quotes from well-known authors as part of his memoir. Choose one that stands out to you. How does this lyric/quote help you understand the changes that Asante was going through at that point in his story? Do you have a favorite quote or lyric that has helped you through some difficult changes?

- Asante incorporates selections from his mother's diary throughout his story. How do these selections help you understand the many changes Malo's mother has gone through? How does the diary change Malo's understanding of his mother? How does it affect your understanding of his mother?

- When Malo is traveling with his father in Africa at the end of the book, his father behaves differently than he did earlier in the memoir. What are some of the most important experiences he had that contributed to his change? Do you think he is a very different person than he was at the beginning? What are some important factors in your life that caused you to change?

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

- Arnold's cartoons and drawings are very important to him; he says that his cartoons are his "tiny little lifeboats." Choose a cartoon/drawing from the book that you especially like or are drawn to. What attracted you to this drawing? How does it reflect Arnold's moods, feelings, and the changes he is going through?

- Wellpinit, the poor but close-knit reservation where Arnold grows up, is different from the wealthier, white community of Reardon, where he chooses to go to school. Is your home community more like Wellpinit or Reardon? What does Arnold take away from growing up in Wellpinit? What does he take from going to school in Reardon? How does Arnold incorporate elements of his life from both Wellpinit and Reardon in his identity by the end of the book?

- In the title of the book, Arnold describes himself as a "part-time" Indian and his story as "absolutely true." What changes in his life does Alexie emphasize by the choice of these

words for the title? Do you consider any aspect of yourself to be "part-time?" Why does he emphasize that the book is "absolutely true?" Is anything ever "absolutely true?"

The Complete Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi

- Marjane has a unique relationship with her family that sustains her during the many changes Iranian society goes through during the revolution. How does her family help her cope and adjust to these changes? What roles, positive or negative, have your family or friends played in helping you through a crisis or a social upheaval that forced you to change?

- *Persepolis* is a graphic novel in which the pictures and texts comment on each other. Choose one panel that stands out to you. How does that panel reveal a change in a character? Is there a panel that shows changes in Marjane's society?

- *Persepolis* both tells a story and comments on the importance of stories in our lives; many of the characters (Uncle Anoush, Marjie's grandmother) tell stories. How do their stories help Marjie understand the changes she goes through? Do you have family stories that have helped you understand change in your life?

- Did you have preconceived ideas about Iran and its people? Did reading *Persepolis* change those ideas? If so, what part(s) of the book impacted your perspective, or caused you to change your thinking about Iran and the Iranian people?