Chancellor's Reading Club Selection for 2016

*Buck: A Memoir* by M. K. Assante
Fayetteville State University
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M. K. Assante


The following guide contains a compilation of information about the book, *Buck: A Memoir* by M. K. Assante. Links and full-text are provided to critical reviews and websites containing biographical and literary information about the author and his works. This material is copyrighted and compiled for educational use. Appropriate credit should be given if the material is utilized and an identified citation style (MLA, Turabian, APA, etc.) should be used to document any work used in papers, assignments or presentations. If you have any questions about this guide, please contact Jan Whitfield by email at [jwhitfield@uncfsu.edu](mailto:jwhitfield@uncfsu.edu) or by phone at 910-672-1750.

“A coming-of-age story about navigating the wilds of urban America and the shrapnel of a self-destructing family, *Buck* shares the story of a generation through one original and riveting voice. MK Asante was born in Zimbabwe to American parents: his mother a dancer, his father a revered professor. But as a teenager, MK was alone on the streets of North Philadelphia, swept up in a world of drugs, sex, and violence. MK’s memoir is an unforgettable tale of how one precocious, confused kid educated himself through gangs, rap, mystic cults, ghetto philosophy, and, eventually, books. It is an inspiring tribute to the power of literature to heal and redeem us.” Amazon

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From vice, MK Asante finds his voice

Morgan State professor has been nominated for an NAACP Image Award, released memoir 'Buck'


"Buck" stops here.

In his office at Morgan State University, MK Asante, the youngest professor ever to receive tenure at the school, is reflecting upon his teen years in the city he calls "Killadelphia, Pistolvania," and that are chronicled in his acclaimed recent memoir, "Buck."

"Buck" never was his nickname. Asante chose the title because he lived through nearly every variation of that "short but loaded" word and acted them out in roughly the order they're presented above.

"At my core, I'm a rebel," the 31-year-old Asante says. "What I've done with my life is learn how to channel my rebellious spirit into something that wasn't self-destructive, something positive."

Between the ages of about 13 and 16, young Malo (Asante's nickname) watched his beloved elder brother go to prison and his parents divorce. His father moved out of the family home, and his mother battled mental illness.
For a time, Malo lived on the streets. His best friend was murdered. He dealt drugs and ended up on the wrong side of a narcotics kingpin.

So great is the teen's peril and so lyrical and perceptive is the voice that's describing it that the memoir can make readers feel almost unbearably anxious. You want to reach through the pages, grab Malo by his shoulders and physically pull this mule-headed kid out of various roach-infested crack dens and into someplace safe and warm.

Miraculously, Malo rescued himself.

"When I was in college in the middle of all of these preppy kids, I never wanted to talk about my mom and brother," Asante says. "I pushed it out of my memory. It took me many years to realize that the stuff I was ashamed of actually was the source of my strength."

Once Asante got on track, there was no stopping him. His memoir was one of last year's sleeper hits. Essence magazine lauded him as "the voice of a new generation." He has appeared on CNN, NBC, CBS and the BBC. This winter, he said, he was named a feature film fellow at the Sundance Institute, where he's working on turning "Buck" into a movie. This coming Saturday, he'll learn whether he'll receive an NAACP Image Award in the literary biography category.

His competition includes his mentor, the poet Maya Angelou.

"I'd love for him to win," Angelou said in a telephone interview.

"I think he's brilliant. There are artists who've been given great gifts but who don't bother to hone, polish and then share them. Mr. Asante works very hard at his art without letting people know he's working hard."

Asante's boss, Morgan State President David Wilson, said the professor's analytical skills match his poetic gifts. He admires Asante's nonfiction book, "It's Bigger Than Hip-Hop," which was released in 2008 when the author was in his mid-20s. Asante used the music to examine larger social and cultural issues.

"In my estimation, Professor Asante will become to his generation what Skip Gates was to my generation," Wilson said, referring to the scholar and literary critic Henry Louis Gates. "He's well on his way to becoming a household name both nationally and internationally."

What's terrifying about "Buck" is the speed with which a solidly upper-middle-class family can collapse.

Asante's father is Molefi Kete Asante, who went from picking cotton in Georgia to becoming dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Philadelphia's Temple University. He's known widely as the father of Afrocentrism, or an African-centered view of history and culture.

Kariamu Welsh, Asante's mother, went from scrubbing toilets at age 8 for wealthy Long Island families to become a Guggenheim fellow who served as founding artistic director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe. She is on Temple's Dance Department faculty.

The family lived in a big brown and white Tudor house in a quiet, residential neighborhood, and the boys attended private schools.

"People thought I had it made," Welsh said. "They assume that if you have a good job and your husband has a good job and you have 2.5 children, that automatically makes you happy. Not so."
As a teen, Malo’s older half-brother, Daahoud, succumbed to the allure of thug life and was sentenced to 10 years in prison. His incarceration put enormous pressure on parents, who already were battling demons from their own troubled childhoods.

"The truth is that we were already broken," MK Asante says.

He was reeling from the loss of his brother when his father moved out, leaving the boy (at least, in his mind) responsible for taking care of both himself and his deeply depressed mother, who had a history of suicide attempts.

"All these experiences were painful as hell, but they had to happen," MK Asante says, and quotes the ancient Roman poet, Ovid:

"Be patient and tough; some day this pain will be useful to you."

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Master storyteller M.K. Asante keeps it real in the classroom

From Amanda Sealy, CNN

April 5, 2011 -- Updated 1110 GMT (1910 HKT)

very week CNN International's African Voices highlights Africa's most engaging personalities, exploring the lives and passions of people who rarely open themselves up to the camera. This week we profile Zimbabwean-born author, filmmaker and professor M.K. Asante.

(CNN) -- As a disruptive teenager, M.K. Asante was expelled from school on more than one occasion.

Yet today, as an award-winning writer, filmmaker and professor, he's welcomed back in classrooms around the world.

A master storyteller, Zimbabwe-born Asante is a major creative force. He's written a number of books, as well as three movies, including 2008's "The Black Candle," which was narrated by American poet Maya Angelou.

Only 29 years old, Asante has also embarked on a mission to make art more accessible to younger generations.

As a tenured professor of creative writing and film at Morgan State University in Baltimore, he leads classrooms of students, many of whom are close to him in age, using language they can understand.

"When I come into school, I keep it real with my students," Asante says. "I use examples that they understand, we talk about things that are relevant in contemporary society," he adds.
"Having a troubled past"

"I want to show them this is what a professor can look like. You know what I mean? Yeah, I write books, you can write books too," Asante says.

"Whether you wear a bow tie or not has nothing to do with your intellectual rigor or whatever, it's irrelevant -- it's really about your ideas and what you bring to the table."

Asante's passion for art has also led him to travel across the United States and to many African countries where he gives passionate lectures about his craft.

He says the trips back to the continent in which he was born have been a great experience for both him and the young Africans who come to listen to him.

"They're inspired and you can see it," he says. "They're shocked that this person from America is so rooted, you know, sometimes even more rooted than they are."

Born in Harare to American parents, Asante moved to the United States at a young age.

Whether you wear a bow tie or not has nothing to do with your intellectual rigor.

--M.K. Asante

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His life's journey got off to a rocky start while growing up in Philadelphia -- he was kicked out of his private school when he was 12 and then was sent to two public schools where he continued to get into trouble by being disruptive and fighting.

But Asante's life took a major turn when he was 16 when he joined a creative writing class and was encouraged by his teacher to write about anything he wanted. He says that this was something he'd never been told before at school.

"I tested her at first -- I wrote a couple of curse words at first just to see if she was serious about this," he recalls.
"And she looked at it and said 'good.' And I was like, 'OK, this is crazy!' So I take the pen and my hand starts shaking because I get overwhelmed with this feeling about what I'm gonna write."

Asante says that defining moment changed his life forever, triggering his love for writing.

"There were so many other things going on at that same time -- I had gotten arrested, I had a very close friend of mine, Little Chris, who got murdered by gun violence in Philly, my brother was incarcerated, people were dying and it was sad," Asante says.

"And that was one of the things I was writing about. I felt like I had an obligation to those things and I had to write about them in a way that was inspiring and empowering so other people wouldn't go there."


Asante made his film debut in 2005 when he wrote and produced "500 Years," a film about the effects of slavery and colonialism on people of African descent that went on to win five awards on the international film festival circuit.

His latest film, "Motherland," won Best Documentary at the Pan African Film Festival last year.

Despite his success, Asante isn't slowing down. He says he wants his art to reach as many people as possible.

"I like to do things on a big level and continue to take things to a higher level because for me if you're going to be serious about art and serious about the work you're making, you have to also be serious about making sure it reaches people," he says.

"If I'm going to investing my energy and time on something that I think is really important, I want millions and billions to read it and have access to it."

Teo Kermeliotis contributed to this report.
Author MK Asante

Lee Steffen/Spiegel & Grau

Writer, hip-hop artist and filmmaker MK Asante's new memoir is called *Buck*. It's about growing up in North Philadelphia in the 1990s. Asante describes his adolescence as, "Me, unsupervised, with my brother gone, my dad gone, my mom gone, and me just on the block in the neighborhood, roaming the streets of Philly - just lost."

*Buck* captures Asante's transformation from a drug dealer and delinquent to a poet and professor.

"I wanted a title that was loaded, that was also short and to the point, but loaded in terms of its substance ... [BUCK] has references to 'make a buck.' It also has references to 'buck shots' in the air. It's to shoot. That refers to violence from where I'm from, 'Killadelphia.'"

Ultimately, Asante wants readers to realize what it means to buck the system. He says that "being a rebel, or being a true buck, isn't about doing the things that result in you ending up in jail. But being a true buck is bucking against the status quo, bucking against the statistics, the norm."

Staring at a blank page helped Asante re-imagine himself.

Asante has won several prestigious prizes, including the Langston Hughes Creative Writing Award for poetry. He spoke with *Tell Me More* host Michel Martin about finding his voice in *Buck*.

**Interview Highlights**

**What 'Buck' is about**
Well I think, first of all, the story is about education. It's about mis-education, re-education, self-education, street education. It's about the difference and the distance between school and education. Mark Twain said, 'Don't let school get in the way of your education.' I learned this first hand. And think that it's also about the redemption of family. 'Without struggle, there is no progress.' We know Frederick Douglass said that. And, although we go through struggles in my family, it's ultimately a story about a family uniting in so many ways:
me and my dad's situation, my mom getting healthier, dancing again. And it's also about the power of art to do all these things, because this story is about me finding my voice as a writer.

Writing during the trial of George Zimmerman
There is a Trayvon Martin situation happening almost every day in this country. And I think what 'BUCK' does is that it helps remind people that, even though there's cases that we know about, there are so many cases that we don't know about. That are happening all the time...'BUCK' is written because, not only is this my story, but this is the story of a lot of people going through these situations in urban America.

Who 'Buck' is for
The best compliment I ever received was, I was at a juvenile detention center, and the guy who ran the prison — he told me that he gives my books to kids who hate reading. So I feel like in a lot of ways, this book is written for the kid that has never read anything that's resonated with him. That's never read anything that saw him or her. And when I say 'saw,' I'm talking about where they were acknowledged, right? Their story, their experience, their language was acknowledged.

SALON http://www.salon.com/2013/09/01/buck_a_teen_drug_dealer_finds_solace_in_words/

Sunday, Sep 1, 2013 05:00 PM EST

“Buck”: A teen drug dealer finds solace in words

M.K. Asante's memoir, "Buck," marks the debut of a remarkable talent almost lost to drugs, crime and violence

Laura Miller Follow

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M. K. Asante

Memoirs, especially memoirs about hard childhoods, have somehow gotten a bad rap, but there’s still no story quite as universal, in its pain and/or its exhilaration, as the story of growing up against the odds. From “Angela’s Ashes” to “The Liar’s Club,” the complicated emotional footwork required to transcend a disastrous home life while remaining true to who you are and where you came from is the subject of this brand of autobiography. Few memoirists have faced challenges as great as those that confronted M. K. Asante.

In “Buck,” Asante describes coming up in a family that ought to have provided him with precious support. His parents were educated, intelligent people who celebrated their heritage. His father, a college professor known as “the father of Afrocentrism,” married his mother, an accomplished dancer, while they were visiting Zimbabwe,
where M. K. (who went by the nickname Malo) was born. They’d made it from their own hard childhoods in “projects and plantations” to a Tudor house on a nice block in Philadelphia. But when Malo’s older half-brother Daudi (nickname: Uzi) ran afoul of the law, hidden fault lines in the family split open and, at 13, Malo fell through, plunging into a perilous world of drugs, crime and violence.

“Buck” portrays Asante’s youth as a tense oscillation between a miserable domestic situation and the hard, jangled romance of the streets. He idolized his big brother, his mother’s child from an earlier relationship with an abusive addict, but Uzi and Malo’s father don’t get along. (Their ur-querrel was over the racial politics of “Star Wars” action figures; Uzi wanted Luke Skywalker, but his stepfather insisted on Lando Calrissian instead.) Out of a misplaced loyalty to his biological father, Uzi is drawn to the outlaw life. When Uzi finally gets into serious trouble, Malo’s father refuses to help: “He’s a thug. You reap what you sow,” he says like a southern preacher.”

Malo’s mother, on the other hand, is psychologically fragile. (Another sibling, a sister whose mind is clouded with elaborate delusions about their family being descended from European and African aristocracies, has been institutionalized.) She’s in and out of mental hospitals and on antidepressants, and eventually Malo’s father moves out. Excerpts from her diary are interspersed throughout “Buck;” it takes the form of letters written from Amina, the African name she assumed as an adult, to Carole, the name she was born with.

That detail is one of the most heart-rending in this memoir, a testimony to all the sorrows of a lifetime that can’t be soothed with pride and pep talks. “I can’t talk to Chaka [Malo’s father] unless it’s about Afrocentricity or The Movement or telling him I’m getting better,” Amina writes to her old self. Her voice offers a mournful counterpoint to the fizzing bravado of Asante’s adolescent adventures and street life, and his father’s stiff rhetoric is no match for either. At the kernel of this memoir lies the crumpled love of a family that tries and fails to roll with more than its fair share of punches.

Harrassed by a racist principal (“he’s got that rare type of limp that, once you meet him, you feel like he deserves”) Malo bails on “Foes” — his name for Friends, the private Quaker school where his parents send him despite his father’s pronouncement to a TV interviewer that he’s “never found a school in the United States run by whites that adequately prepares black children to enter the world as sane human beings.” The public high school he attends next is a nightmare, but also the occasion for some of Asante’s most electric writing:

The cafeteria: bananas, pure chaos. The benches and tables are bolted down and midget-low from when this used to be a middle school. There’s always a couple fights during the first lunch, mostly girls, haymakers and windmills, boobs popping out like Jell-O, spinning, spitting, a lot of hair pulling. The fights leave weave tracks and braids scattered on the floor, right there with the spilled milk, baked beans, and textbooks facing down, pages open like dead birds.

Asante’s prose is a fluid blend of vernacular swagger and tender poeticism; it’s no surprise that when he finally finds his feet again, the place he feels most affirmed is a spoken-word club. But first he traverses an underworld of hoodlums, lunatics, drug fiends and the kind of girl who frankly tells him men “are like bank accounts. Without money, they don’t generate interest.”

Malo sells weed for a while and watches his brother’s old friends on the corner cycle through conspicuous consumption, a millenarian black nationalist cult and finally addiction. They ask him to buy “breakfast” when he drops by for a visit, and this takes them to a blasted urban wasteland (“Everybody’s eyes curry yellow or smog gray, dead as sunken ships”) where one buddy explains it to him: “‘Pancakes,’ Ted says, holding up the Xanax pills — zannies. ‘Syrup,’ with a styrofoam cup full of lean — promethazine and codeine syrup. He drops the pills in the syrup. ‘Breakfast.’” Malo’s best friend, Amir, is murdered, possibly by Malo’s own weed supplier.
Adolescents are notoriously myopic, but one of the great strengths of “Buck” is the range of perspectives and voices Asante weaves into what might have been a one-man show. His mother’s diary entries are the most obvious way he widens this memoir’s scope. But Asante gives generous attention to the characters who wander through his story, from Dah, a Cambodian kid from neighborhood (“Uptown’s MacGyver … Give homie some duct tape, a couple of paper clips, batteries, a tube sock, and like two and a half hours, and he’ll make a better version of anything they sell at Radio Shack. Once he even made a bulletproof vest out of Kevlar strips he ganked from some old Goodyears”) to the old friend who smokes Pall Malls instead of Newports because “I like designer clothes, Versace, Moschino, Polo, but I’m not paying for no designer name-brand cancer. Give me the cheap shit.”

What saves Malo is a last-ditch effort on his parents’ part and alternative education. At Philadelphia’s Crefeld School he discovers a passion for writing, and if his teachers are full of pat mottos (“You don’t need to be great to get started, but you need to get started to be great”), it is nevertheless one of them who tells him that wanting to write “means you have to be a good reader, though.” Confession: I’m a total sucker for first-person accounts of kids whose lives were transfigured by books, and Asante’s delivers an ecstatic payback in this department. He finishes “On the Road” in one day and soaks up James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston and Walt Whitman like thirsty ground in a heavy rain. “Buck” grew from that, and it’s a bumper crop.

Laura Miller is a senior writer for Salon. She is the author of "The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia" and has a Web site, magiciansbook.com.

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**BUCK A Memoir**

Nonfiction

**BUCK A Memoir** Spiegel & Grau (272 pp) Adult 978-0-8129-9341-7 $25.00 Asante, MK

A young black man's self-destructive arc, cut short by a passion for writing. Asante's (It's Bigger than Hip-Hop, 2008, etc.) memoir, based on his teenage years in inner-city Philadelphia, undoubtedly reflects the experiences of many African-American youngsters today in such cities. By age 14, the author was an inquisitive, insecure teen facing the hazards that led his beleaguered mother, a teacher, to warn him, "[t]hey are out there looking for young black boys to put in the system." This was first driven home to Asante when his brother received a long prison sentence for statutory rape; later, his father, a proud, unyielding scholar of Afrocentrism, abruptly left...
under financial strain, and his mother was hospitalized after increasing emotional instability. Despite their strong influences, Asante seemed headed for jail or death on the streets. This is not unexplored territory, but the book’s strength lies in Asante's vibrant, specific observations and, at times, the percussive prose that captures them. The author’s fluid, filmic images of black urban life feel unique and disturbing: "Fiends, as thin as crack pipes, dance--the dancing dead...Everybody's eyes curry yellow or smog gray, dead as sunken ships."

Unfortunately, this is balanced by a familiar stance of adolescent hip-hop braggadocio (with some of that genre's misogyny) and by narrative melodrama of gangs and drug dealing that is neatly resolved in the final chapters, when an alternative school experience finally broke through Asante's ennui and the murderous dealers to whom he owed thousands were conveniently arrested. The author constantly breaks up the storytelling with unnecessary spacing, lyrics from (mostly) 1990s rap, excerpts from his mother's journal, letters from his imprisoned brother, and quotations from the scholars he encountered on his intellectual walkabout in his late adolescence. Still, young readers may benefit from Asante's message: that an embrace of books and culture can help one slough off the genuinely dangerous pathologies of urban life. Asante is a talented writer, but his memoir is undernourished.

- 6.

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Abstract

In present-day vernacular, the filmmaker, professor, hip-hop artist, essayist and memoirist might be called a multi-talent, multitasker or entrepreneur. The story combines a central narrative with entries from his mother's journal, song lyrics, letters from his brother in prison and other "layers" of his story. When I think of my memoir, I ask, what are the different layers that will help create an experience? I want you to be immersed in my world.

Full Text

Once upon a time, MK Asante might have been called a renaissance man. In present-day vernacular, the filmmaker, professor, hip-hop artist, essayist and memoirist might be called a multi-talent, multitasker or entrepreneur. Any way you look at it, he's oozing narrative talent. He caught our eye (and ear) with his memoir Buck, a personal saga of self-reliance in the face of stark odds. Asante was born in Zimbabwe to Americans - a dancer mother, a professor father - and grew up in Philadelphia. In the book, his brother is doing time, and Asante, who goes by Malo, is grappling with the pull of the streets and the depths of his own smarts. The story combines a central narrative with entries from his mother's journal, song lyrics, letters from his brother in prison and other "layers" of his story. We caught up with Asante at the Miami Book Fair International to talk about the layers of his life and work.
Origins: I've always known that I had a story to tell about my education. I don't mean school. I mean my coming of age. I knew that my childhood, my adolescence and youth were filled with characters and moments that I wanted to explore in a book, in a movie, in narrative in general. Even though I've always known that, I didn't have the courage to do it until more recently. For a long time, I was ashamed of some of the things I wrote about in the book. I didn't want to deal with those things. As I had more distance, reflection and time, I realized that vulnerability is my strength, and everything I've been through is not something to be ashamed of.

Role model: I'm around so many young people in colleges, universities or high schools or just on the block. I realized they needed to hear my story. They needed to know it because they were seeing a man who is a tenured college professor, a writer and filmmaker, but they are seeing me now. They don't know what I've been through, and they'd know you could go through these things but that you don't have to be reduced to these things, and they would be inspired to follow their dreams. That's why the book is dedicated to "all the young bucks."

Structure: Part of my influence in terms of the plot structure is cinematic. There's the story, and then we get into the layers: Mom's story, the lyrics, my brother's story. When you're editing a documentary, you've got your narrative interviews but those are not the only elements. You need B-roll. Then you have to have music, so that's a layer as well. Now you need graphic titles or special effects. If it's historical, you'll bring in archival images or video, right? We have the basis of our documentary with the interview, and then the music, the interview, the cutaway, the archival footage, the graphics all coming together to give us this experience. That's how I approach writing. When I think of my memoir, I ask, what are the different layers that will help create an experience? I want you to be immersed in my world. The key is weaving those layers together.

On trusting readers: I've always felt like a bridge between worlds. The other day, I was on the phone, and on one line, I was talking to a billionaire, and on the other line, my friend called me on the run from the police and wanted me to Western Union him $40. This is my life. A lot of people listen to hiphop, and they don't necessarily understand everything the rapper is saying. They get the vibe. But a lot goes on between the lines that you have to know from the streets. To see how popular rap is gave me the confidence. If I tell my truth and write my story in the authentic way it happened, in the authentic language, even if people don't understand everything, they will get it. When we're authentic as artists, people feel the realness. They feel the universal truth. If I get in my Malo bag and write, even if people are not from Philly or the inner city, they're going to feel it.

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