



An introduction to the Great Stories Club series,
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ESSAY

TEXTS

**Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, book 1 (Ta-Nehisi Coates & Brian Stelfreeze)

**Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (Art Spiegelman)

**Binti* (Nnedi Okorafor)

Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two (Joseph Bruchac)

What Can(t) Wait (Ashley Hope Pérez)

Buck: A Memoir (MK Asante)

* Denotes core texts.

Legends, literature, media, and history are full of stories about heroes who rise to the occasion in moments of need, taking on great risk for the good of others. What makes a person able to perform heroic acts? Is this something that certain people are just born with, or does it grow out of our circumstances and upbringing? Related to this is the essential question of how much control we actually have over our own self-making. Major thinkers have debated these questions for centuries, and individuals continue to grapple with them as they face down the challenges — sometimes seemingly small, other times impossibly large — of everyday life.

The books in this series each take a different view of what it means to be a hero, considering how the combination of unique social circumstances, compassion for others, and inner resources can make it possible for young people to perform acts that they may not have imagined themselves capable of achieving. At the same time, these texts explore the conditions that create the need for heroism, probing the underlying social problems that can lead to oppression, discrimination, and even genocide. Rather than serving as a simple celebration of heroism, each book acknowledges the psychological pressures of taking on the responsibilities of a “hero,” and considers the costs and benefits of both individual and collective action.

Most early depictions of heroism in the English language feature warriors who risk everything in battles with human and inhuman foes. In *Beowulf* (dated between 700-1000 CE), one of the oldest surviving works of English literature, the hero singlehandedly takes on two man-eating ogres and a dragon before meeting his end. Medieval scholar A. C. Spearing refers to the Anglo-Saxon worldview reflected in this poem as that of the “man surrounded by a hostile universe, a warrior fighting against odds, probably defeated and yet heroic in his defeat.”¹ Spearing suggests that this understanding of the self comes from pre-Christian Northern mythology, in which both men and gods are doomed to be eventually defeated by the forces of chaos. In such a universe, people lived with no hope of a heavenly reward, so lived for the glory that they could gather in this life. The rise of Christianity in Europe — and with it, the belief that good works in this life would result in a joyful afterlife — soon made other values read as heroic as well, however. For instance, medieval chivalry emphasized faith, loyalty, and care for the weak alongside soldierly might. We still value these qualities today, and continue to celebrate iconic heroes like King Arthur and Robin Hood for their selflessness and good works as much as for their strength in battle. Books in this series, like *Black Panther* and *Code Talker*, both continue and trouble this tradition of fighting heroes, asking us to consider the benefits and drawbacks of treating warriors as heroes.



While heroism has long been associated with men and masculinity in Western culture, there is also a rich tradition of women who serve as models of heroic behavior, from the Greek character Antigone, who defies the law to secure rightful burial for her brother, to the many examples of female power and grace in Christine de Pizan's fourteenth-century *Book of the City of Ladies*.² As books like *Binti* and *How I Live Now* show, girls and women continue to make great heroes, and often use tactics and display intellectual, social, and physical qualities that can help us expand how we define heroism. Nonetheless, as recently as the nineteenth century philosophers and historians continued to imagine heroism as primarily the domain of men: Thomas Carlyle argued that history is shaped through the acts of "great men," rather than slowly through accumulated forces of many people, and Friedrich Nietzsche looked ahead to a post-religious society that put its hopes in this world (rather than the next), led by a decidedly male *übermensch*, or over-man.³

Such thinking implies that the kind of strident individualism that we still associate with masculinity lends itself to heroism. But part of the difficulty of real-world behavior is actually knowing when and how to act in the best interest of others (and ourselves). Writing in the 1950s, influential sociologist Erving Goffman argued that there is *no* authentic inner self to fall back on for such guidance, but rather that we are all shaped by our social situations. Whether we realize it or not, he claims, we act in a series of performances that shift depending on our audience: friends, lovers, authority figures, strangers, etc.⁴ This means that we mostly adjust our behavior according our circumstances and the company that we keep.

Such adaptability can give us valuable flexibility to respond well in a range of situations, but other thinkers have also

argued that "going with the flow" — behaving in ways that may seem perfectly reasonable in a given social circumstance — can create constraining or even deadly conditions for others. Political theorist Hannah Arendt famously coined the phrase "the banality of evil" to describe how the greatest human cruelties can arise not from inherently monstrous tendencies but from everyday acceptance of seemingly mundane rules and norms.⁵ Her example is Nazism, in which millions of otherwise normal people went along with, and even took active part in, genocide against the Jewish people. The graphic novel *Maus*, based on one man's experiences during the Holocaust, depicts the horrific things that regular people can do to one another and suggests how small acts of endurance might qualify as heroism under such circumstances. Meanwhile, *What Can(t) Wait* offers a very different example of everyday fortitude and strength. They also reveal how people can (intentionally or not) limit and hurt even their own loved ones when they are unable to look beyond preconceived notions, social expectations, and/or their own personal struggles.

If the very foundations of our individual identities may be formed by social forces that often work beyond our control, how can we know when it's time to push back and how best to take a stand? Each of the books in this series offers different models of heroism, giving examples of characters that learn to recognize the conditions that shape their societies, determine their own moral standards within these structures, comprehend and empathize with the needs of others, and find the courage to act in moments of danger. From quiet resistance to all-out battle; from compromise with the "enemy" to the simple act of survival: these books use history, fantasy, and imagination to depict how young people can take part in their own self-making and forge new definitions of heroism for their own situations and times.



CORE TEXTS

Book 1: *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*, Book One (Ta-Nehisi Coates & Brian Stelfreeze, 2016)

In this reboot of the Black Panther series, National Book Award winner Ta-Nehisi Coates complicates the straightforward superhero narrative by weaving together multiple narrative strands that reveal the many interests and motivations that can bring people into political conflict. In spite of the series' focus on Black Panther and his life as T'Challa, king of Wakanda, this book does not automatically support all of T'Challa's actions and instead provides glimpses of the motivations behind the people who begin to rebel against his throne. This text plays with mainstream assumption that superheroes must also be "heroes" in the moral sense, and explores how traditionally powerful, decisive masculinity may not always give rise to the most heroic behavior — even when conducted with the best of intentions.

Book 2: *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (Art Spiegelman, 1992)

This graphic novel is the second volume of the now-iconic two-part series by comic artist Art Spiegelman about the Holocaust experiences of his father Vladek. In it, we see Vladek live through the horrific conditions of life in concentration camps, where he is constantly in danger of death from violence, hunger, and disease. Although Vladek never destroys or escapes his enemies, the book demonstrates many small victories of survival, including incredible kindnesses that he does for others and that others do for him. This story is framed, however, by Art's difficult relationship with his aging father as he works on writing *Maus*. In spite of its seemingly simple visual style, this graphic novel shows how multifaceted people and situations really are, asking us to consider how different circumstances can give rise to different expectations for how to think and act. Spiegelman's famous use of mice for Jews and cats for Germans (and other animals for other nationalities/ethnicities) adds another layer of complexity about how we essentialize people and how this may or may not be necessary in extreme circumstances.

Book 3: *Binti* (Nnedi Okorafor, 2015)

In this award-winning novel, Nnedi Okorafor creates an Afrofuturist world in which the young Himba woman Binti leaves her family and people in order to take a full scholarship at the interplanetary Oomza University. When an alien attack on her transport ship kills all of Binti's new classmates and leaves her alone with the deadly Meduse, she discovers that objects and traditions from her homeland somehow protect her and make it possible for her to communicate with the enemy. This work is not only a tale of survival, but also of heroic action: at great risk to herself, Binti offers to negotiate between the Meduse and the professors at Oomza University, opening up lines of communication where there had been none before. In the process, she learns about the motivations and culture of the Meduse, and undergoes an enormous transformation that will make her even more of an outsider to her people at the same time as it allows her to build peaceful bridges between species. This nontraditional approach to heroism balances the importance of staying true to your origins with the power of being open to new experiences and flexible in unfamiliar situations.



ADDITIONAL TEXTS

Code Talker: A Novel About the Navajo Marines of World War Two (Joseph Bruchac, 2005)

This novel, relayed in the first-person voice of the protagonist Ned Begay remembering his youth, tells the story of Navajo code talkers during World War II. While Begay's memories include exciting battles and dangerous beach invasions, this book is careful not to simply glorify war. It provides context that explains the heritage and childhoods of the Navajo soldiers, many of whom experience intense racism in the United States both before and after the war. In particular, the book moves from Begay's time at English-language schools, where students were punished and humiliated for speaking their native language, to the rise of Navajo as a key unbreakable code that the American military used to win pivotal battles in World War II and beyond. By exposing the many emotions and surprising situations that war can create, *Code Talker* challenges us to develop more nuanced ways of thinking about heroism during times of war, and to unpack the layers of history and experience that broad "us vs. them" approaches to war can cover over.

What Can(t) Wait (Ashley Hope Pérez, 2011)

Marisa, a Mexican-American teenager growing up in Texas, dreams of going to a top college and someday becoming an engineer ... but the demands of her everyday life keep getting in the way. From the hours she has to work at her job to help bring income home to her family, to the school she has to miss in order to babysit her beloved niece Anita, Marisa watches as her hopes of attending the prestigious UT-Austin slip away over the course of her senior year. Caught between the expectations of her white math teacher and

her immigrant parents, Marisa struggles to chart her own path and take steps towards achieving her goals. This novel reveals the deep cultural differences that can divide children from their parents, especially in immigrant communities, as well as the loyalties and bonds of love that hold them together. *What Can(t) Wait* puts pressure on traditional notions of heroism, exploring how the accumulation of small everyday actions can improve life for ourselves, for others, and eventually for whole communities.

Buck (MK Asante, 2013)

This memoir follows the teenage years of MK Asante, known as Malo in the book, as he navigates daily life as a young Black man in inner-city Philadelphia. Malo tries to cope as his beloved big brother Uzi is incarcerated, his mother struggles with suicidal depression, his father leaves the family, and his best friend falls victim to gun violence. Although Malo is surrounded by "heroes"—he idolizes Uzi, and Malo's parents are celebrated thinkers and artists—he soon finds himself without present, reliable mentors and left to fend for himself. Fighting to make it in a world of drugs, guns, and masculine bravado, Malo ultimately finds that love, language, and art have their own world-changing power. Rap lyrics from Asante's youth weave through the pages of this book, reflecting on its particular scenarios and connecting Malo's life to broader African-American experiences as captured in music. *Buck* embraces the complexity of individual humans, no matter how "good" or "bad" they may appear in other people's eyes, and pushes readers to consider the constant interplay of social pressures, personal history, and in-the-moment emotions that guide the choices that people make.



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