



BOOK 1

***Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, illustrated by Brian Stelfreeze**

GENERAL QUESTIONS (FOR ALL SERIES BOOKS)

- 1 Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Answering this question may require defining what you think it means to be heroic in the specific context of the novel. Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?
- 2 Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reasons to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? If so, find specific moments in the book to discuss. How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

- 1 From the start of the novel T’Challa, the king of Wakanda and the alter-ego of Black Panther, finds himself fighting his own people (Part 1). The people call him a “tyrant” and want a new kind of government to protect their rights and give them a stronger voice in their society: the rebel Tetu claims that “a day is coming when Wakanda will be ruled by Wakandans” (Part 3). But T’Challa sees himself as the “father” of Wakandans, and believes that they have been misled by “deceivers.” **Are the people victims of propaganda from dangerous rebels, or do they have a reason to be angry with their king? How do you know?**
- 2 Aneka and Ayo, two warriors in Wakanda’s famous all-women Dora Milaje fighting force, become fugitives when Ayo breaks her lover and comrade Aneka out of prison (Part 1). Aneka faced a death sentence for killing a chieftain, known for sexually abusing the girls in his village, without first giving him a trial. On the run with two stolen “midnight angel” warrior suits, Ayo and Aneka become a vigilante force on behalf of the many abused women and girls in Wakanda. **Do you see their acts as heroic or criminal? Is it possible to be both? What kind of resolution would you recommend for their story?**
- 3 The philosopher Changamire teaches students about the injustice of “great robbers” (authority figures) who “punish the little ones to keep them in their obedience” at the shulé (school) where he works (Part 2). He tells T’Challa’s mother Ramonda that in spite of its advanced science and intelligence, Wakanda does not have the “wisdom” it needs to be a “free society” (Part 4). **What is the difference between intelligence and wisdom?**
- 4 Both Tetu and T’Challa’s father tried studying philosophy, but both eventually gave up when faced with the realities of corruption and war. **Do you think that thinking more about the “big questions” can help Wakanda find freedom and a peaceful resolution to its conflicts? If not, what can?**



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Written by Maria Sachiko Cecire, Director of Experimental Humanities and Assistant Professor of Literature, Bard College

BOOK 2

Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began by Art Spiegelman

GENERAL QUESTIONS (FOR ALL SERIES BOOKS)

- 1 Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Answering this question may require defining what you think it means to be heroic in the specific context of the novel. Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?
- 2 Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reasons to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? If so, find specific moments in the book to discuss. How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

- 1 While in the concentration camps, Vladek does not try to fight against the Nazis or even to run away (see p. 73). To survive, he does favors for camp supervisors (pp. 32-33), tells lies and deceives others (pp. 60 and 92), and makes seemingly cruel deals with people to get basic nutrition (p. 86). At the same time he also tries to look out for other people, like when he helps Mandelbaum get a life-saving belt and spoon (p. 34), and when he has his first wife Anja transferred close to him where they can see each other and he can smuggle her extra food (pp. 63-5). **Do you think that survival under extraordinary circumstances, like that of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, counts as a form of heroism? What about people that do not survive? Can we call them any less “heroic”?**
- 2 As an old man, Vladek is grumpy, complains all the time, and often makes his son Art feel guilty (for instance, see pp. 18-20). But he also showed incredible fortitude, intelligence, and caring for others during his time in the concentration camps. **How do you understand Vladek in his old age? Is he a different person?** How have the circumstances that he lived through—and the ones that he lives in as an old man in America—made him who he is? **Does his behavior as an old man affect whether or not you think of Vladek as a heroic figure? Why or why not?**
- 3 As a graphic novel, the images in *Maus II* are often as important as the words on the page. **Can you identify any visual metaphors?** (For instance, the depiction of Jewish people as mice and Nazis as cats, or the drawing that suggests that Art’s success as an author comes literally “on the backs” of dead Jews, p. 41.) **How do these visual metaphors affect how you read the book?**
- 4 Do the simple line drawings and animal characters make *Maus II* seem more like a children’s book, or does this visual style, when combined with the brutal subject matter of the Holocaust, create a feeling of irony that makes it seem more appropriate for older audiences? Think about how the way we tell stories—whether visually, using language, or some combination – affect how we understand the characters and situations within the stories. Try to come up with other ways of telling Vladek’s story (as a film, using a different visual style, etc.), and discuss how it would change this narrative.



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BOOK 3

Binti by Nnedi Okorafor

GENERAL QUESTIONS (FOR ALL SERIES BOOKS)

- 1 Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Answering this question may require defining what you think it means to be heroic in the specific context of the novel. Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?
- 2 Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reasons to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? If so, find specific moments in the book to discuss. How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

- 1 When she secretly leaves her family and Himba homeland to attend Oomza University, Binti gives up on the possibility of a “normal” life, including marriage (p. 13). At the same time, she proudly continues her people’s traditions, including wearing *otjize*, a mixture of flower oil and clay, on her hair and skin. **Thinking about Binti’s choices, which do you think takes more courage: leaving behind a comfortable social situation where you have a set place in the world or staying true to your roots in a totally new environment?** What surprising protections do her culture and homeland give Binti? How does she use these to create a new kind of identity for herself? (For some suggestions, see pp. 30-1, 39-44, 47-8, 80-1).
- 2 By the end of the novel, Binti helps negotiate between the Meduse and the professors at Oomza University. She and the Meduse youth Okwu even become friends. But as part of her work as a “harmonizer,” Binti also changes physically: where she used to have hair, she grows *okuoko*, the tentacles that all Meduse have. **How can taking on some of the physical characteristics of the Meduse help Binti serve as a bridge between them and humans? How does it separate her from her own people even more? Do you think that heroes should have to understand the experiences of the other side before they act, or is this an unrealistic expectation? Can heroes truly fit in with their own societies, or are they always outsiders in some way?**
- 3 *Binti* has been called an example of Afrofuturist writing: a kind of fiction that brings together the history and experiences of African and African-descended people with fantasy and science fiction in order to imagine alternative futures and life possibilities for black individuals and communities. For instance, the Himba are a real people who live in Namibia and Angola who use *otjize*, but in *Binti* they are master creators of hyper-advanced technologies. **What is the effect of combining “traditional” ideas about African peoples with technologies and ideas that we usually associate with the future, like cutting-edge computers and space travel? How is this connected to who we imagine as having the power to shape the future?**
- 4 The author, Nnedi Okorafor, also likes to harmoniously combine plant-based life with sophisticated technology (see pp. 12, 19, 41-2). **Does this feel surprising to you? Why or why not? What does your group’s reaction tell you about the kind of relationships we expect between the environment and scientific advances?**



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

GENERAL QUESTIONS (FOR ALL SERIES BOOKS)

1 Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Answering this question may require defining what you think it means to be heroic in the specific context of the novel. Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?

2 Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reasons to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? If so, find specific moments in the book to discuss. How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1 At the start of this novel, Kii Yázhí—soon renamed Ned Begay at his English-language boarding school—does not have many reasons to like white Americans (*bilagáanaa*). His white teachers do not respect his heritage, look down on the Navajo youths, and punish them for speaking their own language. Meanwhile, Ned knows the American history of white settlers killing and pushing Native American people out of their lands. In many ways, the *bilagáanaa* are a cruel occupying force in his people’s native country. But when World War II starts, Ned is eager to sign up for the US military and to use his Navajo language skills to help win the war. Why do you think this is? **Is Ned’s willingness to take part in America’s war a sign that he is rejecting his own people, or a sign of loyalty to them? Who do you think Ned’s people are – the Navajo and/or Native Americans in general, or the broader American population? Does the fact that Ned still receives racist treatment in the USA when he comes home from the war affect how you think about this (p. 210)? What about his friendships with Georgia Boy and Smitty?**

2 At the same time that Ned was helping the US Marines to fight the Japanese army in the Pacific, the United States was relocating over 110,000 people with Japanese ancestry into internment camps around the country. Many of these people were American citizens, born and raised in the USA, and many of the camps were built on Native American lands. Early in the novel, Ned describes the Navajo history of internment in America (pp. 9-10), creating an uncomfortable parallel between Native American and Japanese American experiences in the United States. **Why do you think that this book doesn’t mention this parallel? Do you think it is an important aspect of the story of the Navajo code talkers and other Native American soldiers in WWII?**

3 Ned also notes that during the war some US soldiers would attack Native American soldiers because of their Asian-looking features, and that Native American soldiers sometimes had trouble seeing the Japanese as enemies because they looked “so Indian” (p. 207). **How can having shared experiences and appearances bring people together? Is it ever better to look past such similarities to maintain an emotional distance?**

4 *Code Talker* is told in the first person, from Ned Begay’s perspective as an old man. He often refers to readers as “grandchildren” while he tells his story, as if to remind us that the events of the novel took place long ago. **What is the effect of the story coming through an older person’s voice? How would it be different if it were told by Ned as a young man in the middle of the action? Do you think that the way we understand heroic behavior changes with time, either over the course of our individual lives or over the course of history? Why or why not?**



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What Can(t) Wait by Ashley Hope Pérez (additional text)

GENERAL QUESTIONS (FOR ALL SERIES BOOKS)

1 Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Answering this question may require defining what you think it means to be heroic in the specific context of the novel. Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?

2 Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reasons to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? If so, find specific moments in the book to discuss. How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1 Unlike the other books in this series, this story follows the protagonist Marisa as she lives a fairly normal life in her Texas hometown. She goes to school, helps her family, has relationship issues, and dreams of going to college. **Can everyday people be “heroic” under everyday circumstances?** Why or why not? If you think so, give some examples of moments when you see Marisa behaving in ways that you see as heroic. What are the qualities that make up these actions? If you don’t think this is a book about a hero, how would you describe Marisa? Talk about the difference you see between heroism and this character’s actions.

2 After a fight with her father about her dreams of college, Marisa goes to her boyfriend Alan’s house for comfort (pp. 120-4). In the middle of the night, she tries to initiate sex with Alan, but he stops her (pp. 126-8). **Why do you think Marisa tries to have sex with Alan that night? Why do you think he refuses? What role do Marisa and Alan’s circumstances play in their actions—both in the moment, in bed together after Marisa has had a disappointing fight with her dad, and in a larger sense, as young people from a community where poverty and teen pregnancy are common?**

3 After Alan stops her from instigating sex (see Q2), Marisa goes to her sister’s house and is nearly raped by her classmate Pedro (pp. 140-3). **Why do you think Marisa is afraid to reveal what happened with Pedro to Alan and others? Again, how do the circumstances around Marisa’s experiences with Pedro shape how you think about this encounter?**

4 Why is it so hard for the adults who care about Marisa—from her mother and father to her math teacher Ms. Ford—to understand her situation? (On her parents, see pp. 27-9, on Ms. Ford, see pp. 62-5.) **What social realities do each of them come from, and how are they different from Marisa’s? What do Marisa and some of these adults do to bridge the divides in their social realities and find solutions that make sense to both sides?** (For instance, for Ms. Ford, see 106-110; for Marisa’s mother, see 224-6.)



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Buck by MK Asante (additional text)

GENERAL QUESTIONS (FOR ALL SERIES BOOKS)

1 Would you call the protagonist of this book a “hero”? Why or why not? Answering this question may require defining what you think it means to be heroic in the specific context of the novel. Does heroism in this case require being flexible or firm about the character’s previous beliefs (or some combination)?

2 Who or what is the enemy in this novel, if there is one? How do you know? Does the book give you any reasons to sympathize with the antagonist(s) that oppose the main character? If so, find specific moments in the book to discuss. How does the protagonist understand how the “other side” came to have the beliefs and positions that they hold? Does this affect the outcome of the story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

1 Each member of Malo’s family can be seen as both heroes and villains, depending on one’s perspective. Malo sees Uzi as a personal hero who loves and protects him, but in the eyes of the state Uzi is a delinquent and sex offender. Chaka is a well-known scholar of Afrocentric thought, an intellectual hero in the field of African-American Studies, but Malo comes to see him as a man who has deserted his family. Amina is a famous choreographer and scholar who survives domestic violence and suicidal depression to provide a home for Malo, but she ultimately throws him out into the street. **Is one perspective on each of these characters more “correct” than the other? Why or why not?** How does Malo come to see Uzi, Chaka, and Amina by the end of the novel?

2 Malo’s Uncle Howard tells him at a crucial point in his life that there are “two wolves” at war inside everyone – a bad one and a good one, each made up of a range of feelings and experiences. Uncle Howard says that the one that wins is “the one you feed” (187-8). Do you think that this is a good description of the inner struggles that Malo goes through, or an oversimplification? **If everyone is a combination of qualities, represented by the metaphor of the warring wolves, what sets apart the people we think of as “heroes”?** Are there characters in the novel that seem to just feed one wolf?

3 Throughout *Buck*, characters often treat girls and women as sexual toys, objects, or conquests rather than as fully realized human beings that deserve consideration and respect (66, 96-9). **Do you think it is possible to be a hero and treat or think about others in degrading ways?** Why or why not? How does Malo’s deeper relationship with Nia reflect his evolving understanding of himself and his priorities? (139-40) What examples of respect-based relationships can you identify in the novel?

4 *Buck* incorporates lyrics from contemporary hip hop and rap artist throughout the story, and in the final chapters begins to include quotations from authors that Malo reads and even Malo’s own poetry. **How can art help to articulate feelings and capture situations that can otherwise be hard to express?** This memoir is itself a work of art and an act of speech. Do you think that making art, speaking your truth, can be a heroic undertaking? How? What other examples can you think of beyond *Buck*?