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Buck: A Memoir

"A story of surviving and thriving with passion, compassion, wit, and style." —MAYA ANGELOU

BUCK
A MEMOIR
MK ASANTE



Synopsis

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. Praise for Buck

“A story of surviving and thriving with passion, compassion, wit, and style.” Maya Angelou

“In America, we have a tradition of black writers whose autobiographies and memoirs come to define an era. . . . Buck may be this generation's story.” NPR

“The voice of a new generation. . . . You will love nearly everything about Buck.” Essence

“A virtuoso performance . . . [an] extraordinary page-turner of a memoir . . . written in a breathless, driving hip-hop prose style that gives it a tough, contemporary edge.” The Philadelphia Inquirer

“Frequently brilliant and always engaging . . . It takes great skill to render the wide variety of characters, male and female, young and old, that populate a memoir like Buck. Asante [is] at his best when he sets out into the city of Philadelphia itself. In fact, that city is the true star of this book. Philly's skateboarders, its street-corner philosophers and its tattoo artists are all brought vividly to life here. . . . Asante's memoir will find an eager readership, especially among young people searching in books for the kind of understanding and meaning that eludes them in their real-life relationships. . . . A powerful and captivating book.” Hector Tobar, Los Angeles Times

“Remarkable . . . Asante's prose is a fluid blend of vernacular swagger and tender poeticism. . . . [He] 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.” Salon

“Buck is so honest it floats” even while it's so down-to-earth that the reader feels like an ant peering up from the concrete. It's a powerful book. . . . Asante is a hip-hop raconteur, a storyteller in the Homeric tradition, an American, a rhymer, a big-thinker singing a song of himself. You'll want to listen.” The Buffalo News

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Customer Reviews

"Now I see why reading was illegal for black people during slavery. I discover that I think in words. The more words I know, the more things I can think about....Reading was illegal because if you limit someone's vocab, you limit their thoughts. They can't even think of freedom because they don't have the language to." p. 229. I certainly wish many more young men would have this epiphany about reading. And that's why this book is important, it can be inspirational for youth everywhere who feel locked out and left behind. I think MK has done a superb job in representing his generation. His journey thus far told with a hip hop sensibility is certainly one that will resonate with many. Buck is MK's story of coming of age in '90s Philadelphia. With a father that was/is a legendary educator, scholar and lecturer, and a mother who also was a celebrated educator in her own right, it's hard to understand how MK came so close to the third rail. Again, a close reading of this memoir will reveal it's essentialness. The way his life unravels and plunges him onto the road to self-destruction is finely detailed. A two parent household doesn't guarantee one will be kept from the vices of the hood. Especially given a father who is often absent and a mother struggling with mental illness. When MK's older brother gets locked up, his world begins to really spiral out of control. We meet the various "friends" that orbit MK's universe. The acting out and the anger is easily identifiable, because the family structure is broken, the secondary institutions are broken and the community is in chaos. All of this is bravely shared, and hip hop lyrics are frequently added to the

pages as sort of a soundtrack for his life.

In a world turned upside down by violence, escaping the danger is often not a simple solution. Such is the case in M. K. Asante's new book entitled *Buck: A Memoir*. Born to American parents in Zimbabwe, their return to the US and the subsequent years haven't always been kind. In fact, we first meet him as his family is spiraling out of control, fueled by the street life mentality of the neighborhood in Philly, with an older brother in a gang and street name of Uzi, this 12 year old boy is living far beyond what is age-appropriate in many areas. With an absent father and a mother who is severely mentally ill, and often hospitalized, Malo is often left to his own devices after his brother's quick disappearance. His mother is ineffective, in fact she begs him to step up and be the 'man' of the family, a child playing adult for years before it should have been necessary or acceptable. This is not an easy read, nor should it be. Language is the words of the street, and those unfamiliar will be searching the internet to find appropriate translation and meaning. But for those who allow the words and the incredibly honest narrative take them for the ride, it will be one of the most enlightening of their lives. Be warned that this story is strong in language and imagery is often graphic and will be shocking (in all good ways) to those unfamiliar with the more urban and impoverished areas of our country's cities. Yet the growth, talent and determination of this young man and his struggle to learn and grow, to find himself and build a sense of accomplishment that won't be shattered with gunfire and jail is well worth your time. The largest discovery we are treated to, and one that brings this story to a focal point is the oft-used "pen is mightier than the sword".

This is a fascinating memoir, but it reads more like a superb novel. The sophistication of M.K. Asante's work reflects long study and practice of his craft -- to say nothing of great giftedness as a writer. It veritably oozes ambition in the best sense possible. The book is a coming-of-age story set in an African-American family who we meet living in the Philadelphia area. Asante's style can be described as "urban"-influenced, and much of his story has to do with the specifics of his youth in "urban" environments -- with their attendant dangers and disadvantages, peculiarities and personalities, and unique and rich local culture(s), which variously impact Asante. However, its major theme has to do with his self-education and deepening understanding of himself and where he comes from. This story shows the coming of age of an intellectual and an artist, and it places itself squarely within a long and broad literary tradition in that respect. Most prominent among the strengths here, Asante is fearless in his (largely successful) experimentation with form, which gives his story a unique and distinctly appropriate voice and correspondingly authentic effect on his

audience. He uses language with great purpose and frequent brilliance. His work is unmistakably art. On the other hand, the organization didn't always seem to be in perfect step with the content of the story; on occasion, his brilliant range of formal approaches looked to be applied somewhat haphazardly. Some of his lyricism fell flat as well, even though much of it was wonderfully evocative and original. In sum, *Buck: A Memoir* is a fine work of literature that bears a lot of scrutiny; close or multiple readings of the text will enrich understanding and stimulate.

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