



Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention

Manning Marable

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Selected by *The New York Times Book Review* as a Notable Book of the Year Years in the making-the definitive biography of the legendary black activist.

Of the great figure in twentieth-century American history perhaps none is more complex and controversial than Malcolm X. Constantly rewriting his own story, he became a criminal, a minister, a leader, and an icon, all before being felled by assassins' bullets at age thirty-nine. Through his tireless work and countless speeches he empowered hundreds of thousands of black Americans to create better lives and stronger communities while establishing the template for the self-actualized, independent African American man. In death he became a broad symbol of both resistance and reconciliation for millions around the world.

Manning Marable's new biography of Malcolm is a stunning achievement. Filled with new information and shocking revelations that go beyond the *Autobiography*, *Malcolm X* unfolds a sweeping story of race and class in America, from the rise of Marcus Garvey and the Ku Klux Klan to the struggles of the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties. Reaching into Malcolm's troubled youth, it traces a path from his parents' activism through his own engagement with the Nation of Islam, charting his astronomical rise in the world of Black Nationalism and culminating in the never-before-told true story of his assassination. *Malcolm X* will stand as the definitive work on one of the most singular forces for social change, capturing with revelatory clarity a man who constantly strove, in the great American tradition, to remake himself anew.

Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention Details

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Samuel Cooper says

I absolutely loved this book, I couldn't put it down for the most part. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in this time period, regardless of your personal feelings about the subject. I would also highly recommend it to anyone who already feels that they are operating with a basic understanding of who Malcolm X was, I guarantee that there will be multiple points within this book where certain assumptions would be challenged.

This book really went in depth in covering his evolving religious/spiritual beliefs as well as his personal and ideological transformation following his separation from the NOI. This book did a lot to dispel many myths and misconceptions regarding the man and his beliefs, but it did so without tarnishing his allure or his legend in any way. More than any other work on Malcolm X that I have come across, this book offers an uncompromising look at the human behind the legend, even some of the less flattering aspects of his life. If you have read and liked his Autobiography, or Spike Lee's adaptation of it on film, then you owe it to yourself to pick this book up, it was one of the best books I have read in a long time!

Nakia says

I spent 11 days with this book. Half of those days, I've dealt with some kind of ebola zika bird flu strep throat virus. So it's just been me, my bed, Kleenex, and these nearly 600 pages of the life of Malcolm X.

Noted African American history professor and scholar, Manning Marable claimed these pages as his life's work. After teaching *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and noticing inconsistencies within the book, he decided to piece together Malcolm's life from diary entries, interviews, FBI and police surveillance, meeting notes, letters, and a host of other primary sources. More than a decade of research, and this is the result. Released to a lot of controversy, due to salacious facts about Malcolm's sexuality in his early years, his erratic and drama filled marriage to Dr. Betty Shabazz, and discrediting much of *The Autobiography*... as fictive in order to inspire the downtrodden and further Alex Haley's republican ideals; it was also released to a lot of praise thanks to the meticulous and engaging examination of his life. Marable died from pneumonia three days before the book was released, leaving it impossible for him to defend this work. But even still, this book is a master biography, having won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2012, and numerous other accolades.

I have so many feelings to unpack about who Malcolm could've been, what he would've been for Black people everywhere, had he not been gunned down. A Life of Reinvention is one of the best titles one can give the man, as he dealt with numerous transformations and was on his way to becoming a Pan-African leader, uniting Black people across nations. The bridges he built within Morocco, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt and the Middle East on behalf of the African American struggle during the last few months of his life were amazing. He was also preparing to bring the plight of Black Americans before the United Nations, framing our struggle as human rights violations on an international stage on par with South African apartheid.

There is so much to talk about within this book: Marcus Garvey's early influence which opened the door for

the NOI to flourish, the history of the NOI along with the brazen violent tactics used to keep order and protect their leader, Malcolm's very questionable marriage, Malcolm's relationship with other civil rights leaders and organizations, and the broken loyalties that led to his death.

I wish I'd read this with a class led by a Malcolmite scholar because unpacking it by myself is a daunting task. I especially want to research more about Malcolm's views on women which seemed very problematic, and his connection to Maya Angelou, which was both exciting and disappointing. Despite that, this book is brilliant, heartbreaking, and life changing. I'm thankful that I was finally able to dedicate time to learning more about my favorite Black activist.

Karen says

For true history buffs or scholars of Malcolm X, I am sure this book is a treasure. For me, it was a bit of a slog to make it all the way through. I enjoy reading about history and was interested in Malcolm X (about whom I knew almost nothing before reading this), but this book covered his life in almost excruciating detail, especially in the second half. The author explained in his afterword that he had 20 graduate and undergraduate students working with him to create a day-by-day recreation of the last two years of Malcolm's life. This definitely shows, since the book basically describes what he did for each of those days. I did enjoy many things about the book and learned a lot, but I wish I could have read a heavily edited version of this book.

Ernestine says

This book will probably be known as the definitive work on Malcolm X in that it is the product of extensive research into the life and times of Malcolm. It is well written but also in need of an editor. It is a scholarly work that does not give insight into the brilliance and charisma of the man. It tells about some of the more well known people who's lives he impacted. But it does not speak on the countless people who listened to his speeches and had their own lives reinvented. I enjoyed the information on the Garvey movement and Harlem but I would have rather been given more accounts of encounters with Malcolm from the nationalist and Pan-African community. After I read the book, I did not come away liking the man. The epilogue softened the impact but that was not enough. In addition, I did not think that the speculation and innuendo was necessary. If you do not have backup for something in a scholarly work, why print gossip. The dynamic between the Nation of Islam and Malcolm was interesting.

It is always interesting to see the books that are supported and published about Black people and organizations.

Edwin Cruz says

This is a must-read for anyone that has read Malcolm's autobiography. Marable's investigative work, alone, makes this book worth reading. While some of his theories regarding Malcolm are far reaching, the book makes Malcolm palpable to ordinary readers. If the Autobiography fascinated you then this book will be a great way to address some of the "facts."

Jimmy says

When I was in the military, I read every book I could get my hands on about Malcolm X. I would have loved to have been a helper for Mr. Marable as he gathered information to write this book. It is now the definitive biography of Malcolm. A true masterpiece of biography.

Marable even makes a point of critiquing the Alex Haley book *the Autobiography of Malcolm X*. He does not mess with words when he points out the weaknesses of that book. He tries not to make the same mistakes. There is so much effort in this book to get out as much information as possible. Marable is not afraid to search for the truth, or as close to the truth as he can arrive at, no matter where it takes him. For example, he is not afraid to point out the racism, misogyny, anti-semitism, and corruption of the Nation of Islam. If there is a flaw, it may be the effort to point out the final changes that Malcolm went through at the end of his life. He was still a flawed man.

One story I found fascinating was that of Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali. In the first Clay/Liston fight, it was Malcolm who stood up for Clay. Elijah Muhammad backed Liston. In the fifth round of that fight, a chemical got on the gloves of Liston. It then got in Clay's eyes and blinded him for the entire round. He managed to defend himself until the round ended. In the sixth, he knocked out Liston. How close he came to losing.

The Nation of Islam realized they messed up. Elijah Muhammad gave Clay the name Muhammad Ali. From that point on, they pulled Ali into their group. Although Ali would later regret his words, he denied Malcolm X. It seems that Ali did not have the courage to do battle with the powerful Elijah Muhammad.

It is also pretty clear, but not certain, that it was the Nation of Islam that was behind the assassination of Malcolm X.

Jason Walker says

This book requires imagination. You cannot make assumptions that you think might be true. Everywhere you turn there is the opportunity for both failure and excess. This book does great justice in restoring Malcolm X's reputation. His previous biographers were aggressive in their prose and put their own thoughts into the issues raised. Mannining Marable has written a very readable book. You do not have to be inspired to read this book. At the same time you will be inspired. Malcolm X should be on every American's mind as we move forward in the 21st century. All of the thoughts of disunity and failure, whether racial or religiously motivated, only serve to describe America today. We are little more than our benefactors in the race to retirement or some other financial love. Life is not lived like that. We are not that. We are people with jobs and families that we love. That is what is true about this biography even when we disagree with the subject matter.

Chris Blocker says

Cover a famous song and people will test its merits. Reboot a loved film and fanboys will let you know what they think. Write a biography that re-explores a very respected autobiography and you are guaranteed to

elicit comparison.

It seems perhaps unfair to compare Manning Marable's biography of Malcolm X to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* published in 1965. *The Autobiography...* as told to Alex Haley has sold several million copies and been named one of the most important and influential biographies ever written. It is a hallmark work of non-fiction and continues to be celebrated nearly fifty years after its publication. And yet, a comparison between the two books is in order. What better do we have to measure Marable's work by?

The difference between the two works is as obvious as the covers. The most circulated cover of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* features a color painting of a thoughtful Malcolm X, his hair dissolving into the swirl of clouds in the blue sky above, two more images of his face in the background that perhaps show his more revolutionary side and his gentler side.

The first edition cover of Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* shows a black-and-white photograph of the contemplative, teacher Malcolm. The cover features little flair, almost no color, its straight lines box the name of Malcolm X and give the image of Malcolm little room to move.

This is *exactly* what you should expect from these two books.

While *The Autobiography...* was a beautiful and organic declaration of faith, moving and inspiring in its execution, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* is a detached, yet very meticulous portrayal of Malcolm X, as well as those who surrounded him. Though not "definitive," *Malcolm X* provides a detailed account of Malcolm's life, from an exploration of his parents' lives to every step Malcolm, his advisers, and his enemies took in the final hours of his life. Marable fills in all those facts Malcolm X and Haley couldn't have known, i.e. who among Malcolm's entourage may have been an informant (for the FBI, the NYPD, the NOI, etc.), and those details no one would've divulged at the time, i.e. who slept with whom. It nearly completes the image we have of Malcolm. It is a high resolution photograph of his life. But it lacks all the magic and wonder of *The Autobiography...*

Both books have their place, and I don't think Marable should be faulted for creating such an intricate mapping of Malcolm's life, a task which Marable apparently spent decades on. Marable's work should be praised, but it will never be what *The Autobiography...* was and is. Though it provides a more complete picture, it should always be read secondary to the 1965 autobiography. Before you learn about Malcolm's life, you really need to be introduced to Malcolm's soul.

Walter says

The late Manning Marable was a lion of the contemporary African-American history community and deservedly so. It's a bit ironic and sad, then, that this work, the crowning achievement of his decades-long career, was published posthumously and that he didn't live to receive the full extent of the accolades that his work, especially in this latest incarnation, deserves. This book is masterful: piercingly insightful, thoroughly researched and unflinchingly candid about its subject. In all, it is a worthy and satisfying experience....

But it's a tough read, at least for the first quarter or so. Frankly, Marable's style is less consistent than I remember it from previous works in the first part of the book, so, frankly, it takes a while to get into it. Once drawn in, though, the treasure trove of revelation, analysis and insight is deep. For a world that largely takes

Malcolm X's autobiography as definitive, this is a shock to the system as it definitely expands upon and replaces that initial seminal work.

What Marable does so effectively in this work is to de-mystify and humanize the icon that his subject has become, especially by differentiating between the public record to this point (including as recorded in the Autobiography) and the reality behind it. Here we see Malcolm in all of his raw glory: a young boy looking for love and family stability; a young hustler whose actual malfeasance is less than he makes it out to be; a young Minister in the Nation of Islam struggling to build its franchise while navigating its politics; a troublingly detached husband and father; an early and racist zealot evolving into a more mature and inclusive prophet; a doomed man intent upon pursuing his new path despite the prohibitive risks; and a very human, flawed person struggling to live up to the acclaim that he had earned in his own lifetime. Thanks to Marable, readers will come to appreciate and admire Malcolm more but may not actually like him as much. As with every icon, the reality is far more complex and typically less inspiring. So, too, with the enigmatic Malcolm Little cum Malik el-Shabazz.

There is much new ground here: we learn of some homoerotic (if not homosexual) episodes in Malcolm's Boston-based hustler phase, and of his seeming indifference to and ambivalence about his marriage while continuing to pine for an early love who joins the NOI to her ruin, and of his inconsistent views on race after his split from the NOI and his revelatory Mecca trip, and of the unfortunate series of poor decisions by Malcolm and others prior to and after his assassination, etc. Unfortunately, we also are treated to assertions that seem like speculation fairly often, notable in a contrasting way because they are most often shared without context. My suspicion is that the author covered so much ground that, occasionally, he omitted such source information in the interest of 'brevity' (if one can associate this concept with a book of almost 500 pages of content and 100 pages of notes and other corroborating information). There are also some aspects or periods of his subject's life that the author covers in less detail than others have, which seems an unusual choice for a book that clearly strives to be comprehensive and encyclopedic.

This being said, this is a grand work, a big, ambling, trove of insight and information about one of the most fascinating and compelling personages of the last century and one whose legacy seems to continue to grow almost a half-century after his death. As such, then, Marable has done us an incredible service, as we come to understand and appreciate Malcolm X in all of his vexing and inspiring complexity in a much greater way because of this worthy effort. Too bad we can no longer thank the author personally....

Feisty Harriet says

I knew very little about Malcolm X prior to reading this book and I appreciate the author focusing on the ways that Malcolm changed and transformed his public persona throughout his lifetime. From a criminal, to a minister and teacher for the Nation of Islam, to starting his own Islamic church (branch? organization?)...from militant protests to a more inclusive and civil dialogue, Malcolm X was constantly adjusting his politics and his protests. I am still processing said politics and trying to figure out my opinion. I think there are a lot of comparisons between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr, their very different protesting style and brand of activism, and I think that both have valid points. Malcolm X was representing urban poor, which is a very different demographic from small Southern towns where MLK worked. Malcolm had zero formal schooling, and prided himself on being just like the people he worked with. MLK had a doctorate and his friends were similarly educated. I'm not saying one is a better leader than the other, I'm saying they are very hard to compare. Also, as a middle class white girl from the American West, I feel like I cannot make a judgement call on what Malcolm X or MLK Jr were to the different groups of people who

followed them. I have a lot more reading to do.

Louise says

This is an information-packed book fully covering this short but influential life. I believe this will stand as the definitive work on Malcolm X for a long time to come. For a book that documents as well as tells the story, Manning Marable does an excellent job of holding the reader's interest throughout.

Malcolm's family, the Little's, lost its house in a likely arson (for which his father was accused of starting for insurance money, when he had no insurance), lost its husband/father in a likely murder and then its mother to a mental institution. These were only a few of many setbacks before Malcolm's teenage years. With this background it is not surprising that he turned to crime. Manning takes the reader through this stressful childhood, to prison where he studied and converted to Islam as interpreted by the Nation of Islam, through the religious and political activities that followed his release, his travels and break from NOI, and eventually his assassination.

So many things were striking about this life. First was the role of the father. Malcolm, essentially, followed his father's footsteps in his religious devotion (if not the same faith) and activism (if not the same advocacy). His later relationship to Elijah Mohammed was similar to that of a son, a bond very hard to break. Next, was the amount of violence within the NOI organization and its cult like characteristics. Also notable was the amount of undercover work at the federal and local level that was devoted to Malcolm. (I doubt that J. Edgar Hoover knew or cared how much he'd be assisting historians.)

Marable does an excellent job in laying out the doctrinal differences in the Nation of Islam and Islam as practiced elsewhere in the world and Malcolm's growing awareness of them and his painful separation from NOI. Marable has good descriptions of Malcolm's tours and the recognition Malcolm received in the highest levels of Islamic countries. I would presume the hardest chapters to write were those on assassination and its aftermath. Undoubtedly a lot of sifting and thought went into bringing together the many different impressions of how it happened, who did what and which of the many unanswered questions to pursue.

This is an excellent work and clearly shows the years of careful research that went into it.

Paige says

4 1/2 stars.

I saw this book sitting on a shelf at the library, and having a pitifully small amount of knowledge regarding Malcolm X, I decided to check it out. When I was about 80 pages in, Peter asked me to read it aloud to him. Luckily, it was interesting enough that this was not a problem.

I asked Peter what he knew about Malcolm X, and he said that he, too, knew basically nothing--"He said 'We didn't land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us.'" He said he'd tried to read the Autobiography but found it to be a struggle (later, all the quoted Alex Haley correspondence drove him crazy, it was pretty funny--apparently Peter is just not a fan of the man's linguistic style).

Anyway, this book had a lot to offer. We watched/listened to lots of Malcolm X speeches, debates,

interviews, etc while we read the book and it was a good combo--especially because Marable gives a lot of detail to the who, what & when of Malcolm's life--associates, dates traveled here, letters sent when, etc., and doesn't go into super detail about his politics. I mean, you can't really talk about Malcolm's life without addressing his politics, but Marable only used actual quotations and excerpts from his speeches sparingly. That's what got us started on the clip-watching--I was wondering, what is the actual content and delivery of these sermons, debates, etc? Well now I know. And now I kind of love Malcolm ("kind of" because of his sexism; I've been Googling about it and learning more about Malcolm as regards that area, but the jury's still out as of today). I got kind of angry that my school didn't cover him in history class. All we got was MLK. And, I mean, I respect very much what he was trying to do, but his speeches never really moved me or spoke to me. But when Malcolm talks? !!!! I felt so much more drawn to what he was saying, I perk up and I agreed wholeheartedly with almost every sentence out of his mouth. When reporters/moderators/interviewers would give him guff and/or say something ignorant I would have to stop reading or pause the video to yell at them.

After watching videos and reading about him, I am really upset by how the FBI, CIA, and police organizations considered him "bad" enough to wiretap, surveil endlessly, plan & execute disruptions in his life. I guess it just goes to show how strong the white power structure in this country is that they can't even take a smidgen of well-reasoned criticism without declaring it a threat to national security. How fucking shameful.

This guy had about 100 pages of notes & index in the back of this book too. Which was awesome. But! I heard that he still left out sources for some things, which goes to show that you can never be too good at citing your sources.

The book loses half a star not because of anything that's in it, but rather what's left out. The author will speculate on various things for a sentence or two and leave them; but I found myself wanting more information and wanting to entertain speculation from all angles. I guess that's not really the purpose of the book and I'll have to find a different one for that but it did leave me mildly disappointed. I was just like, in some places it is a little TOO detailed, what dates Malcolm travelled where and to whom he was corresponding with, and then a little paragraph-long bio of that person. (Meanwhile, I enjoyed the details re: things like Malcolm wearing long underwear, Ruby Dee wanting to hide Malcolm in her & Ossie Davis's walls, etc.) But nothing to feed my conspiracy-minded head with??? Whyyy!

Ann Pearlman says

I must confess that my daughter was one of the researchers for this book, so I had eagerly awaited its publication which occurred a few days after Dr. Marable's tragic death.

I thoroughly appreciated the glimpse of Malcolm X as a human being with all the foibles, faults and struggles as well his evolution and continual intellectual growth. It is the rounded picture of the person behind the icon which increased my understanding and respect for him as I learned how his experiences pushed him to evolve into the spectacular visionary and powerful orator he became. It's also fascinating to read events from a vantage point removed by time and witness a clearer understanding of the important forces during that period. I hope that this book will help force the new examination of his assassination.

Zach says

This book marks the end of the late great Dr. Marable's work while (hopefully?) simultaneously ushering in a fruitful re-examining of Malcolm X's life and place in the historical record. This means, of course, that it isn't quite the definitive work some people are holding it up to be, but would it really have been possible to capture something so complex and important in a single volume? Probably not, and especially not when so much remains unclear and so many sources remain unavailable (and, I have to say, Marable is entirely explicit about this - there is an enormous amount of conjecture in this book, but it is always presented as such, and he is always clear that as new sources become available, the story will continue to evolve).

I, personally, could have used more of a theoretical/structural analysis: there was one brief discussion of Gramsci's prison experiences and the growth of organic intellectuals, but I would have loved further elaborations along that line. I also hated the lack of footnotes.* On the other hand, this book can be (and is being and will continue to be, I'm sure) consumed by a pretty diverse audience, so again, hopefully this will start a wider conversation that involves a variety of voices.

Some of this open-endedness, of course, also stems from the fact that Malcolm's life was cut short so early and in the midst of such a profound transformation. This leaves the field pretty wide open for his legacy to be kind of a floating signifier, which is a problem that I think Marable himself wrestles with here - was Malcolm headed towards liberal reformism, pan-African socialism, or Black nationalism, or some combination of all or none of the above? I don't know, neither does Marable, and nor does anyone else, although theories are pouring out of the woodwork (it's that conversation at work!). It's pretty telling, though, that much of the furor centers on Marable's allegations of paid homosexual encounters and marital infidelity (a "furor" currently led most publicly, of course, by a review that misreads much of this work, plays fast and loose with some factual errors of its own, and is full of venomous and, frankly, patently ridiculous personal attacks on a man who is no longer around to defend himself), neither of which makes much of a difference in the long run except for, I guess, calling Malcolm's "masculinity" into question (as if that was a bad thing).

The fact that this isn't a hagiography seems to have convinced ~~many~~ a few very vocal readers that this must be at attempt at some sort of character assassination, but it isn't, and the actual text of this book makes that very clear.

* This is actually the one area where I'm afraid some of the criticism is deserved: there are definitely some assertions that really should have been sourced that are not, and even a few places where direct quotes are not attributed at all.

Janice says

Malcolm X was a complex and extraordinary man. Reading Manning Marable's biography took me longer to read than most books and I found myself having to take breaks and read other things during the process. It

wasn't that I didn't like the book but that it was so heavy with information and detail about the evolution of this man that I couldn't absorb it without pausing. Many reviews on these pages go into much detail about the book so I will not. What I found remarkable was learning about Malcolm's place on the world stage. Had he chosen to stay abroad (and remained alive) I believe he would have made a big difference in the Pan African Movement. He was though a tragic character in the true Shakespearean sense and the strengths and weaknesses that made him so remarkable marked him for his assassination.

In many ways this book deserves 5 stars but I missed not having footnotes and the notes provided at the end of the book though scholarly were of little help unless you find yourself at the Malcolm X library. A big question for me was the fact that Malcolm preferred Goldwater over Johnson in the 1964 election (even though 96% of the black vote was for Johnson) and there was scant information in the text and absent in the notes to explain why.

I leave this book with profound respect for Malcolm X the man and the question 'What if this man had lived just a little longer'?

Paul Bryant says

This is a dense, thorough, dour book and I found it tough going most of the time, for a variety of reasons. Malcolm X is a complex and hair-raising subject. When we follow Malcolm through his tortured life, and it was tortured, we find ourselves face to face with some very disturbing views and statements and actions. The usual trajectory laid across Malcolm's life is that after the break from the Nation of Islam, and his pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, he became an enlightened all-embracing champion of humanity – gone were the terrifying denunciations, and the implacable race hatred was visibly melting. And this upset some people, so he was assassinated, like Gandhi, like Martin Luther King, like RFK. But it really wasn't like that at all.

THE NATION OF ISLAM

One thing this book has to do is provide a handy summary of the creation and development of the Nation of Islam in the USA. Atheists need look no further for clear – and indeed heartrending – proof that religion is largely composed of human wish-fulfilment. The NOI was a cult which emerged in the 1930s in Detroit, Chicago and a few other Northern American cities. The weird and racist theories spun by Elijah Muhammed, which formed a defining myth for the NOI, were as nasty as anything imagined by the author of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, or indeed Adolf Hitler. But of course, there the comparison ends, because it's almost impossible to understand how the Jews came to provoke such pathological hatred in Hitler's (and many other's) minds - but it's **extremely easy** to see why white people could be seen as 100% evil devil creatures by black people in the early to middle 20th century. The psychology of this particular brand of racism is very clear. Why wouldn't you hate people who hate you so much and prove it every day?

(Quick question : when is a weird little cult a religion?

Answer : when it started two thousand years ago and was lucky enough to have great poets write its holy books.)

Anyway, the NOI took a number of concepts and ideas from Islam and threw them in a pot and stirred them up with a whole lot of invented stuff. Not too dissimilar to Scientology and Mormonism and all the other cults. And this is what all religions did in their beginnings, of course.

All deities reside in the human breast. – William Blake.

The NOI did not do well in its first years, less than 1000 members by 1953. In opposition to every other black organisation, they preached non-involvement in politics. They were against blacks voting in elections! And they were 100% segregationist. They had this whole Yakub's History thing going. This is where they said that a black scientist many thousands of years ago deliberately created the white race during a eugenics experiment. And the white race is irredemably evil. That's the way they were, that's the way they will be, they can't change. They were radical and they wanted separatism, ideally in a state of their own. They had only contempt for the tiny black middle class – they were all Toms. (Everyone who wasn't a Muslim was a Tom – when Martin Luther King arrived on the scene he was a Tom too, according to Elijah.)

The NOI mindset led them down some crazy pathways. Malcolm met with the KKK, as previously Marcus Garvey had done, to discover if there were any areas they could find to work together for mutual benefit. The KKK and the NOI were both believers in total separation of the races, so why not? Likewise, a few years later, the NOI invited the American Nazi Party to attend some of their rallies. George Lincoln Rockwell, the Nazi leader, gave the NOI a ringing endorsement, saying that Elijah Mohammed had

Gathered millions of the dirty, immoral, filthy-mouthed, lazy and repulsive people and inspired them to the point where they are clean, sober, honest, hard-working, dignified, dedicated and admirable human beings in spite of their color.

This is the guy Elijah and Malcolm had discussions with and invited to their rallies in 1961. With friends like that, hmmm?

WORLD TOUR 1959

Malcolm X was clearly the human dynamo who turned this weird little cult around, barnstorming his way through American cities, charismatic, inspirational, and flattening audiences with rhetoric which this book unflinchingly describes as "incendiary". He got them signing on the dotted line. Membership took off. He was the golden star and he was thought of as the likely successor to Elijah Muhammed himself.

But things happened.

In 1959 Malcolm toured the Middle East and Africa and realised to his astonishment that

- Islam is not racist but inclusive, and there are many white Muslims
- the Muslims he met had never heard of this Yakub's History thing and they clearly thought the NOI was either profoundly heretical or not Islamic at all, just an American black sect which used Islamic terms here and there
- Elijah Muhammed was therefore not a prophet at all

This put him in a spot. What to do?

And then Elijah Muhammed – surprise! - decided that it was his cult so the very strict moral rules imposed on all the Muslims did not, in point of fact, apply to him, and he therefore fathered a series of babies with the young women who came to work at his head office in Chicago. The final tally was around eight or so. Now, every male cult leader does this, and – hmm – **there are no women cult leaders**, so I'm thinking

that starting a cult is a way for some guys to meet girls. Lots of them. Other guys join rock bands because learning 4 chords is easier than inventing a theology.

Malcolm was genuinely horrified when he found out about Elijah's girls. At the same time Elijah was getting really worried about Malcolm because Malcolm was getting more and more blatantly political. Then came the chickens remark.

THE CHICKENS REMARK

December 1st, 1963, Manhattan Center, New York City. Malcolm's speech is entitled "God's Judgement of White America". Elijah had ordered Malcolm not to mention the late JFK at all.

Malcolm delivered the speech and was answering questions from the crowd. Eventually Dallas came up and Malcolm said it was an instance of "the chickens coming home to roost". Well, so far, so ordinary. Malcolm characterised the US government as perpetrators of huge violence against its black citizens, not to mention increasingly against Vietnamese freedom fighters. So Malcolm just meant that ye shall reap what ye sow. But then he added :

Being an old farm boy myself, chickens coming home to roost never did make me sad, they've always made me glad.

(Audience laughs appreciatively)

This was so offensive that even Elijah Muhammed was offended, and he had no time for Kennedy. For the chickens remark Malcolm got a 90 day speaking ban from Elijah, and the 90 days ended up being forever. As Hank Williams put it, one word led to another, and the last word led to divorce. And this was astonishing because the NOI was Malcolm's whole world, where he ate, slept, got married, got paid, it was the roof over his head, it was everything. But he walked away from it.

TOO MUCH PRESSURE

After the split, which was a painful gradual process from December 63 to summer 64, Malcolm was in an extremely exposed position.

Malcolm stood at the very middle of a complex set of crossroads between Islam and America, Africa and America, religion and politics, pacifism and violence. From 1963 to 1965 he was the very personification of these swirling torrents.

What now? He was reforming his views on everything at the same time as being under the full-on media glare and scrutiny of the black population of America – and Africa too, the new independent African nations had not only heard of Malcolm, they were fascinated by him. Imagine, a black Muslim in America! And what a guy!

So Malcolm ended up with everything on his plate. He was trying to act politically as the fulcrum between black America and black Africa, and religiously as the conduit between Muslim America and orthodox Islam. He was involved with an escalating war with NOI who were issuing death threats, veiled and not so veiled, on a daily basis. Oh, and he had no source of income, so he had to flog himself around the country making lecture after lecture, engagement after engagement. It was too much for anyone. He couldn't slow down until the NOI slowed him down.

Malcolm X, 11 March, 1963 :

There will be more violence than ever this year. ... White people will be shocked when they discover that the passive little Negro they had known turns out to be a roaring lion. The whites had better understand this while there is still time.

COMPLICATED OR CONFUSED OR BOTH

The contradictions in Malcolm's thought at this time are dizzying – in 1964 he was the only black leader supporting right-wing Republican Barry Goldwater for president. At the same time the CIA were trying to figure out how to arrest him for sedition.

MM sums this up beautifully:

He was trying to appeal to so many different constituencies. He took different tones and attitudes depending on which group he was speaking to and often presented contradictory opinions only days apart. That he was not caught up in these contradictions more often owed to the fact that news travelled slowly across the country, that black politics was underreported, and that speeches were not regularly recorded. ... he would alternately praise King and other civil rights leaders one day and ridicule them the next.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Malcolm was a dazzling articulator of black anger and oppression, and not a clear political strategist or writer of manifestos. That would probably have come later. The organisations he created after the NOI split did not survive his death. He was the very embodiment of painful black struggle. He laid out the fate of black Americans for all to see. You take a few million black people in chains from Africa, you dump them into a foreign land, you work them in the fields, you breed them like cattle, and then **you turn around and hate them for being in the country that you brought them to**. Whilst at the same time you issue constitutions proclaiming your country to be the bastion of freedom for all. How about that? Breathtaking. This is what Malcolm explained in brutal language that everyone could understand.

The Chickens remark and many others made Malcolm the most feared and hated black man in America in 63 and 64. But in 1987 Mayor Ed Koch renamed Lenox Avenue in Harlem Malcolm X Boulevard. In 1999 the US Postal Service put Malcolm on a stamp. He's almost revered now. He has had a spectacular posthumous career.

POSTSCRIPT

READING BIOGRAPHIES IN THE AGE OF YOUTUBE

In 1959 local New York City TV produced a series of documentaries about the NOI called *The Hate that Hate Produced*. It became famous. It introduced the NOI to white America. And yes, it's on Youtube. So you have to stop reading and watch it because now you don't have to read about this stuff, you can watch the thing

itself! Wow.

While reading a biography of British author B S Johnson I found out he'd made a tv show called Fat Man on a Beach in 1973. Yes, that's there too. (well, it was....)

While reading a book on the Velvet Underground I found out that before the Velvets were formed John Cale had appeared on the panel game show I've got a Secret. Yes, that's there too.

Youtube is changing the way I read non-fiction.

Skip says

Manning Marable has written a scholarly biography of a controversial civil rights figure. Unlike the Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley, this book tries to separate facts from how Malcolm and Alex chose to portray him. After a few years of petty crime, Malcolm Little was convicted of a series of home thefts and sentenced to prison, where he converted to Muslim and became a devotee of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam (NOI). After his parole, Malcolm X rose to prominence as an evangelist, recruiting members and building temples (mosques) in cities in the Mid-west and East. Malcolm X's main messages of self respect, discipline, economic development and empowerment were overshadowed by his rhetoric of violence. He was unwilling to work within the system, like other black leaders during this era (notably Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others), because he did not think white America (the so-called "white devils") would ever recognize blacks as their equal. Malcolm X advocated for separation, not integration. Eventually, his political views became as important in his message as his religious devotion to Elijah Muhammad, causing an irreparable rift. After learning of Muhammad's multiple infidelities and his growing personal wealth, which he felt were inconsistent with Muslim values and beliefs, Malcolm journeyed to Africa and the Middle East (including a Hajj), meeting with religious and political leaders overseas, leading to the formation of his own religious clique (Muslim Mosque, Inc.) and a political clique (the Organization of African American Unity.) Preaching Black Nationalism, Malcolm X was a polarizing figure, creating enemies within the black community (NOI, certain moderates) and within the law enforcement community too. Yet, throughout his tumultuous years, Malcolm X worked with a broad cross-section of leaders in Harlem and elsewhere on secular issues such as education, voting registration, police brutality, etc. I think the book's subtitle "A Life of Reinvention" may be a bit idealistic as I think "A Life of Contradiction" is more apt. There are many instances where his sexist or anti-Semitism are obvious, but as his assassination approached, Malcolm X's views moderated to judging a person based on their actions, not the color of their skin or religious affiliations.

Sheri says

Many people have read Haley's ghost-written "Autobiography Of Malcolm X." In this new biography, which was one of the 5 finalists for the nonfiction National Book Award this year, Marable deconstructs Haley's work, identifies the fictitious & erroneous content that for various reasons Malcolm X and/or Haley chose to include, and tells the real story of Malcolm X's life and assassination. Missing from the Haley account is the real story of Malcolm X's conversion to "traditional" Islam and his rejection of the teachings of the Nation Of Islam, of which he was the 2nd ranking minister in the US. Malcolm X rejected important NOI teachings,

including that Louis Fard, an African-American who died shortly before the founding of the NOI, was in fact God; and that NOI founder Elijah Muhammed was the final prophet of God (contradicting Islamic teaching that the "original Mohammed" was the final prophet). The NOI then "expelled" Malcolm X, and he was replaced by Louis Farrakhan. By rejecting NOI doctrine, it appears Malcolm X signed his own death warrant, and the assassination attempts began.

Having lived for many years in Chicago just a couple blocks from Louis Farrakhan -- who preached to NOI followers just a couple days before the assassination that Malcolm X deserved to die -- it was pretty creepy reading at some points. Especially realizing that those nicely dressed skinny young men in black suits, white shirts & dark bow ties who hung around on the sidewalk in front of Farrakhan's house whom we saw all the time were the "Fruit Of Islam" in Marable's book. The FOI were essentially the Nation Of Islam's enforcers, the "lead pipe" guys who ensured compliance with the behavioral rules of the NOI and the teachings of Elijah Muhammed (the NOI founder & nationwide leader prior to Farrakhan). According to Marable, it was FOI enforcers from Newark who showed up in Harlem & gunned down Malcolm X, even though the actual killers aren't the ones who went to jail for the assassination.

Interesting reading. It took Marable more than 20 years to write this book, and he died about a week before it was published. It's unfortunate he didn't live to see its publication, or the favorable reviews it's gotten, or learn of the awards it's been nominated for.

Nick says

Marable weaves a compelling narrative, fills in a lot of chronological gaps in Alex Haley's "Autobiography," and offers perhaps the most detailed account to date of Malcolm's evolving political thought (owing to new research on Malcolm's trips to the Middle East and Africa). His greatest achievement is taking Malcolm's intellectual legacy seriously and situating it within the Third World struggle for liberation. But some questions remain about the "new" revelations regarding Malcolm's life and assassination and Marable's allegedly spotty documentation thereof (cf. Karl Evanzz's blistering review).

Nonetheless, the author succeeds in bringing his subject into sharp relief. By the book's end, Malcolm X emerges as something more than the revolutionary black icon brought into existence by mainstream media and hip-hop culture. Instead he stands as one of the most formidable political and religious geniuses of the 20th century, and after all his foibles and contradictions are considered, as one who was finally human.

Muberra says

In my opinion, the author was trying hard to taint Malcolm X's image by trying to "expose" his dark past, eg. claiming he had relations with other men, which his daughter, Ilyasah Shabazz, questioned the accuracy of these accounts. If you want to gain an understanding of this remarkable & honoured man's life, work and influences, read books that are reliable such as his auto-biography and books that encompass his speeches.
