

A Review of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as written and told to Alex Haley, 1965.
By Mike Halaiko, October 23, 2021

Some in America are becoming increasingly aware, by making honest attempts to view our complete history, that we have a long way to go, if we are going to come anywhere near living up to our creed.

The Life of Malcolm X (aka Malcolm Little; aka El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) was a testament to what was just stated in the first sentence above. He was often hated because he was black, and he was also despised because he believed, for a time, that whites could never be trusted.

Born in 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska, Malcolm was the seventh of nine children. Alex Haley, his accompanying author, begins the narrative with Malcolm's mother, (shotgun in hand, and pregnant with Malcolm at the time), facing down an angry mob of Klansmen, at their front door, who were hunting down Malcolm's father, Reverend Earl Little. Malcolm's father was a Baptist Minister, and a Disciple of Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" Movement.

When Earl returned home, he moved his family, first to Milwaukee, "for safety", and then on east to Lansing, Michigan, where an angry mob burned their home to the ground. Everywhere Malcolm's family went, they met hostility and hatred. One of the major reasons for this was Earl Little's advocacy for The Marcus Garvey Movement. In other words, white people were opposed to blacks like The Littles integrating into their neighborhoods but were also opposed to blacks having the nerve to believe in segregation. Only "superior" white people were permitted to preach segregation between whites and blacks.

Earl Little was mysteriously murdered, leaving Malcolm's bereaved mother with nine hungry children in the depth of The Great Depression. Malcolm's father left behind two small life insurance policies. When Louise Little, Malcolm's mother, tried to collect these meager amounts to feed her starving family, she was denied one of the policies, because the insurance company, without proof, deemed that Earl Little's death was a suicide. Louise was desperate for some kind of income, and being a woman of color, in the 1930s, her only option was to take in laundry for more affluent whites. Malcolm remembers his poor mother spending a lot of time in the kitchen, over the stove, trying to divide up the little they had for food among all of his siblings. Malcolm remembers being hungry all of the time. These extremely stressful situations led to his mother's mental illness, and Malcolm resented the white authorities, who visited their home, under the guise of "helping", but pressuring his mother further into mental illness, and eventually being institutionalized, while he and his siblings were placed in foster homes.

Early in the story, Malcolm, as a young boy, says that he had a premonition that he would die a violent death. This was based on his father's own murder, and three of his father's brothers all died at the hands of white men. One of his uncles was lynched.

Malcolm's foster parents were kind enough, but young Malcolm noted that they often used racial epithets about other blacks in town, as if he were not in the room, and for a while, he had regular meals, and attended the local junior high in East Lansing. Malcolm was a very bright

student and was even elected 7th grade class president. One jolting memory he describes in junior high was when his social studies teacher led a discussion on possible future careers for the students in his class. When it was Malcolm's turn to tell what he thought would be his future career, Malcolm said he would like to be a lawyer. His teacher quickly corrected him stating that negroes could not become lawyers, and that he would be better off in pursuing a career in carpentry.

Malcolm worked as a carryout clerk in the local grocery, and when he earned enough of his own money to buy a bus ticket, he left East Lansing to live with a half-sister, Ella, in the predominantly black Roxbury section of Boston.

It was in Roxbury, that Malcolm again witnessed how blacks were forced to live, and he met people that led him into a life of drug addiction, crime, and illicit behavior. For a while, Malcolm worked as a shoeshine attendant in The Roseland Ballroom. It was here that he saw many wealthy whites, who wouldn't allow a black person in their neighborhoods, go "slumming" to listen to Count Bassey, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and be searching for drugs, and black prostitutes. Malcolm soon earned big money in leading whites to their weekend desires, and another connection landed a job for him on The Roxbury to New York rail line, that took him to Harlem.

In Harlem, Malcolm soon learned the ways of survival on the streets turning to more drug pedaling, the numbers racket, and becoming a pimp.

Eventually, Malcolm helped form an armed robbery gang, while dating a white married woman. Malcolm's life was always on the edge, as he carried multiple weapons, and was in a constant state of drug and alcohol altered states of consciousness.

Finally, one robbery went awry, and Malcolm was sentenced to seven years in prison. Malcolm stated that the real crime he was sentenced for was dating a white woman.

In prison, Malcolm was known as "Satan", because he had become such an embittered, enraged man, and most inmates and guards feared him. It was here, somewhat miraculously, that Malcolm embarked on a long journey of self-education. He read every book he could get his hands on, sharpened his skills in argument, by joining the prison debate team, and taught himself to write fluently. Also, during this time, a visiting younger brother told him about how the family in Michigan had started to follow Elijah Muhammad, and his Americanized version of Islam called The Nation of Islam.

Malcolm, up to this point, had rejected all religion as being hypocritical, but he decided to write Elijah Muhammad, and to his surprise, Elijah wrote back to him.

Malcolm's sister, Ella, was able to get Malcolm released from prison, on good behavior, and he returned to his family in Michigan, where he started to go to Nation of Islam meetings in Detroit. One Sunday, he travelled to Chicago to listen to Elijah Muhammed speak and he was

mesmerized by the man's charisma. After the ceremony, he met Elijah Muhammad, and was immediately taken in by what he preached.

Malcolm X became Elijah Muhammad's greatest follower and devotee, over the next 12 years, because The Nation of Islam's core belief was that white people were devils and could never be trusted. Elijah Muhammad's followers became known as The Black Muslims, which was a title assigned by whites in America. Neither Malcolm, nor Elijah liked the title "Black Muslims", because they believed it had negative racial overtones. They stated that they were Muslims in America that happened to be black.

Through the proselytizing of Malcolm X, over the next decade, The Nation of Islam grew exponentially. Malcolm opened numerous mosques throughout the country.

The appeal that The Nation of Islam had for greatly oppressed blacks in the 1950s and 60s was that they believed in being separate from whites, in every way, in business, schools, religion, and where they lived. The Nation of Islam was all about self-control, regular prayer to Allah, and discipline. They had a kind of rigid discipline, somewhat militaristic, that frightened whites. Elijah Muhammed preached, and his followers believed, that he was Allah's living prophet, and The Nation of Islam became a cult, that Malcolm X became deeply enrooted in. The followers often took the letter "X", because the actions of white people, in our history, totally obliterated genealogies of black people, where they had no idea as to family names, origins, or family histories. Hence the "X", for unknown.

Then, in 1963, Malcolm started to hear rumors of sexual harassment, and sex abuse perpetrated by Elijah Muhammed. He tried to deny them to himself, but after personally interviewing the alleged victims, came to see that the "prophet" was a fraud.

At about the same time, Malcolm was interviewed publicly about the assassination of President Kennedy, and Malcolm made the statement that, "the chickens have come home to roost", meaning white hatred had struck again, but it was interpreted, by the press and many in this country, to mean Kennedy deserved this horrific fate.

Malcolm was suspended, by Elijah Muhammed, allegedly for his statement about Kennedy's assassination, but there was more to it than that. Many in the hierarchy of The Nation of Islam had grown jealous of Malcolm's ascendancy in the organization and had spread false rumors that Malcolm was aspiring to replace Elijah. Malcolm had a huge public platform. He spoke all over the nation, and world, at universities, and regularly on news programs. His messages were bold, sometimes incendiary, and often disconcerting to white Americans. He regularly railed against, what he called "brainwashed blacks" that were trying to pander to the white dominant culture.

After his "suspension" from The Nation of Islam, Malcolm began to see this group, to whom he had given so much devotion, as a fraudulent cult. He was also hearing rumors, that a "price had been put on his head" secretly by Elijah Muhammed, and Malcolm decided to form his own Mosque in New York City.

Not long after that, Malcolm borrowed money from his older sister Ella, and followed a dream of all true Muslims, a visit to Mecca. It was in Mecca, that Malcom X went through his final spiritual transformation, he came to meet Muslims from countries throughout the world, and many of them were white. Malcolm embraced the belief that all people, regardless of color, are God's children. It was here that he adopted the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Upon his return to the US, Malcolm met with The Attorney General of Illinois, and testified against Elijah Muhammed, presenting the victims of Elijah's sex abuse to the attorney general. This action sealed Malcolm's fate, and on February 21, 1965, while delivering a speech in Manhattan, Malcolm was shot 14 times, by believed-to-be members of The Nation of Islam, in front of his wife Betty and four little daughters.

Malcom X's life is a life of a man trapped by a society that does not provide the same opportunities for all its members.

The Nation of Islam, and finally Mideastern Islam was so appealing to him because he did not see members of other religions living up to what they professed.

There is still today much misunderstanding about the trajectory of his life.

I see Malcolm X as a heroic, courageous person because he managed to pull himself out of the depths of degradation, that were so easy to fall into, as a black man in white America. He was, against all odds, also self-educated, and he spoke the truth, which made him admired by some: hated by many; hunted to his death; and a tormented, greatly misunderstood man because he called out the enormous paradoxes in American society.

I chose to read this book for a number of reasons. One is that I wanted a deeper understanding of how oppression can cause people to choose a life of crime or radicalization.

Another is that Malcom X was in the press often at the beginning of my teen years in early high school, in Akron, Ohio. Back then, I didn't understand his anger and frustration, that was presented so vividly in the media. After reading Alex Haley's well written and poignant account, I have a much better understanding of the mostly tragic events of Malcolm X's life, and why they happened.