



WRITERS MOSAIC

Quarterly 01

**Malcolm X,  
by any means  
necessary**

This is the debut of *WritersMosaic* in print.  
Future editions will range from Iranian  
Women's Voices to Frantz Fanon.

# A revolutionary with fire and charm

What's the connection between Malcolm X, the radical and electrifying Black nationalist, and slavery? One obvious answer is the rejection of his family's slave name, with Malcolm Little reborn as Malcolm X following his embrace of the Nation of Islam (NOI) in jail in the late 1940s. The other, less obvious connection is *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) by Alex Haley and its protagonist Kunta Kinte, an enslaved man abducted from Africa. *Roots* tells his story and that of the family who came after him.

The television series of the novel was my generation's introduction – at least in my Jamaican migrant household in 1970s Luton – to the charismatic leader who tapped into the dreams and aspirations of Black Americans; **people who were tired of waiting for change in their racist homeland**. Alex Haley was one of Kunta Kinte's descendants, and in a late episode of the series in which Haley's character features, the struggling journalist gets the chance to interview Malcolm X.

As a teenager, I recall my anxiety while watching the episode that focused on Malcolm X as a marked man, hyper-alert to the possible threat of assassins from within the NOI, whom he knew would one day come for him. In one short scene, Malcolm X meets Haley in a café, and insists on sitting with his back to the wall and one

eye on the door as he begins recounting his story. My teenage feeling of vulnerability was underscored by *Roots*: the feeling that **I would never as a black person in the UK be clear of danger; that I'd succumb to it or that 'the man' would trip me up**, and that feeling has never really left me.

Haley's 1963 interview with Malcolm X, commissioned by *Playboy* magazine, was the genesis of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which Haley co-authored in 1965. The back cover of the first edition quotes Malcolm's haunting words:

When I am dead – I say because from the things I know, I do not expect to live long enough to read this book in its finished form – I want you to watch and see if I'm not right in what I say: that the white man, in his press, is going to identify me with hate.

Malcolm's fearless stance was thrilling to me and my peers in 1970s Britain when we considered how we were schooled by our fathers to show deference to authority figures such as the police, no matter their antipathy towards us. The decade previously, in the midst of America's civil rights battles, Malcolm's excoriating judgements were a counterweight to the daily reports of nonviolent black protesters on freedom marches being battered by police.

Arnold remembered Malcolm as  
**‘charming and gracious’**  
 and **‘a passionate orator who could  
 whip a crowd to euphoria.’**

In celebration of the centenary of his birth, the writers in *WritersMosaic Quarterly* –

- **BONNIE GREER**
- **VAYU NAIDU**
- **VANESSA KISUULE**
- **EKOW ESHUN**
- **MAX FARRAR**
- **ELLA SINCLAIR**
- **JOHN SIDDIQUE**
- **FRANKLIN NELSON**

– reflect on their own relationship with Malcolm X, offering portraits of how they first saw him and how they picture him today.

In 1960, the photographer Eve Arnold travelled with Malcolm and his entourage between Washington, New York and Chicago to meet Black Muslims. Reflecting on their collaboration, Arnold remembered Malcolm as ‘charming and gracious’ and ‘a passionate orator who could whip a crowd to euphoria.’ This was at a time when white America demonised him as a dangerous, hate-spewing villain.

For me, the most striking image that Arnold took of the man who served as the poster boy for the NOI, shows Malcolm X in a cocked hat, with browline glasses, a gold watch and Masonic ring. ‘Thanks for making

him look like a dude,’ a group of black photographers once told Arnold.

In several of Arnold’s photos, his appeal is immediately apparent: this allegedly scary ogre menacing white America lights up halls full of his black compatriots with the warmth of his unguarded, loving smile. In the NOI, Malcolm X had found his people. And in Arnold’s portraits of his audiences, you can hear the laughter at his humour and sense the awe at his daring to say in public those truths that black people only expressed to each other in barber shops and churches; as well as when they settled down in bed at night and ran through the audit of transgressions they’d endured that day at the hands of their white compatriots.

‘If you’re black you were born in jail,’ said Malcolm X in 1964, the year before his assassination. The American Dream was a nightmare as far as the Black Muslim was concerned. However, he argued that there’d be no peace for ‘blue-eyed devils’ (white people) either, without a reckoning for the sins of slavery and the continued brutalisation of the descendants of the enslaved.

# Malcolm X: truth seeker

Malcolm X, for me, became and remained – even after his assassination – a deeply intellectual man, driven to activism and witnessing. However, speculation, assumptions and attributions assigned to him, especially from those who did not see or know him in life, are always interesting to me. I read them with respect. Yet I can still see and hear the man in real time.

He made irregular appearances on a late-night chat show when I was a young teen growing up on the South Side of Chicago. The host was a man named Irv Kupcinet, who wrote a major showbiz column and knew everyone. When our father was not working Saturday nights on the assembly line – which was rare – I would sit with him and watch the man called Malcolm X.

Dad was what used to be called a ‘race man’, so any Black man on TV was an occasion for him. I’m talking about 1963 or ‘64, maybe later, so for Kupcinet to even have Malcolm on his show must have meant that he considered him not only good television, but there must have been something about him. And there was. Malcolm would come on set with a notebook full of research, dressed in a very serious and rather chic suit and glasses. Incredibly elegant – what we would call ‘clean.’ **He would always fight back with the words of the US Constitution itself, leaving his opponents stunned.** Dad loved intelligent Black folks, and if they were articulate too, he would light one of his cigars and toast them. Malcolm was that and more.

His resistance was to misinformation and ignorance, no matter the hue of the person who spouted them. He said ‘The White Man’ a great deal, which made his co-combatants squirm because, out of Malcolm’s mouth, it was clear and concise – he was talking about power. You were a ‘white man’, above all, when you perpetrated

The System and a ‘Tom’ if you were Black and helped – even unwittingly. He would point out, sometimes even to Irv himself, that being working-class Jewish, Italian or Irish, for example, allowed you to vanish within the great matrix of America, the land of opportunity – no matter what your ancestors had suffered, no matter from where they had fled.

Malcolm never stopped discovering just what exactly the true story was, what exactly the truth was – and to some extent, that may

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Children of members of the Nation of Islam on their way to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA. 1961.

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Magnum Photos

have gotten him killed. Maybe he was killed by people who had stopped searching for the truth; or for answers or for anything. Maybe by people who would have hit the brick wall of their own point of view and, having hit that wall, turned around and saw Malcolm coming toward them – maybe even going through that wall to the next level.

Now he's a kind of saint and that's OK because sometimes sainthood is necessary before people begin to hear, to think, and to feel. He was no saint – not by any definition of the word. Nor was he a prophet, not to me. **To me, he had enormous courage, a great heart, and he was a seeker.** Along with Martin Luther King and the civil rights activist Medgar Evers, Malcolm became one of the 'Three M's' whom James Baldwin revered. He did not live long enough to become the 'has-been' that my fellow Black Baby Boomers rendered Jimmy. We did not have enough time to cancel Malcolm like we did MLK before his assassination. An early, untimely death can be a kind of luck.

The innate nobility of Malcolm X has always shown through. He was, in the end, a preacher of his own religion – one that went beyond the parameters of the Nation Of Islam, embracing all people who wanted to know the truth and live it. When he was assassinated, I was not surprised. There was something in him – like MLK – that made you feel he would never become an elder, an old man. Maybe he knew that, too.

The Hajj was a light for him, a passage for him, and that experience should never be overlooked. Malcolm X was an artist in the creation of a deeper reality; not only for us Black people, but for all human beings. His Mecca was just the beginning of becoming ours too, especially for us young people on the verge of a tumultuous decade. His centenary shows us that he is a man for all seasons.

# Encountering Malcolm X

**1969** The District of Columbia had for the first time appointed a black principal of a state-funded school in Washington D.C. I was 12, and my parents' government posting from India to the US had brought me to D.C. India's colonial legacy and an education in English had given me the English language. When I was admitted to Woodrow Wilson Senior High I was unaware of American social history.

On that first September morning of the Fall semester, my class tutor and Head of English was Miss Jackson. She had a way of taking in the entire class in one sweep of her eyes.

She opened the lemon-Pledged books cupboard beside the paint-cracked, cranky radiators. With her back to the class and us seated in rows of single, state-provision school desks etched with hearts and expletives, she was crouching, gathering books from the cupboard shelves. After she stood up, she turned around. I was admiring her smart black-rimmed spectacles, new fall dress suit and straightened hair. She went down the first three rows of desks and triumphantly placed the books, back cover up. Our class of thirty was a mix of Spanish speakers, Black and White Americans, one English and one Indian student. It was co-educational, compelling and chaotic.

I was staring at the book on my desk. It was the first day in school and I was new to everything, except the news of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, and

the successful Apollo 11 landing on the moon. The Seniors were putting on *Hair* the musical in the auditorium, and the posters were swishing in my mind with psychedelic streams of hair.

'Wait 'til I'm done!' With speed on her heels, Miss Jackson was at the front of the class. She held the book up, back-to-front. There were nervous laughs, and chatter. She smiled wide, did the reveal, and we followed obediently.

The big red X across the black and white photograph of a bespectacled black man staring straight back at me gave me a wave of terror – of not knowing why this autobiography was so significant. I had just begun to awaken to life through literature by struggling through – and, strangely for that age, enjoying *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham.

Miss Jackson spoke with an educator's passion. 'Black people get murdered, assassinated, and their stories go missing. **Here's a story many of us live, and don't dare to find out how to speak.**' Our eyes were on her and she read us. 'You're asking, why English? Read the writing, know the man, find America.'

I had never heard so much passion in a classroom before and flicked to a page headed **SAVED** and read the 'voice' of Malcolm X as he described a scene in Charlestown Prison where a Harvard seminary student teaching the Bible to black and white inmates was talking about the apostle Paul:

**‘What color was Paul? [...] He had to be black ... because he was a Hebrew ... and the original Hebrews were black ... weren’t they? [...] What color was Jesus ... he was Hebrew, too, wasn’t he?’**

Both the Negro and the white convicts had sat bolt upright ... I could feel the nodding. It had a seismic effect. In India I had been taught by jolly Irish nuns and all the images of Jesus, Mary, and the apostles were Caucasian. Malcolm X’s voice shot through my adolescent mind. It was a turning point about learning not to accept hearsay. It was a mind shift to return to the roots of anything, and enquire, and see how dangerous appropriation is.

The school had been picked to be a flagbearer of change. Its first black principal, Vincent Reed, brought that change to reality. Strategy and mobilising led young minds through a radical shift in institutional education. US immersion in the Vietnam war was well underway and the draft was statutory. The principal brought in a staff of bright old and young black American educators in History,

Politics, Art, English, Math, Sports – all my subjects. I began to see a US that *Life* or *Time* or *The Washington Post* would never tell adolescents like me about race, culture, music, politics, teenage pregnancies and that distant war coming closer into the kitchen. It was as History students of Edna Burke Jackson that we entered the psyche of what made America and learned the different shades of equality.

Reading and living the change Malcolm X had brought about after his murder has stayed with me and shaped my thinking of the personal as political, in the arts, and in storytelling as means to archive migration and voices of the diaspora in Britain.

As Gary Younge says in his new introduction to the book: *‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X* represents the attitude not just of a man but of an era [...] Malcolm X sought to seize the moment to broaden both the understanding and the appeal of America’s black struggles by locating them in the context of human rights and internationalism’. As Malcolm X asked, ‘How is the black man going to get “civil rights” before first he wins his human rights?’

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# Malcolm at the Martyr's Cafe

When you walk in, the three lattes on my tray crash to the floor. My colleague Tina looks over, then away. She is used to this sort of thing. Your lips twitch a smile of commiseration. A blade of light hits the left lens of your famous glasses, slices the room in half.

Feigning calm, I drum my fingers on the counter as you scan the menu, make your order. I watch you pour one sugar, then another and a third into your espresso. You throw it down your throat like a pill and grimace.

Here you are in the Martyrs' Cafe, where slain heroes come to cloud watch, drink coffee and mourn the revolutions they didn't live to see. I don't work here for the money. The pay is terrible, the people watching priceless. Martin, your presumed nemesis, came by a month ago, and gleefully pulled

an iced caramel mocha through a red straw. Joan of Arc sat beside him, sipping at a sombre filter coffee. St. Bartholomew barged in, ordered three brownies and ate them in five minutes flat. But you are the first martyr to fluster me, dash my coffees and my cool to the floor.

Behind the counter, Tina mutters at me. *Say something to him.* I wipe furiously at the spotless patisserie shelves, chewing the inside of my cheek. What do I possibly say? Hey Malcolm! Did you know there's a community centre in my city named after you? As you walk through the doors, a crude rendering of your face takes up an entire wall. In every montage about black liberation you appear, always

at some podium, with the camera craning up at you. Or you're sat with your chin propped by your hand, that furrow in your brow persistent.

You told us not to wait for freedom but to seize it. How thrilling and fearful it was, how impossible an ember of rage to live up to. It was a distinctly American and male anger. I admired it but couldn't claim it entirely as my own. It happened often that your history across the pond was fed to us as if it were ours. I was nine when I first heard your name, twenty-nine when I heard of Olive Morris. Her face anoints no posters, her name not mentioned in any rap song I know of.

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Can I confess I resent it, resent *you*, sometimes? The height and heft of you in that chair! You and Martin were not the only ones – certainly not the only ones that mattered – magnetic men though you were. If it were Betty and Loretta’s mouths that spoke the same rhetoric, would the media have fawned and seethed the same way?

This is why you’re not supposed to meet your heroes. They’re best kept as hooks on which we hang our hopes for salvation. Of course, you know this. Maybe that’s the question: have you forgiven him, your erstwhile hero, Elijah Muhammad? The name punctured your sentences like commas. **Yours was the steady devotion of a cult member, and we like our cult leaders strident, don’t we, like a straight arrow we can follow to redemption.** There is something cultish in how we remember you, too, how we remember all the telegenic leaders of the movement. A slogan here, a raised fist there, quotes pulled free of context and gristle.

With a jolt, I realise you are speaking to me. *Tell me where you grew up?* you ask. I describe the tiny bedroom in a nondescript commuter town: its curtainless windows, its modest shelf of chick-lit books and fantasy novels. I was eleven when I read your autobiography, a big serious book with a tiny font. It made me feel grown up. Like you, I fancied myself an autodidact. Inspired by how you read the dictionary cover to cover whilst in prison, I tried to squint my way through the tiny Collins dictionary my mother kept in the living room. I got a few pages into E before I got bored and gave up (*effort n: physical or mental exertion; attempt*). You laugh kindly, say it’s easy to be diligent when you’ve little else to occupy your time.

Malcolm. How sacrilegious, to think of you by your first name! The table you’re sat on is the one that wobbles. I should have warned you. You fold a napkin and wedge it under its short leg. As you bend, I see that your frame is slight, your shoulders failing to fill your jacket. **You are still, I imagine, haunted by those three gun barrels, the last thing you saw before you hit the floor.** Sometimes, I entertain notions of myself as a freedom fighter wanted by the authorities. I can see it: a black and white shot of me posed by a window with a rifle in hand, my hair blown out big enough to rival Angela Davis’s. I like the aesthetic of revolution, shrink from its gruelling sacrifices. Looking at the gaunt hollow of your cheeks, the ceaseless tremor of your knees, I am ashamed of my hubris. There is no glamour or glory to any of it. Malcolm, I dare not ask: *were you scared?*

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EKOW ESHUN

# Smethwick, England, 12 February 1965

**F**rom the train station you walk down cobbled streets, past a tired-looking pub and a giant bingo hall, to meet Avtar Singh Johal, the energetic leader of the Indian Workers' Association, a local group campaigning against an anti-immigrant fervour that's taken hold of Smethwick. Johal leads you through the town, his breath forming steaming clouds in the cold air, as he describes how burgeoning job opportunities in Smethwick's factories and car plants during the 1950s drew thousands of young men from India and the Caribbean. And how, in turn, they received a harsh welcome from locals in the town which was once the constituency of Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists. **Landlords wouldn't rent to them, said Johal. Pubs wouldn't**

**serve them. In the factories, they were given the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs.** In 1964, Britain held a general election. In Smethwick, the contest took place between a sitting Labour MP and Peter Griffiths, the Conservative candidate, a supporter of apartheid who ran on the slogan, 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour.' Griffiths won the seat. At the announcement of the vote, Tory supporters heckled the defeated Labour politician, shouting: 'Where are your niggers now?'

Listening to Johal, you think immediately of growing up in Lansing, and how the white folks, even the well-meaning ones, couldn't conceive of black people as anything other than an inferior species. You remember doing some yard work for an elderly white couple who always treated



Malcolm X (1925 - 1965) on Marshall Street in Smethwick, near Birmingham, UK. 12th February 1965. (Photo by Daily Express/Archive Photos/Getty Images)

Text extracted from *THE STRANGERS* by Ekow Eshun, published by Hamish Hamilton at £20.00

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you well, and hearing the husband say to the wife that he couldn't understand how Negroes could be happy living in poverty like they did. And her replying with a shrug, 'Niggers are just that way.' Black people might be with them in the same town but they were never considered *of* them. Smethwick today is no different to Lansing then. You feel the same disgust and anger here as you did there.

You arrive at a hectic scene. A mass of newspaper reporters and a BBC TV crew are clustered in the road, waiting to interview you. On the pavement beside them, a clutch of white residents, mostly women in housecoats, some of them toting small children, look on, arms folded, muttering sceptically among themselves. Griffiths is also here. He's already talking to the press, from amongst a group of aides, his finger indignantly stabbing the air. 'It makes my blood boil that Malcolm X should be allowed into this country,' he is saying. 'The whole news-gathering side of the English world is trying to turn Smethwick into something it's not. **This is Birmingham, England, not Birmingham, Alabama.**'

All your life you've known these men, who think their whiteness gives them the right to deny coloured people their respect as a human being. He's no different from the men who killed your father, or the judge who inflated your prison sentence for having a white girlfriend. The sight of him, thin-lipped, red-cheeked, fills you with abrupt contempt. But as you approach the scrum of reporters, you are cool. The reporters spot you and begin shouting questions. Across the street, the local residents start to shout

too, hurling abuse at you. How many times in your life, you wonder, will you face white people to insist on your right to existence?

'The worst form of human being is one who judges another human being by the colour of their skin,' you say to the reporters. From what you understand, Peter Griffiths can strut up and down the streets of Smethwick, preaching *If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour*, and that's all right. As long as it's the far right and the fascists and the Nazis, no problem. But when you, Malcolm, come to Smethwick, there are protests.

As you speak, Griffiths looks on from the side, seething. He tries to interject but you raise your voice and carry on speaking. Britain has a colour problem and people like him would rather object to your presence than address the real issues at hand. From what you've seen today, the situation in Smethwick is as bad as it is back home. Coloured people here are being treated in the same way as the Negroes are treated in Alabama, when all they want is to be respected for their humanity.

Without waiting for any reply from Griffiths, you walk away from the reporters. For a moment you feel overwhelmed by the endless, tidal nature of the struggle. Both with Elijah Muhammad and now on your own, you have fought for black people and you hope to have been of some service through your actions. But it's never enough. The attacks keep coming.

A photographer trails after you, insisting on a photo by the Marshall Street sign. You wonder what expression he'll capture on your face. The resolution of a leader, or a man searching for the strength to keep going?

# Malcolm X (and James Baldwin) changed me

It was James Baldwin who led me to Malcolm Little, and it was my Black friend in the boarding house at England's cheapest public school who set me on my lifetime campaign for equality for all – whatever our 'race', class, gender or sexuality.

Not so long ago, I realised I had to revisit Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1962). I was surprised to see how sympathetic he was, not just to Malcolm but to that charlatan Wallace Fard Muhammad, who, at that time, had Malcolm under his spell in the Nation of Islam (NOI).

As a student in 1969, I had read E.U. Essien-Udom's thoroughly researched book about the American 'Black Muslims'. It showed me that Fard, despite his honourable roots in the teachings of Noble Drew Ali and Marcus Garvey, had corralled Islam into the pursuit of Black capitalism.

Recently, re-reading Malcolm's *Autobiography*, I found myself more gripped by his early life than I was by his time in the NOI. In his excellent foreword, Haley hints that, as Malcolm was perpetually genuflecting to Fard, there was a bad smell in the air. His account of Malcolm's experience at Mecca is a consummate example of how learning from experience is often far more significant than learning from oratory and books. **Then I found a section of *The Fire Next Time* that showed me why I preferred the young Malcolm – and the hustler Malcolm – to the NOI Malcolm.**

Baldwin was listening to Big Bill Broonzy. He said white Americans (surely this goes for the white English too) do not understand the 'ironic tenacity' revealed in blues songs, because they are 'terrified' of the sensuality that underlies it. Being sensual, Baldwin wrote, involves 'respect[ing] and rejoice[ing] in the force of life, of life itself, and [being] *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.'

Even when I read Malcolm denouncing me as a 'white devil' (as happened to me in real life in Chapeltown, Leeds in the 1970s), I am totally engaged by his life force because he is so utterly and admirably *present* throughout, even when his body is suffused with industrial qualities of booze, coke and weed.

Malcolm lived on with me for another reason. In the late 1980s, I began to hear from Chapeltown's young men and women of Caribbean heritage about their conversion to Islam. They were elated and inspired by shedding their



Christian upbringing and finding a 'true faith'. These sincere young people tried to draw me in, but I was committed to Marx's idea that religion is the 'sigh of the oppressed creature', the 'heart of a heartless world' ... Nevertheless, I thought this was a significant moment in the story of Black Britain.

Had Malcolm's late recognition that Sunni Islam embraced people of every skin colour and that class oppression must also be addressed and been carried through into global politics, the Al-Qaeda heresy might never have gained its following.

Of the various interpretations of Malcolm's legacy, it's the life and thoughts of his daughter Ilyasah Shabazz that have the most resonance for me. She positioned herself as a much-loved child in a 'mainstream and privileged and integrated and utterly American' home. While her story is more a praise-song for her mother than an appraisal of her dad, she's very clear that Malcolm's 'by any means necessary' strategy is not a call to violence, but a commitment to self defence alongside a 'comprehensive' set of tactics for redressing the systematic oppression and exploitation of African Americans. The implication throughout, stemming from her mother's own climb to academic seniority and her father's continual self education, is that education is a major component of that comprehensive strategy.

There's also a hint of economic nationalism when she adds a clarion call for the expansion of black-owned businesses, but the cornerstones are an accurate understanding of world history and a new colour-blind humanism – these will eradicate self-loathing and instil self-respect among African Americans, Shabazz suggests.

And of course that would change white people, too, just as Malcolm changed me. Nowadays, I am sometimes referred to as an 'ally'.

Nation of Islam meeting held at the International Amphitheater. Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Chicago, USA. 25th February 1962.

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Magnum Photos

# Straightening out the kinks

My mother never let me have hair straighteners. At the time, I thought this was incredibly unfair. She had the straight blonde hair I would have killed for back then. I grew up in Brighton, a predominantly white city on the south coast of England, and I wanted to have gravity-obeying hair like everyone else at school.

At fourteen, I bought my own pair of GHDs. They were sleek and glossy, symbolic of how I wanted my own unruly hair to look. I was delighted by them. Every day, I could have a close-enough hair do that mirrored my white peers. At seventeen, I'd finally succeeded in my mission for dead-straight hair. It had started falling out in lifeless, brown clumps. Horrified, I vowed never to touch hair straighteners again – a vow I've kept to this day.

I wish I could say that my discovery of Malcolm X was what led me to finally put down my hair straighteners. Perhaps it was the first step I took towards him. I knew why I straightened my hair, and it wasn't because I wanted to be Black.

It was around this time that I picked up my father's weathered copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I was curious as to why my parents would own a book about a man I only knew vaguely as controversial, an extremist, and not as good as Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Rereading this same book ten years later, I noticed that seventeen year-old me had underlined whole sentences where X describes getting his first 'conk' (hair relaxer).

**'This was my first really big step toward self-degradation', he wrote, 'when I endured all that pain ... to have it look like a white man's hair'.**

I've carried the lessons from this book with me into my adult life entirely unknowingly, without realising that Malcolm taught me that. He woke me up to the world-ordering system of white supremacy and its impact on all of our lives – how it bleeds into our own psyches in ways we are blind to, making people hate something seemingly as innocuous as their own head of hair.

**These are 'extreme' and 'controversial' lessons from Malcolm that I hold on to.**

Lessons that (to borrow from Marcus Garvey) started to straighten out the kinks in my mind, and not my hair.

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Nation of Islam  
meeting. 1961.  
New York City,  
USA.

© Eve Arnold/  
Magnum Photos

# Burn it down, reading Malcolm X in Rochdale

**1987** Frontline Books Manchester. Down cement stairs into a sense of radical possibilities and alternatives. I've given up drugs and cut my hair and am looking for clues to live a clean, sacred, meaningful life. I buy *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as an audiobook on cassette. I don't know what makes me want to know him. I never knew my dad much, maybe I need the sense of a fatherly voice to guide me in a world that I didn't know then was not created for me?

I get back to Rochdale and ride up in the lift to my 16<sup>th</sup> floor flat. I came here after nine months of homelessness. I have a Hitachi boom-box that I braved a visit to my mother's house to retrieve. I play the first side of Tape 1 and Alex Haley's voice intones Malcolm's early life: young 'Red', the house surrounded by the KKK, the murder of his father, the oppression and the fear, the beginnings of a way through crime. I listen to all the tapes in one sitting, realise that the audiobook is abridged and buy the book itself the following week.

**I hope I am wrong but most people never remember that Malcolm was a spiritual teacher.** After reading Kahlil Gibran, Richard Bach, Stephen Levine and a bunch of yoga texts as a teenager, Malcolm was my first real teacher. I always felt that I was in the wrong and had to fit in somehow. Malcolm not only gave me my first permission to be a person of colour, he also showed me something incredibly profound.

The Malcolm that most people never remember was a seeker who put the voice of his soul above all outer circumstances. It was listening to its voice and needs that fuelled his entire journey. It is this internal quest for truth, humanity, and real freedom in Malcolm that spoke loudest to me. It didn't just resonate with me, it made me see that my own soul and way ahead lay in committing completely to only this.

Malcolm then translated this into the outer world – speaking, talking and fighting from his soul for his own freedom and ours. That inner journey, and the courage to actually heed it seems to me to be the point so many of us are missing. Malcolm was simply prepared to walk away from anything unreal or corrupted as soon as he realised it was so. What more could I ask from a father figure than the courage to stand for truth? Not 'his truth' in that falsely individuated way of our day, but *the* truth and the realignment of life

that happens as we begin to live from that actual place of *is-ness*.

It was the remembrance of Malcolm, when Spike Lee's movie came out in 1992, and hearing his speech in which he recalled the era of slavery in white American history, when the enslaved house negro would kiss up to the slave owner so much that, if the 'master's' house was on fire, he would say, 'Our house is on fire,' and do all he could to protect it. Meanwhile, the field negro would be the one waiting for the opportunity to burn it down and escape. I knew that I was of the field. My father's family in India were farmers of sugarcane and cotton, but all our land was lost after Partition. This woke my rebellious spirit back up. I discovered that my spirit cannot *coconut* for anyone – for any price or idea of a prize – and it will not let me get away with the reduction of my inner or outer self. Brother Malcolm showed us that. He died to show us that.

At 5 a.m. on 19 January 2025, the day the ceasefire is supposed to begin in Palestine, I am sitting in bed writing these words, waiting, praying that we will one day raise our consciousness as a whole. **The last thing Malcolm wrote, a few months before his murder, was a piece on Palestine for *The Egyptian Gazette*. It reads like it was written today.**

Deference politics are proffered at every turn for our capture; to keep those of us who desire constructive and collective change under division and control. Malcolm stands unfallen as a wonderful example of a man committed to the deepest realisation and expression of truth; his soul meeting his karma as his teacher. If we dare to look at our lives in this way, we will find that his deeper example is a calling for our very blood to remember, and to act upon it.

**Burn it down.**

**Malcolm**  
not only gave  
me my **first**  
**permission**  
**to be a**  
**person of**  
**colour,** he  
showed me  
something  
**incredibly**  
**profound.**

# Living reinvention

I can't claim to remember how old I was when I first heard the name Malcolm X, but it must have been around the time, aged 14, that I decided to obtain a copy of his *Autobiography*. Having passed, up till that point, through most of the world as a white person, I was becoming more curious about the other half of my history. So I spent time with works by Maya Angelou, James Baldwin and Malorie Blackman, as well as Caryl Phillips, Sam Selvon and Benjamin Zephaniah, colouring in parts of myself that had until then been, if not blank, then at the very least muted.

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, though, had a particular pull when I came to learn of its existence. It wasn't fiction. It told of a life. The title was simple and short, but the definite article made it authoritative. And the author's name. Malcolm: almost out of place as a given name in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. X: a letter, one of the simplest to write, that also works as a kiss or in a mathematical expression, to cross a possibility out or to mark the right spot.

I didn't go in search of the book because I wanted an education in the Black struggle in the United States (although I must have realised that I would learn some facts about it, and be presented with a particular interpretation). Nor did I expect the book to offer me answers as to how to live. Instead, I went in search of it because I wanted to know more about this charismatic black man, dead well before his time, with the intriguing, somewhat unknowable name.

At the time bookshops just about still held the upper hand over online retailers, so in I went one Saturday morning to my local branch of Waterstones to find a copy. On the shelves were books about the other, more 'respectable', 'M' of 20th-century American history – Martin Luther King. But Malcolm X wasn't to be found, so I placed an order for the *Autobiography* and returned a couple of weeks later to collect it. When I went back, the bookseller seemed bemused that someone of my age, or colour, or both, could or would want to read the title she was putting through the till in this solidly middle-class part of England, where one of the store's main draws was its bookless, airless café. **When I got home, my father took one look at what I'd bought and called it a 'heavy book'**. At more than 500 pages it was big, but he didn't mean to get at its size. Their scepticism, transmitted in different ways, only made me want to begin reading more.

Picking up my Penguin Modern Classics copy today, just over a decade since my eyes first scanned its pages, I am reminded how I was struck back then not just – or not even principally – by the statements Malcolm X makes and the stories he recovers, but rather by the clarity and force with which he does so. Even as they wrestle with difficult memories or advance complex ideas, his sentences are spare. Many of them are grammatically simple, spurning excess description and long words. 'They seemed



to be nearly always at odds,' he observes of his mother and father in 'Nightmare', the opening chapter. **'Sometimes my father would beat her. It might have had something to do with the fact that my mother had a pretty good education.'** For an unashamedly political testimony, the book is also knowingly funny, as when Malcolm X describes dodging military induction by donning a 'wild' zoot suit and fashioning his hair into 'a reddish bush of conk'. He recalls dryly: 'the stony-faced rest of them looked as if they were ready to sign up to go off killing somebody – they would have liked to start with me'. In these and other moments, style is not at odds with or seeking to get one over on or playing second fiddle to substance. The two are equals.

Malcolm X giving a speech at a Nation of Islam rally. 1961. Washington D.C, USA.

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The *Autobiography* is revealing as much for what it does not tell the reader or dwell on as for that which it does. This is the result both of Malcolm X's 'own evasions' and the 'subtle shapings' made by co-writer Alex Haley, as the historian Manning Marable has noted. For me, one hundred years after the birth of Malcolm Little, his big book's relevance to our time lies in part in the space between what it shares and what it conceals. When do we really know or tell, or want to know or tell, the full story about anything, and is it our right to know? Malcolm X's was, to quote the subtitle of Marable's biography, 'a life of reinvention'. Why can't our lives be too?

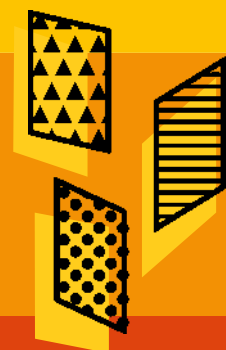
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Editor: Colin Grant

Copy editors: Eleanor Margolies and Emma Dyer

Design by John Round Design

Picture editors: Missohio Studio

Communications: Ladbury PR

**Front cover image**

Malcolm X during his visit to enterprises owned by Nation of Islam members. 1962. Chicago, Illinois, USA.

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