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## Malcolm X: A Life Of Reinvention -- The Review

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**Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention**  
By **Manning Marable**  
\$30; Viking Press

The scholar and author **Manning Marable** died just **on the eve of publication** of his magnum opus, this sober, detailed, engrossing biography of Malcolm X. One trusts he is resting easy, knowing that the early reviews were rapturous and that the book did justice both to his lifelong work as an educator and champion of progressive causes and to Malcolm X's ever-growing importance as a figure both in the black community and impassioned fighters for freedom

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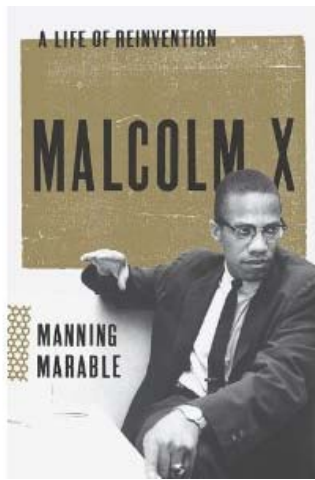


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and justice around the world.

It's natural to focus on the juicy bits, the revelations not heard before or finally confirmed: the convincing proof of infidelities on the part of both Malcolm X and his wife Betty, the stripping away of myth surrounding his criminal past, the shocking lack of desire on the part of the police to find and convict the real killers, the informers and undercover police that infiltrated his movements and the "gay for pay" claim that X's description of a "friend's" involvement with a rich gay white man was a front for his own first-hand knowledge. (Marable quotes letters from Malcolm X in prison, after converting to the Nation Of Islam, in which he hopes this benefactor can help him get out on parole early and provide him a home and stability of some sort.)

Needless to say, the children of Malcolm X have decried the book. But they shouldn't. It pays their father the high respect of treating him like the world figure he is and strives to separate fact from fiction with the sober, balanced eye of a writer and scholar whose only desire is to present Malcolm X fully, with all his contradictions and complexity. This isn't the final word: too many documents remain unreleased by the FBI and numerous police departments even decades after his assassination. But one thing is abundantly clear: you can't simply watch Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* or read *The Autobiography Of Malcolm X as Told To Alex Haley*. To get the fullest, fairest treatment of his life, you must also read this book.

It begins with the story of Malcolm Little's parents, ardent supporters of Marcus Garvey, the closest precursor to the black nationalism that fired the imagination of Malcolm X. We see his father's brutal death -- almost certainly a hate crime -- and the young, wandering life of Malcolm and his siblings as they were unmoored by a mother overwhelmed by the bitter hypocrisy and discrimination of the state. Always smart and wary of work, it's no surprise when Malcolm reinvents himself as "Detroit Red" and embarks on a life of crime and a white girlfriend, a life that Marable insists wasn't nearly as hardcore as Malcolm X said.

In a reasoned manner that sets the tone for the book, Marable sets the cultural and political scene of Harlem when Malcolm X arrives in New York. Marable details what X described in his autobiography and



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then dissects what was most likely to have really happened based on records of the time. For example, for political reasons (Marable says) Malcolm X describes working with prostitutes in Times Square and burglarizing homes in all-white suburbs. Marable says it's more likely that the prostitution he dealt with usually occurred on 125th St. and he probably robbed some Harlem nightspots.

His time in prison and conversion to the racist ideology of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation Of Islam is captured precisely by never downplaying the cult-like behavior of that organization or the very real and very positive effect it had on Malcolm X. His work in the group with whole-hearted devotion, his growth as a public speaker and thinker, his growing politicalization (when a central demand of the Nation Of Islam was to avoid politics and the outside world) and his ultimate championing of a pan-Africanism are captured brilliantly and precisely. At every turn you sense the essential truth of Malcolm X: whatever stage of his philosophical and political growth, he always represented fierce, unapologetic pride in the heritage of blacks and the strength they can and should embody in the face of oppression. This is what electrified millions who couldn't and wouldn't embrace the demonizing of whites that Malcolm X himself ultimately came to reject as counter to the tenets of traditional Islam.

It's fascinating to see exactly how focused the FBI and police were on a man and organization that called on black people to abhor drinking and doing drugs, work hard and not ask for handouts from anyone. The Nation Of Islam and Malcolm X's later groups were always under threat of informers and undercover law enforcement who tried to sow divisions between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. One policeman assigned for months at a time to listen secretly to phone conversations soon realized that not only was Malcolm X not a threat in the sense of encouraging lawlessness but that everything he knew about the man was wrong. He encouraged his superiors to work with Malcolm X. Needless to say, he was ignored.

But Marable truly shines in the book's final chapters. The closer we get to Malcolm X's death, the deeper Marable plunges into the day-to-day changes. Malcolm X was being slowly kicked out of the Nation, a process that wrenched him emotionally even though he was quickly outgrowing both the narrow tenets of the cult and disillusioned with the hypocrisy of Elijah Muhammad, who lived lavishly and had sex with numerous secretaries while demanding sacrifice from his followers. Marable convincingly asserts that it's too simplistic to see Malcolm X as moving more towards the mainstream while Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was becoming more radical.

The moment to moment contradictions in Malcolm X's speeches in the last months of his life are not the words of a man telling each audience what they want to hear (tossing in an old school reference to "devils" at one stop; denouncing violence at the next; embracing a color-blind vision of life where you judge deeds not skin tone at a third and hinting at inevitable and righteous violence at a fourth). They are the words of a man who was discovering for himself a new philosophy, a new way of thinking that was still radical and strong (and strands of which would influence everything from the Black Panthers to rap music) but also more mature and nuanced and with an international perspective.

Marable led [The Malcolm X Project](#) at Columbia University, an online site filled with a wealth of material on X's life and work. Slowly, more and more speeches, more and more unsealed documents and more facts about the truth surrounding his life and death will come out. Others will surely build upon the work that Marable has done here. But this book will remain a cornerstone for any serious scholarly work about

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the life and legacy of Malcolm X.

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