X: A NOVEL

by ILYASAH SHABAZZ

with KEKLA MAGOON

ABOUT THE BOOK

Malcolm Little is lost, his spirit broken. His father has been murdered, his mother taken away by state officials bent on destroying his family, and Malcolm separated from his siblings. Trouble seems to find him wherever he goes . . . and some of it is his own making. Choosing the excitement of Boston and New York over the loving home and guidance of his half-sister, Malcolm slides into the streets of Roxbury and Harlem at age fourteen. From running numbers to smoking dope to small-time hustling, Malcolm tries everything the street life has to offer. But he cannot outrun the law—or his grief—forever, and he ultimately ends up in prison. There Malcolm comes to terms with his past and changes the course of his life. Out of the pages of history, we see how Malcolm’s past leads him to become a humanitarian leader representing new hope for all races: the man now known as Malcolm X.

Common Core Connections

The Common Core State Standards seek to involve students in reading literature that provides facts and background knowledge in social studies. Reading literature that mixes history with fiction, as is done in X: A Novel, encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytic reading that piques students’ interests and at the same time prepares them for college reading and thinking. Using the CCSS for Literature and Informational Text along with Literacy in History/Social Studies, X: A Novel requires readers to distinguish fact from fiction and to use text to support analysis and to draw conclusions. Students will explore Malcolm X’s motivations and conflicts from the perspective of his daughter Ilyasah Shabazz. They will also be introduced to the vernacular of the time and explore why these words were so important to the story.
Prereading Activities: Making connections through historical context

- These suggestions can be used to build background knowledge and to activate prior knowledge before reading.
- These topics may also be used for writing more detailed research papers during or after reading.

In order to understand the conflicts Malcolm faced throughout his life and to gain perspective on the situation of African Americans during his lifetime, students need to create a context in which to view Malcolm's story.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.1, 2, RH.9–10.2, RH.9–10.3

1. Working in small groups, students should prepare a brief overview of one of the following topics and present their information to the class in an oral presentation:
   - Malcolm X's work as a civil-rights leader
   - The rise of black activism in the 1920s
   - How the Great Depression affected African Americans in the 1930s
   - The role of African Americans during World War II
   - The roots of the Nation of Islam in America
   - A timeline of important events of the civil-rights movement from the 1950s to today

2. Have students think about, share with a partner, and then discuss as a class what they know about the civil rights movement and the role of African Americans in bringing this movement to the forefront of political and social reform.

Discussion Questions

1. Instead of telling the story in chronological order, the author moves back and forth through time. What effect does this have on the story? Why is this important to the story? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.5

2. Early in the story, Malcolm says "I am my father's son. But to be my father's son means that they will always come for me" (page 5). What do you think Malcolm means? How does this statement foreshadow everything that happens to him? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.6

3. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he realizes "it takes less than a minute to buy a new life" (page 8). What do you think Malcolm means? How did that one action change Malcolm's life? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.1

4. As Malcolm leaves for Boston, he reminisces about his biological family and his foster family and comes to the conclusion that leaving won't be very difficult. Why does he feel this way? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.1

5. Malcolm refers to the influence Marcus Garvey had on both of his parents. What did Garvey stand for, and how can his influence be seen in the way Malcolm thinks? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.1

6. When Malcolm is very young, his parents tell him that he can be anything he wants to be. While Malcolm believes this for a while, he later decides that their counsel is not true. What causes Malcolm to turn away from his dreams? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.1

7. In Chapter 3, Mr. Ostrowski shares his true opinion of Malcolm's potential. What effect does this conversation have on Malcolm, and how does it influence his future actions? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

8. Upon Malcolm's arrival in Boston, his half-sister Ella wants him to experience the city before he gets a job. How does this change Malcolm? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1
9. Shorty tells Malcolm: "In this world, everything's a hustle... If it doesn't look like a hustle, you got to look at it from another angle" (page 114). Why does hustling appeal to Malcolm so much? Why is he drawn to the world of the hustler? 
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

10. Everyone seems willing to offer Malcolm credit at first. How does this become a problem for him later on?
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

11. Malcolm's family confronts him about his selling and using drugs, dating white women, and losing his job. How does Malcolm rationalize his actions, and what does this do to his relationship with his family?
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

12. When Malcolm works at Small's in Harlem, he listens as two men discuss "Negro improvement." Malcolm reasons that "Negroes don't need improvement. Real Negroes don't sit around and talk about how things should be and what they should have. Real Negroes go out and get some of their own" (page 253). How has Malcolm's life up to this point personified this sentiment? Why does he feel this way? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

13. On May 19, 1943, Malcolm turns eighteen years old. How is he feeling about his life at this point in time?
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

14. Malcolm feels that it is inevitable that he will go to jail and claims "the whole court is out to get [him]" (page 322). Whom does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

15. 22843. With these numbers, Malcolm begins to look at his life in a new way. How does Malcolm see the world through these numbers? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.2

16. After hearing and seeing Bembry in prison, Malcolm remembers that "words are a weapon" (page 331). What do these words mean to Malcolm, and how does he begin to change? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.1

17. What impact does Elijah Muhammad have on Malcolm? How do his words change Malcolm? 
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.1

18. Malcolm believes that everything in his life has led him to where he has arrived, to be a new man, to follow Islam, and to be ready to serve Allah. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

19. The words "Up, up, you mighty race" resonate with Malcolm. How does he use these words to create a new life for himself and his people? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1

20. At the end of the story, Ilyasah Shabazz has added notes to explain many of the events that take place in this novel. Why did she choose to combine fiction and facts? What effect does this have on the story she has told? 
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.5

Additional Activities

1. Have each student interview an individual who lived during the civil-rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s to get a firsthand account of how the subject felt about this movement. Students might choose to interview a family member, friend, teacher, clergy member, or neighbor. Have students ask their subjects what they knew about the civil-rights movement, how they learned about it, and how the civil-rights movement affected their lives, as well as any other questions students may have. Ask students to present the most interesting point they learned from their interview. Encourage students to talk about how their interview changed or broadened their understanding of the civil-rights movement.
Additional Activities (continued)

2. Ask students to watch several videos about Malcolm X. For example:
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9AmuYqjRyg
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpr6PK-Cz3c
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gR5gU7WffMQ
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auWA7hMhShc

   After downloading and viewing these videos, students can use editing software to create a video montage, using various clips of Malcolm X that highlight his work to promote civil rights. Invite students to show their videos to the class and explain why these particular clips are important.

3. Ask students to collect pictures of the civil rights movement from the Internet. Using these pictures, students can create a collage of images that tell the story of the civil rights movement, both the positive and the negative events, from the 1940s through today. Students can add music to this montage and present it to the class.

4. Ask students to reread the author's notes about what happens to Malcolm after he leaves prison. Have them consider the following questions:
   a. Why do you think Malcolm X was such a powerful influence on American society at the time?
   b. Why were some people upset with his teachings?
   c. Why did some people embrace his teachings?

5. Have the class debate the pros and cons of Malcolm X's teachings and decide if they helped the progress of the civil rights movement or if his words hurt the movement.

6. Sometimes words belong to a certain time period. For example, students today use words like sup for "what's up" and lol for "laughing out loud." Some of the terms used in the novel are no longer used in everyday language. Knowing these terms will enrich understanding of Malcolm X's story. Have students research the terms, places, and individuals on the following list and explain how they are connected to life in the 1940s. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.4

   1. Billie Holiday       6. jive                   11. reefer
   2. Black Legion        7. Lindy                   12. uppity
   3. conk                8. making bank             13. zoots

ABOUT ILYASA.SHABAZZ

Ilyasah Shabazz, third daughter of Malcolm X, is an activist, producer, motivational speaker, and the author of the critically acclaimed Growing Up X and the picture book Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Grew Up to Become Malcolm X. In her newest book, X: A Novel, Ilyasah Shabazz explains that it is her responsibility to tell her father's story accurately. She believes "his life's journey will empower others to achieve their highest potential." She lives in Westchester County, New York.

ABOUT KEKLA MAGOO

Kekla Magoon is an award-winning author of many young adult novels, including The Rock and the River, for which she received the 2010 Coretta Scott King–John Steptoe Author Award for New Talent. Kekla Magoon lives in New York City.
X: A Novel: How Malcolm X Grew From ‘Little’ to the Leader of a Revolution

Hope Wabuke

1/23/15 3:00am Filed to: CULTURE

In medieval Europe, when a man vanquished his enemy, he killed the enemy’s wife, the enemy’s children and any other kin he could find. It was brutal; it was terrible. But it was done so that the enemy’s family would have no support, strength or even knowledge of who the man was. So that no one else in the enemy’s family would take up the mantle of revenge upon him or the next generation. Destroy the family, they knew back then, and you destroy everything.

America in the 1940s was no different. Malcolm X’s father, Earl Little, was a pivotal figure in the fight for black rights. In X: A Novel, co-author Ilyasah Shabazz—the third daughter of Malcolm X—recounts how her grandfather “was instrumental in getting Garvey out of jail” and “circulated the petition against the government for violating the human rights of Negroes in the United States.” So Earl was attacked. First the Ku Klux Klan burned his house down, and when that failed to stop him, KKK members killed him one night.

Afterward, Malcolm’s mother kept their family afloat during the Great Depression by working whatever jobs she could find and educating her children in the strength and beauty of black people. But the local government systematically harassed Malcolm’s mother until she finally lost her job when outed as black. With his mother out of work, the government took Malcolm and his brothers and sisters away from their mother; she was later incarcerated in a mental institution. They were taking no chances that one of the children would rise up and take on the father’s mantle working for African-American rights.

Destroy the family, destroy everything. And for a long while, it looked as if this attempt would be a success. When we first meet Malcolm X, then known as Malcolm Little, in X: A Novel, it is 1945 in Harlem, and Malcolm is running for his life from West Indian Archie, the crime boss who employs him. The long line of bad decisions Malcolm has made while fleeing the pain of his father’s murder, a broken family and everyday American racial violence has gotten him here: in a dingy bathroom with an armed gunman seconds away. How could this have happened?

This is the question X: A Novel answers through a vivid portrayal of the formative years of Malcolm X’s life. We see the pain of a frustrated life eating at Malcolm and we wonder: Will he find a way to channel his intelligence and drive? Or will the constant injustice beat down on him, destroying him as it has so many other talented, beautiful black girls and boys?

Because we know Malcolm Little survived to become Malcolm X, the great thinker, leader and activist for African-American rights, the suspense lies not in the if but in the how. In a lively first-person
narration, X: A Novel weaves together Malcolm’s childhood and young-adult life to delve deep into the psychology of his personality, exploring how the weight of his father’s activism and violent death was instrumental in Malcolm’s own civil rights work.

This debut novel by Shabazz, co-written with Kekla Magoon, is an intimate imagining of Malcolm X that humanizes the great leader and makes him accessible for readers of all ages. Set against the horrific racial violence suffered by African Americans in the first part of the 20th century, X: A Novel is a powerful coming-of-age tale of going out into the world, getting lost and finding yourself. Here, Shabazz crafts a love song to her father and to all the little black children of that time whose potential went unrealized because of segregation and discrimination.

Malcolm, like many other black boys and girls growing up in segregated America, was a straight-A student who dreamed of being a lawyer before his teachers told him “he was just a n—ger” who would amount to nothing. By the time Malcolm leaves his foster family in Lansing, Mich., to stay with his half-sister, Ella, in the upper-class black Boston neighborhood of Sugar Hill, his dreams are dead. He has trouble connecting with the more privileged Sugar Hill blacks, who, to him, deny the stifling realities of racism.

He heads down to Roxbury, “where people are looser” and “where all the action is.” Malcolm falls in with Roxbury scenester Shorty, who gets him a job as a shoeshine boy. The old Malcolm is unrecognizable to his new self, with his new fedora, zoot suit, freshly coked hair and ability to party all night. And that is exactly the way he wants it. He is still running—from his memories of his dead father, from the voices that call him “n—ger,” from the odds that are stacked against all black boys trying to become men. How can he be the man his father was, the man his father raised him to be, and not also end up being killed by white people for being “too uppity”? Malcolm has no answer, so he keeps running—heading full tilt for self-destruction with dangerous drugs and dangerous women.

When World War II opens up the enlisted white men’s jobs in the States to blacks, Malcolm gets work on a train line. Able to travel and see more of the world, he sets his sights on New York City. There, Malcolm’s talents captivate a crime boss named Archie, and Malcolm joins his racket as a number runner. But after Archie becomes convinced that Malcolm has scammed him out of a deal, Malcolm flees back to Boston for safety. Malcolm, however, doesn’t see this as a sign to change his life; instead, he accepts an ex-girlfriend’s invitation to join her thieving ring. But it is Malcolm who gets caught.

Given eight to 10 years in prison, Malcolm at first acts out, until an older black Muslim, reminiscent of Malcolm’s father, takes Malcolm under his wing. In being mentored by this man, Malcolm rediscovers his love of reading and thinking. In the stillness, in the reflection, he heals and makes peace with his father’s death. We see Malcolm rediscover his childhood spirituality in the new form of the Nation of Islam. We see Malcolm becoming the man he is meant to be, the man who will change the world.
much, (page 14) Why does Malcolm appeal to Malcolm so
if he doesn't look like a hustler, you go to look at him another
7. Show why Malcolm "in this world, everything a hustle.."
Malcolm
6. Upon Malcolm's arrival in Boston, his half-brother Elian wins him
and how does this influence his future actions?
5. In Chapter 2, Mr. Osswell says Malcolm "has a lot going
once be seen in the way Malcolm himself thinks?
the person's, while, did Carly stand for, and now can this hint
4. Malcolm refers to the influence Marcus Garvey had on both of
How did that one action change Malcolm's life?
3. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
2. Early in the story, Malcolm says "am my father's son, but to
on the story?
1. Instead of telling the story in chronological order, the authors
9. Malcolm reasons that "Negroes don't need improvement. Real
8. Everyone seems willing to offer Malcolm ready at first, How
does this become a problem for him later on?
7. After everyone and see how dry, in promotion, Malcolm remembers
6. When impact does English in Birmingham have on Malcolm: How do
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
2. What does Malcolm blame for his troubles and why?
1. Malcolm buys a bus ticket to Boston, and in that moment he
10. Malcolm: Well that is inevitable there he will go to jail and
9. What does Malcolm mean when he refers to "the world"
8. What does he feel this way?
7. When impact does English influence his future actions?
6. When impact does English influence his future actions?
5. When impact does English influence his future actions?
4. The words "up, you might_PLAY" resonate with Malcolm.
3. When impact does English influence his future actions?
SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

‘X,’ a Novel About Malcolm X
Children’s Books

By MATT de la PEÑA  FEB. 6, 2015

It would be fascinating to get Malcolm X’s take on the current surge of racial tension in America. At first glance, we seem to have made great strides toward equality since the civil rights movement. We elected Barack Obama, a black man, president. Twice. We almost universally condemn outright racism. But is it possible that racism (most notably against African-Americans) hasn’t receded so much as it has evolved and become more refined? “The elegant racist,” Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, “knows how to injure nonwhite people while never summoning the specter of white guilt.” Housing segregation, for instance, is both devastating and hard to detect. And according to the Sentencing Project, a group that advocates for prison reform, racial minorities are more likely than whites to be arrested, to be convicted and to face stiff sentences. With recent racially charged events like the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and Eric Garner in New York City — as well as the rising plea for more representation of minorities in children’s literature from the We Need Diverse Books movement — I can’t think of a more appropriate time for a book about the early years of Malcolm X.

Malcolm’s own daughter Ilyasah Shabazz (“Growing Up X”) and Kekla Magoon (“How It Went Down”) have written just such a book, choosing, as Shabazz explains in a thorough and thoughtful author’s note, to use the novel form as opposed to...
follows a trail that leads him to Boston, then to Harlem, back to Boston, and ultimately to prison after years of crime catch up to him. Not surprisingly, the most interesting journey of the story is the one that takes place inside Malcolm’s mind and heart.

On his first bus ride out of Michigan, Malcolm sees a black body hanging from a tree near the side of the road. An older black man sitting nearby tries to shield Malcolm’s eyes, but Malcolm has already seen it, and his thoughts go directly to his own father, an activist who may have met a similar fate back when Malcolm was just 6. Years later, when Malcolm is in Harlem and committed to his new life as a hustler, he hears Billie Holiday sing “Strange Fruit,” that haunting song about lynching. It hits young Malcolm at his core. He sits there in silence long after Holiday has left the stage. But Malcolm isn’t quite ready to process the depth of this hurt. Instead of reflecting on his father this time — the fascinating evolution of his relationship with his dead father, incidentally, is one of the book’s highlights — he muses: “Got to have some reefer after that. A little whiskey.”

Skillfully rendered moments like this are what make the novel so successful. Shabazz and Magoon expertly guide the reader by presenting loaded scene after loaded scene, often making us watch young Malcolm choose the wrong path or opt for the buzz of the street over the pull of family and principle. The result is a satisfying (and appropriate) complexity. Malcolm’s love for his mother, father and siblings is palpable, even when he’s pulling away from them or sabotaging those bonds.

The novel eludes any neatly tied bows at the end, as well. Instead of closing with Malcolm well on the way to fame, “X” leaves us with the beginning of his awakening while he was still in prison, where he shows a growing interest in books and converts to Islam (a return to his roots, the novel is careful to point out). In one climactic moment Malcolm reflects, “I am my father’s son,” and instead of being part of what’s wrong with the world, he vows to fight against the wrongness.

There are a few minor missteps. The pacing is off in places — in the first third of the book we’re unnecessarily yanked back and forth in time — and I longed for more reflective depth from Malcolm, especially given the major historical events taking
place around him, like the Great Depression and World War II. Still, “X” is a powerful, honest look at the early years of one of our country’s most important civil rights leaders. Most exciting of all is the prospect that his story will awaken a new generation of young activists, inspiring them to step into what remains a vital fight.

X

By Ilyasah Shabazz and Kekla Magoon

348 pp. Candlewick Press. $16.99. (Young adult; ages 14 and up)

Matt de la Peña is the author of several novels, including “Mexican WhiteBoy” and, most recently, “The Living,” which has just been released in paperback.

A version of this review appears in print on February 8, 2015, on Page BR23 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Becoming Malcolm X.