

# X *a* NOVEL

by ILYASAH SHABAZZ  
with KEKLA MAGOON

## ABOUT THE BOOK

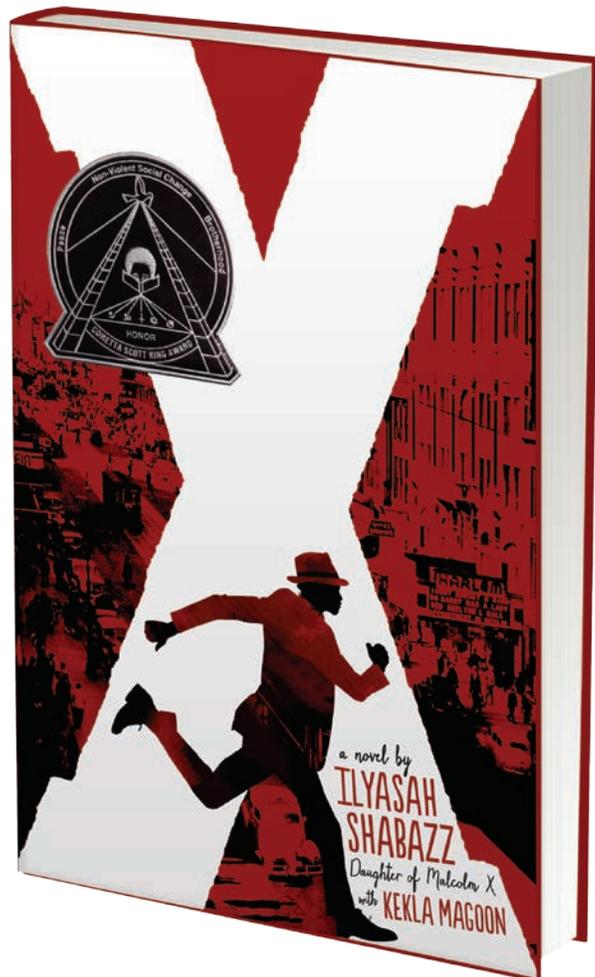
Malcolm Little is lost, his spirit broken. His father has been murdered, his mother taken away by state officials bent on destroying his family, and Malcolm separated from his siblings. Trouble seems to find him wherever he goes . . . and some of it is his own making. Choosing the excitement of Boston 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.

## ABOUT ILYASAH 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 *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 MAGOON

Kekla Magoon is the Margaret A. Edwards Award-winning author of more than a dozen books for young readers, including *Fire in the Streets* and *How It Went Down*. She is also the coauthor, with Ilyasah Shabazz, of *X: A Novel*, which was long-listed for the National Book Award and received an NAACP Image Award and a Coretta Scott King Honor. Kekla Magoon grew up in Indiana and now lives in Vermont, where she serves on the faculty at Vermont College of Fine Arts.



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## 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

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 from which to view Malcolm's story. The following suggestions can be used to build background knowledge and to activate prior knowledge before reading. They may also be used for different types of writing, from daily journal prompts throughout the reading to more detailed research papers after reading.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.7

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

- Working in small groups, students should prepare a brief overview of one of the following topics and present their information to the class. They can incorporate technology and music to support their presentations about what they've learned.
  - Malcolm X's work as a civil-rights leader
  - 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 Black Freedom Struggle from 1619 to today
- Have students collect artifacts and images of Roxbury, MA, and Harlem, NY, in the 1940s and the present. Have students discuss and share their findings.
- Have students develop their research skills by investigating either activism in Tennessee, such as the Highlander Folk School, the Nashville sit-ins, the Tent City movement in Memphis, and the Clinton Twelve, or the impact of music during the Black Freedom Struggle.

## Discussion Questions

- 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? How does the story change if the flashbacks are removed? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.5
- 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). Who is the "they" that Malcolm is referring to? How does this statement foreshadow everything that happens to him? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.6
- 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 he means? Can a person buy a new life? What's necessary to create a new life? How did that one action change Malcolm's life? How do we see the impact of his former life in his new life? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.1
- 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
- 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

## Discussion Questions (continued)

6. When Malcom is very young, his parents tell him that he can be anything he wants to be. In Chapter 3, Mr. Ostrowski tells Malcolm that he can't be a lawyer because he is Black. What impact do these conflicting messages have on Malcolm? How do they inform his later decisions? Have you ever experienced anything similar? How did you feel? How did you handle the conflicting messages? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.1
7. Upon Malcolm's arrival in Boston, his half-sister Ella wants him to experience the city before he gets a job. What did Ella hope Malcolm would do during this time? What does Malcolm do instead? How does this change him? How does it change his relationship with Ella? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1
8. 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
9. Everyone seems willing to offer Malcolm credit at first. What does this say about Malcolm's character? How does this become a problem for him later on? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1
10. 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
11. 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.RI.9–10.1
12. 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
13. 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 he blame for his troubles and why? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1
14. 22843. With these numbers, Malcolm begins to look at his life in a new way. How does he see the world through these numbers? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9–10.2
15. 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? How are the words that make up this book a weapon? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.1
16. What impact does Elijah Muhammad have on Malcolm? How do his words change Malcolm? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9–10.1
17. 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? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.1
18. 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
19. Malcolm Little becomes Detroit Red. Detroit Red eventually becomes 22843. How do each of these names change Malcolm? Who is instrumental in these changes? Why do names matter? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9–10.4
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.
2. Ask students to locate speeches, photos, articles, and other media about Malcolm X. After reading and analyzing several pieces of media, students can create a response to reading *X: A Novel* using these artifacts. They can then create an accompanying piece of writing that analyzes and synthesizes their understanding of the novel and their understanding of Malcolm X.
3. Ask students to collect pictures of the Modern Black Freedom Struggle 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 students examine Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* or Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*. Have students discuss how Malcolm's life might have been different if he were incarcerated now.
5. 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  |
| 4. Cotton Club    | 9. Marcus Garvey    |            |
| 5. Harlem         | 10. Nation of Islam |            |

6. Have students read and analyze the Black Lives Matter website, then have them look for speeches by Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey. As a class, discuss the similarities and differences among these activists and their philosophies.
7. Malcolm X stated, "The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses." Have students think about how media has changed since Malcolm X was alive. How has the rise of social media impacted the Black Freedom Struggle? How might Malcolm X use social media?

This guide was written by Dr. Susan Thompson of the Lynchburg College School of Education, with updates made by Dr. Kim Parker, Shady Hill School, and Nicholl Montgomery, a Boston educator.



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