

# 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.



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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

- 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.RI.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.RI.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=gRSgUTWffMQ>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auWA7hMh5hc>

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:

- Why do you think Malcolm X was such a powerful influence on American society at the time?
- Why were some people upset with his teachings?
- 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  |
| 4. Cotton Club    | 9. Marcus Garvey    |            |
| 5. Harlem         | 10. Nation of Islam |            |

### 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 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 MAGOON

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.



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