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X

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Book Review

Title: X

Author: Ilyasah Shabazz with Kekla Magoon

Reviewer: Carlie Smith

Publisher: Candlewick Press

Publication Year: 2015

ISBN: 9780763669676

Number of Pages: 348

Interest Level: Young Adult

Rating: Excellent



Review

Before he was X, Malcolm had many titles: son, brother, Negro, dancer, Detroit Red, and thief. This novel explores Malcolm's early years before he became one of the most influential civil rights activists. Haunted from an early age by the injustice of his father's assassination and his mother's confinement in a mental institution, Malcolm quickly learned street survival skills. He leaves Lansing, Michigan for the progressive Roxbury neighborhood of Brooklyn and falls in love with the dancing clubs, zoot suits, and "cool cat" hustlers. He sheds his small-town identity to become Red, a petty criminal, the boyfriend of a white woman, and friend of jazz musicians. Work opportunities lead Malcolm to Harlem where he becomes an associate of Sammy the Pimp and bookie West Indies Archie. But one of his deals goes badly awry in a haze of drugs and dancing so Malcolm retreats back to Boston. There he finds the best and most risky gig yet, robbing the wealthy white neighborhood with his girlfriend. Malcolm is eventually caught and sentenced to prison at 23 years old. This world away from the streets forces him to confront his true identity as the son of religious, powerful, and proud black activists. He learns of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and decides to become a new man, Malcolm X.

This novel's unique features make it an excellent choice for a high school history classroom. X is written by Ilyasah Shabazz, Malcolm X's daughter. Although her father was killed when she was young, the stories she was told by her family members and her personal sense of pride of being part of the Little family provide deep insight into Malcolm's identity. Malcolm's early years cover key parts of 20th century US history, from the Great Depression to the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement. The narrative details can help students to contextualize the experiences of black people during these tumultuous years. His story can be the foundation for discussions on many topics. The challenges Malcolm faces will resonate with teenagers. His strained family relationships, struggle with competing expectations; attraction to drugs, alcohol, and sex; conflicts with the law, and quest for identity are all contemporary issues. X is an engaging read, but more importantly, a humanizing look that will prompt students to look deeper into a controversial historical figure.

*Contains mild violence and moderate sex content and language.