

The Autobiography of Malcolm X - Reviews from HMP Prisoners, July 2015

John

A book of immense power. A broken man with a troubled childhood finds his cause and a belief that we can change the stereotypical views helped by his faith. The journey from a clearly intelligent child to the streets of Harlem as a young adult, where like so many others, he became addicted to cocaine and burgled to feed his addiction.

The inevitable demise led to his imprisonment and a journey of recovery. Often at odds with the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm riled against the norm, vocally advocating extreme anti-white views, mirroring the views of many working class Afro-Americans.

Over time his radical views changed and he became a voice of unity for both black and white, at last finding his 'true' voice. Tragically just as he came to back to the Civil Rights Movement he was assassinated. The book is a powerful testament to one man's driven need and desire for all black Americans.

Iain

Malcolm X was the son of a Baptist preacher. He grew up in Lansing, Michigan. But after the early death of his father in 1931 he was placed in a foster home. When he was leaving school early he made his way to New York to work as a waiter in Harlem.

In 1946 Malcolm was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. While in prison he became a disciple of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam sect which were known as Black Muslims. He spent the next ten years travelling throughout the country speaking on behalf of the Black Muslim movement. It was at this time that he gave up his surname – he considered it a relic of slavery – and became known as Malcolm X.

In 1963 he left the Black Muslim movement because of a disagreement with Muhammad and a feud developed between the Black Muslims and the followers of Malcolm X. He was also criticized by more moderate leaders of the Civil Rights Movement for his extreme anti-white views and it started a violent protest.

Mark

I have only read the first chapter of the book so far, but I am gripped by the recollection of Malcolm's early years. For such a young child he had to go through not only the death of his father but the separation from the rest of his family. It is quite evident that even at this young age he was very bitter regarding his mother being taken into care due to her mental state – all of which was brought on by her trying to look after her family in very difficult times, with absolutely no help – in fact quite the opposite, by the (white run) authorities.

Summing up, all I can say is that I cannot wait to sit down and read the following chapters of this book.

Tendai

I am quite touched by the whole of chapter one as Malcolm describes how his father looked after his family.

As a hardworking preacher, he made sure that his family did not have to depend on the authorities to survive, which by what he remembers they were not fair on how they treated black people. He certainly learnt a lot of things from his father as he believed he was his favourite.

Nowadays our attitude towards family is a bit different in the sense that men do not look after their women as they did back in those days. There is more equal rights and women prefer to go to work than staying at home and

looking after their families. In my opinion, it might sound a bit old fashioned, but I think mothers should spend more time at home with their families. In that way they can teach them all sorts of domestic chores to improve their future abilities in their homes.

On the other hand it shows how everything evolves around money in this world – that everybody must earn some money, not just one person doing it for the whole family because it's never enough.

Malcolm also expresses a rollercoaster of emotion from when his father was alive to when he finally died. They went through the Great Depression period and his mother not being mentally stable which is understandable in comparison to his behaviour. He became a violent boy and he wanted to be the man who his father was. Being able to protect his little ill brother made him feel useful.

It's interesting to learn that he used to like learning through philosophy. In so many occasions he expressed his feelings in quotes, that might be evidence to suggest that he wasn't as dull as he thought.

I am looking forward to reading the rest of the book because I feel like it's got so much issues to tackle and his writing skills are spot on to what I expect from authors.

Dirk

Although I have not yet read all the book, I have found it extremely interesting and poignant, it is definitely a book I will read again.

In places I have found it both educational and moving reading about his family life, early years and the way he built up to the man who galvanised and moved so many people, not only in America but in other countries as well.

Even though I have not read all of it I find myself drawn back to it when I have nothing to do, this is unusual for me as with my reading problems I don't usually do that, it takes me out of my cell and into his world, which for a young black man at that time must have been very hard. His mother's pride and his father's early death obviously had a profound and galvanising effect on his life and politics. And I look forward to reading more about him.

Jacob

Caught

He doesn't have much respect for women, he also smokes a lot of cannabis/reefa. Very shy not wanting to talk much at first. Listens to a lot of music – likes to be known as a hustler. He knew he had the ability and supreme well being – add soaring over-confidence in both physical and mental well being to be a leader. I feel like I am not alone with my feelings and that I am not the only man going through the same struggle.

Junior

The Relevance of Malcolm X

Whenever people talk about race, people can get uncomfortable. We don't want to feel like we're part of the problem and many of us try in our lives not to be. Talking about it can be painful to some because it reminds us that there are experiences we can't fully understand because they haven't happened to us in such a brazen manner as has to others, or none at all.

When Malcolm spoke you could hear the anger and disgust in his voice, also I received the same vibe from the text within the book. It's amazing that he could've been saying this last week. What he's talking about rings so true to us in 2015! In such democratised times of "the people", we expect police to be on our side, working with us. But in recent events namely Ferguson Missouri etc. etc. can and has shaken people's beliefs in the system.

Really it's hard to know how often someone faces harsh treatment and is assaulted by members of the police force because it happens away from the cameras and the public. On the other hand there has to be thousands of police that have morals and great relationships with their communities. How much progress have we made??? If any! Heartbreakingly what Malcolm X described does still happen.

This man was something of an extraordinary character, made a transition from drug dealing, gambling, racketeering, robbery and pimping, to becoming the head figure of the Universal Negro Improvement Society (UNIA). The transition started whilst he was serving time in Charlestown State Prison for larceny and breaking and entering, so he was far from an angel in his own rights!

He preached race separation as opposed to integration, blacks living separate from whites. This came from his father's influence by Marcus Garvey who believed in this, even though he was brought up by white foster parents. He fought against racism in a very different light from traditional Civil Rights groups, he did more than speak about racism in the abstract; he also spoke out on particular concerns, some of which remain with us. In May 1964 he talked about police brutality in black communities. "A black man in America lives in a police state", he said, "He doesn't live in any democracy. He lives in a police state." He also blamed the media saying: "The press is used to make it look like black men are the criminal and the police force is the victim." His statement addresses the phenomenon that has occurred repeatedly in the past few years in incidents of police brutality involving black men killed by their hands. A voice like Malcolm X's on this subject would be quite relevant today. His place in history continues to evolve. 50 years ago more than the life of a great leader was lost. The world lost a chance to address racial issues that continue to divide the nations.

Trevor

I believe this autobiography proves Malcolm X is still relevant today as he explains his life challenges, even though so long ago, are still the challenges that are current and that people are facing in today's society. Poverty, social deprivation, racism, classism and a need for survival in the ghetto will always occur as the way society is set up, it dictates that separatism on some level will always be the order of the day in modern society.

Although unfair reality has made this apparent, throughout all periods of history. The chapter "Hustler" explains how, in order to survive, a man with no education or skills gets involved in drugs, prostitution, robbery and gambling just to put food on the table. Bootlegging and drugs vices helped people get through these depressing times along with other vices. Also being black in this time mimics being an ethnic outcast, being left to fend for yourself by a government who doesn't care about you, hence the lack of care socially, and also the blasé attitude in which the poor were treated then. Life at this time was reliant on skill, cunning, wit, survival instinct combined with dishonesty and a will to succeed. When a man is left with no choices or opportunity, he tends to make poor decisions as he is forced into this by his situation.

I can relate to his feelings of God watching over him, when entrenched in a flurry of dangerous situations that he wonders on reflection how he managed to survive. Finding faith can often be the saving grace for people like this and always has, even today.

For me the biggest relevant factor in his life that is current today, is change. Any man who is honest and willing to look at his defects of character, will always have the capacity to change within himself especially with help. For me this equates to strength and defines a man, as what doesn't break us makes us stronger. In conclusion

Malcolm's life is an inspirational account and truly gives us an insight into one of the world's greatest ever human beings.

Matthew

Is Malcolm X Still Relevant?

In asking whether Malcolm X is still relevant we have to assume that he once was. Undoubtedly, in the 1950s Malcolm X was a dominant voice for the socially repressed black society. Perhaps a more pertinent question to ask in 2015 would be 'to whom is Malcolm X still relevant'? Is it the black community that he famously defended? Great strides have been made since Malcolm X's murder, both socially and legislatively, for inclusion and equality amongst all of America's citizens. I can present no better evidence to this than the democratic election of a black US president.

Although race riots have recently been seen again on the streets of America, they aren't necessarily born out of endemic racism. It is my understanding that the latest unrest manifests from failings of police forces to correctly apprehend, restrain or question persons of interest. I therefore feel that Malcolm X, as revered as he once was (and continues to be), doesn't hold relevance with the black community of today.

If not the black community, then to whom? In answering this, we have to establish Malcolm X's own beliefs. This presents its own difficulties in that his ideology changes considerably throughout his lifetime. In his childhood, Malcolm's life is constantly dictated to him by white authority figures. After the murder of his father at the hands of white supremacists, and the deterioration of his mother's mental health, he is forced to accept the decision of a judge who places him into the care of a foster family. The fact that all these people are white can not have been lost on his impressionable young mind.

Quite possibly the greatest influence on his early beliefs has to come from his school teacher, who after learning of Malcolm's aspiration to become a lawyer, firmly quashes any academic progression of this quite capable student. As a result, Malcolm becomes reclusive feeling trapped by the colour of his own skin.

Rather than integrate and conform as his teacher would have liked, the teenage Malcolm sought refuge among thriving black communities: first in Boston and later in New York. I believe this is an attempt to shut out 'white' influences that had held him back thus far, and to allow him the opportunity to make it on his own, amongst his own.

Surrounded by others who similarly grown to acknowledge that social mobility within a predominantly white America was a challenging prospect, Malcolm gets on with living the best life he deems possible for his race. He doesn't seem anti-white at this stage, more accepting that the white man runs America. Had he possessed the anti-white sentiment he would later become famous for, then I would find it hard to believe that he would have had an inter-racial relationship.

His life takes a downward spiral into crime and drug-taking, all of which he is more than happy to involve his white girlfriend and her sister in. Conversely, if there is one belief that I think Malcolm holds for the entirety of his life, it is his views on women. Whilst falling short of misogyny, it is clearly evident that he holds entrenched sexist views, discriminating against women quite overtly at times. However, I suspect that his view was quite ubiquitous amongst middle-aged men of 1950s America!

It is Malcolm's inevitable prison sentence that truly ignites his anti-white sentiment. His involvement in 'corrupting' two young white females into his criminal escapades led him to believe that his sentence was unduly longer than it would otherwise had been. With a white judge yet again dictating his life, together with his past influences and experiences of white supremacy, it is his time in incarceration that allows his anti-white feelings to grow and fester.

The resentment of the white man is timed perfectly with his finding of the Nation of Islam. His correspondence with Elijah Muhammad entrenches his belief so strongly that he acknowledges him as a deity (and worships him as one). This, I believe, was Malcolm X's greatest mistake. The dangers of holding a person in such high regard is that that person is still human, capable of making mistakes and therefore sin, something God (or Allah) is immune to.

The Nation of Islam is an interesting religious organisation; it acts as a break-away faction of traditional Islam – what some would describe as a sect! The birth of the phrase 'devil white man' and their extremist views aren't too dissimilar to those that we hear today from Islamic extremists such as ISIS, cementing the Nation of Islam as being rather far removed from the true Islamic beliefs of non-violence and peace. From Malcolm's autobiography it is never made clear whether he personally condoned violence. However, it was definitely portrayed this way by the press and media at the time.

Malcolm's incarceration provided him with ample opportunity to educate himself. He chooses to immerse himself with historical facts, studies philosophy and practices debating amongst his fellow inmates. In an effort to improve his vocabulary he even transcribes an entire dictionary. These new-found skills and knowledge equipped Malcolm with the tools to become an accomplished public speaker; to which the Nation of Islam put to good use. He also excelled in organisational skills and man-management, which were utilised successfully to build membership of the Nation of Islam.

It is around this time in Malcolm's life that I become confused as to what he stood for. On the surface it quite clearly looks as though he is fighting for black equality. Look a little deeper however, and his arguments should be extended to social class or anti-capitalism. He belittles so-called "bourgeois Negroes", who as far as he can see, have done nothing more than climb the social ladder and bettered themselves. Instead of applauding them, Malcolm X seems to hold them in veneration (sic) for apparently succeeding in a 'White Man's America'. I have no doubt that 1950s America was an increasingly racist decade to live through, but far less so than fifty years before it. Social tolerance of minority groups can take generations to implement and comes about through integration and acceptance. However, gradual change must be frustratingly slow for those living through it. Perhaps a sizeable movement can bring about a seismic shift in attitudes in order to get the ball rolling. Is this what Malcolm X had in mind? Did he believe that by taking such an extreme view it would skew social acceptance towards racial equality? Sadly, I don't buy this.

Malcolm X only revisits his beliefs after his pilgrimage to Mecca. After his falling out with Elijah Muhammad, culminating in his suspension from the Nation of Islam, he sought to reassess his beliefs drawing on more traditional Islamic values. It is whilst he is away from America that he learns to embrace all races and ethnicities regardless of skin colour. He also learns how different the Nation of Islam is from 'true Islam' promising to go back to America and preach the more traditional form. It is upon his return to that he denounces the 'devil white man' rhetoric and instead promotes integration, tolerance and acceptance. I applaud anyone who is open-minded enough to change their opinions based on newly discovered enlightenment or understanding. This is especially important when that person holds the ear of the disenfranchised black youth.

The fight for equality, for whatever unrepresented group of society, has always required a leader; from Emmeline Pankhurst of the Suffragettes movement to Harvey Milk campaigning for gay rights. Malcolm X was a formidable character who passionately believed in a better life for black Americans, but is he still relevant today?

I believe that Malcolm X is still relevant today, but not in the fight for racial equality. He is relevant to an entire society in understanding how the dangers of social repression and intolerance can cause national, and even international, disharmony. He is relevant because he can help us understand how extremist views can gather momentum and popularity under pragmatic leadership. How such an ideology can be packaged into a factional sect masquerading under a form of religion. But by far the most important lesson that we can learn from Malcolm

X, some fifty years after his death, is that a true utopian society comes from integration, tolerance and acceptance of our fellow man (and woman) in all their unique and glorious forms.

Justice

I

Malcolm X was one of the most important and influential political figures of his time I believe! He was labelled militant, extremist, and controversial person and he's big enough to accept it! This is what he said when confronted with it – yes I'm an extremist, the black race here in North America is in extremely bad condition, you show me a black man who isn't an extremist and I'll show you one who needs psychiatric attention. What he meant here is that desperate people does desperate things! The extremely bad condition of black people made some of them extremist. When he was called a racist this is what he said – I'm not a racist, I'm not condemning whites for being whites, but for their deeds! I condemn what whites – collectively, have done to our people collectively. From non-violence to active self defence against white supremacists across America. Don't strike at puppets, strike at the puppeteer.

IS MALCOLM X SILL RELEVANT? For us to be discussing and debating about him today says it all, this is what HE said about it. Do you realise that history's greatest leaders never were recognised until they were safely in the ground? The New York Times reported that a meeting of Negro intellectuals had agreed that Dr Martin Luther King could secure the allegiance of the upper and middle classes of Negroes, but Malcolm X alone could secure the allegiance of Negroes at the bottom. They also know that he comes from the lowest depth and they regard him as one of their own. The Negroes respect Dr Martin Luther King and Malcolm X because they sensed in these men absolute integrity and know they will never sell them out.

II

When the author told Malcolm that his youngest brother had won a seat in one of the State Senates, Malcolm said, tell your brother for me that he and other moderate Negroes who are getting somewhere need to always remember that it was us extremists who made it possible. He talked about the pressures on him everywhere he turned and about the frustration among them. That no one wanted to accept anything relating to him except "my old hate and violence image". He said the so-called moderate civil-rights organisation avoided him as he was too militant and those called militant avoided him as he was too moderate– they won't let me turn the corner! He once exclaimed – 'I'm caught in a trap'. He said, I believe in recognising every human being as a human being neither white, black, brown or red! And when you are dealing with humanity as a family there is no question of integration or inter-marriages – it's just one human being marrying another human being or one being living with another human being. I may say though, that I don't think it should ever be put on a black man, I don't think the burden to defend any position should ever be put upon black men because it's white men collectively who has shown that he is hostile toward integration and towards inter-marriages and these strides towards oneness. So as a black man and especially as a black American any stand that I formerly took, I don't think that I would have to defend it because it's still a reaction to the society: and I think that it's the society that produces this that should be attacked, not the reaction that exists among the people who are the victims of that negative society.

III

He's talking about the HATE that HATE produced: I don't advocate violence but if a man steps on my toes, understandably I'll step on his. When he went to visit Dr Martin Luther King's wife while Martin was in prison Malcolm told her and the gathering that he's not there to cause trouble or rioting but to help and give alternatives! He said whites better be glad Martin Luther King is rallying the people, because other forces are waiting to take over if he fails. He showed his flexibility when he told a reporter: I'm man enough to tell you that I

can't put my finger on exactly what my philosophy is now. He said that his biggest mistake was when a young white girl came to him and asked how to help during his Black Muslim days that he said to her – no way you are not welcome and she went away crying. When he travelled to the African continent his perspective changed – I saw a white student helping black people. Something like this kills a lot of arguments – I did many things as a Muslim that I'm sorry for now. Even on his death many of his opponents confessed their respect for this man. I believe that he was sincerely groping to find a place in the fight Civil Rights, on a level where he would be respected and understood fully. I looked forward to his growth along these lines. It doesn't matter so much about the past.

It is tragic that he was cut down at the point when he seemed to be achieving the position of respectability he sought. I believe everyone can't be Mr nice guy – Malcolm was a rarity. In life we need flexibility because life itself is not static – we learn every day as we grow events around us have so much influence on us as well. In politics you have right wing, left wing, centre, centre of both right and left and far left and right. Some politicians have moved both ways in their political life – that doesn't change the person only his views at the time changed.

IV

Is Malcolm X STILL RELEVANT? Of course YES! HE IS AND WAS VERY, VERY RELEVANT.