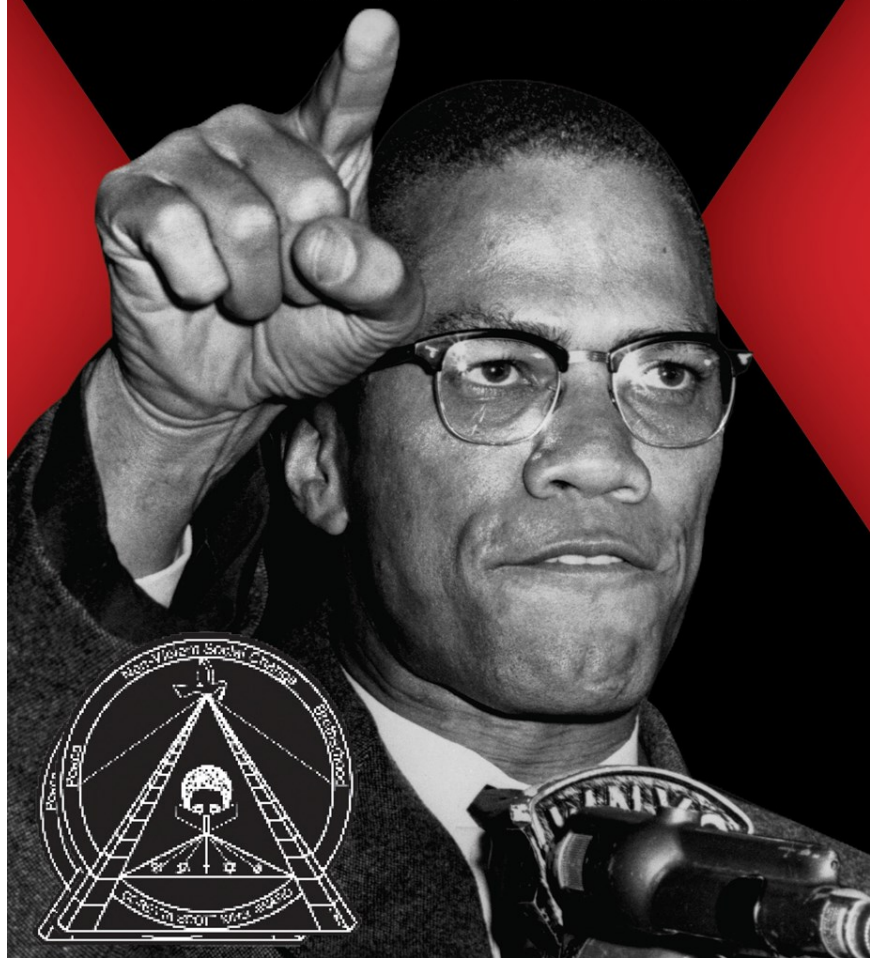


A Biography by

WALTER DEAN MYERS

MALCOLM X

BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY



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PREFACE

THE SIXTIES was a decade of change in the United States. Some of the changes were orderly, some were not. In a way it was the first period in American history in which people took their protests to the streets and actually forced changes in the way the country went about its business. The changes began, as so many do, with a people's protesting against a long-standing injustice, in this case the evils of a racially divided society.

From the hard times of the civil rights movement, from the jails and the bombings, the hatred and the love, the curses and the prayers, emerged some of the most memorable people in the history of this country: people such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Thurgood Marshall; Medgar Evers; Fannie Lou Hamer; Septima Clark; and the Kennedy brothers, Robert and John. There were people who were quietly courageous, who risked their lives for their fellow human beings, and who far too often lost their lives. Not since the Civil War had there been as much violence on American streets.

It is hard now to think of a United States in which black people could not even drink from the same water fountains as white people, or in which black students could not attend public schools that their tax dollars had paid for, simply because of the color of their skin. In some places, blacks were barred from restaurants, prevented from voting, and

forced to sit in the backs of buses. To be black was to be treated with contempt, a contempt that was often backed by what were then called “Jim Crow” laws. In the wrenching days of protest known as the civil rights movement, America confronted its racial problems, not only in the courts, but in the streets as well. It is a rare testimony to the American system of government that the country was not torn apart.

To select one person, or even one group of people, as being pivotal to the sixties is risky. There were many people who were important in that exciting time in American history. Who is best remembered? Whose words have best stood the test of time? Whose actions most defined the temper of the times as we remember that time, and that temper, from the present? For many it was a man named Malcolm X.

It was Malcolm’s anger, his biting wit, his dedication, that put the hard edge on the movement, that provided the other side of the sword, not the handle of acceptance and nonviolence, but the blade.

“Whoever heard of a nonviolent revolution?” Malcolm asked. “Whoever heard of a revolution without bloodshed?”

The mere possibilities inherent in the questions sent government officials to back-room planning strategies with nonviolent demonstrators.

Malcolm showed that one person, riding the crest of social discontent, could still inspire great masses of people. He displayed the awesome potential of a portion of black America that many thought would sleep forever and

proved that black docility was a thing of the past. Malcolm and the Nation of Islam drove the civil rights movement, gave it the dark side that many feared it might have. It was Malcolm who said to black Americans that they did not always have to hide their pain, or their outrage. It was Malcolm who claimed the imagination of young black men as no one had since Frederick Douglass had called them to fight in the Civil War.

The segregation signs have been taken down now. They can be bought at flea markets as “collectibles” from a distant era. The pictures of black students being escorted to school by armed soldiers can be found only in history books. But the memories of the sixties, and of Malcolm X, remain. He remains because he represented, and still represents, something that other leaders, leaders as courageous as Malcolm, did not. These leaders, black and white, men and women, willing to risk their lives in the search for justice for all people, represented a courage that was right for the time. But Malcolm’s words speak to today’s time, and to the young people of today who, in many ways, are as different from the mainstream of American life now as their parents were in the fifties and sixties. The reasons might be different, but the disillusionment is the same.

Malcolm scared America. The fear he generated might well have cost him his life. But in scaring America, in bringing it face-to-face with the realities of our society in the sixties, he left it a better place.

INTRODUCTION

A MAN CALLED MALCOLM

APRIL, 1957, NEW YORK CITY. Two black-and-white New York City police cars pulled up to the curb in front of the 28th Precinct. Curious onlookers watched as the police pulled a black man from the back of one of the cars. The man's arms were handcuffed behind him. There was blood on his head and on the front of his shirt.

Two hefty police officers, one on either side, half lifted, half pulled the man into the station. On the street some people commented to each other and then went about their business. It wasn't the first time that a black man had been hauled into the police station, or even the first time one had been brought into the station bleeding.

One Hundred and Twenty-third Street is in the center of Harlem. The street is not particularly wide, and often the police cars in front of the precinct were parked on the sidewalk. Red and brown buildings along the street, which had seemed almost colorless during the long winter months, were coming alive in the early spring weather. Already there were signs of the coming summer.

On the fire escapes overlooking the street were flower boxes, an occasional mop put out to dry, and sometimes

a small child playing under the watchful eye of a grandparent. In the windows the serious watchers, the women who brought special pillows to the windows on which to rest their elbows, didn't spend much time on precinct activity. There were other, more cheerful things to see on the busy street. There were always the children, playing spirited games of ring-o-leevio and stickball, moving reluctantly from their games to allow cars to pass. Older women sat in front of their homes and exchanged the most recent gossip. Old men played bid whist or dominoes while young men whispered their best lines to slim-waisted girls.

The street held a rich assortment of colors. The brightly colored skirts of Jamaican blacks, the white shirts of the old men, and the blue jeans of the youngest boys all served to offset the drabness of the buildings themselves. But the most vibrant colors were those of the inhabitants of the street. They ranged from the deep brown, almost pure black, of some of the boys idly bouncing a basketball, to the cinnamon-colored shopkeeper on the corner, to the cream-colored, almost white, woman playing with her child.

The baseball season had just started and there was talk about the retirement of Jackie Robinson. Jackie had been a Harlem hero from his entrance into professional baseball in 1947 until he had decided to hang up his spikes.

Some old-timers were talking about the ballplayers from the old Negro Leagues: Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, and Buck Leonard. Younger men were talking about Willie Mays.

Suddenly there was a stirring on the street; something was happening. There is an unspoken language in Harlem,

a way that the people walk, and look at one another, that signals that something important is going on. The casual pace is suddenly quickened, the rhythms of the street are less relaxed, there is an electricity in the air. There was a decrease in the volume of street noises. Portable radios were turned down, conversations were interrupted. Eyes turned toward the busy 28th Precinct. What they saw shocked them.

In front of the 28th Precinct was a formation of black men. They were all dressed neatly with short haircuts, their arms folded before them. Some wore dark glasses, many wore suits. None of them were smiling.

“The Black Muslims!”

The word quickly spread along the street. The women in the windows shifted the pillows that protected their elbows from the concrete windowsills. A crowd began to gather around the men in formation. A white policeman took a look at the lines of men and quickly disappeared into the station house.

A brown-skinned young man, tall and blade-thin, carefully surveyed the formation that defiantly faced the precinct doors. Pleased by what he saw, he adjusted his glasses, walked toward the station house, and through the heavy doors.

Inside the station the young man walked quickly to the desk sergeant. He noticed the white police officers gathered at the windows.

The thin man who confronted the desk sergeant demanded to see the black man who earlier had been

brought to the station bleeding and in cuffs. He asked for the man by name.

The officer at the desk said that the man wasn't there, but the stern-faced man in front of him insisted that he was. The officer seemed nervous as he admitted that the man was indeed there, but that he could not be seen.

"And who are you?" the officer asked.

"Malcolm X!" The answer was quick in coming, and forcefully delivered.

Malcolm X declared that until the man, Johnson Hinton, was actually seen, and he was personally assured of Hinton's safety and that he was receiving proper medical attention, the formation that had assembled outside the precinct would remain.

The police of the 28th Precinct had heard of the militant group commonly called the Black Muslims, but they had never seen it represented in this manner. The entire scene looked like trouble.

In Harlem the police did what they felt was necessary to maintain law and order. There had been occasional difficulties, but never an organized group of black men as this seemed to be. It was said that the Black Muslims hated all whites and were trained in the martial arts.

The desk officer relented and allowed the man before him, Malcolm X, to see the man the police had arrested earlier.

"That man belongs in the hospital," Malcolm announced.

An ambulance was called, and Johnson Hinton was

taken to Harlem Hospital. The men who had formed ranks outside of the police station remained in formation as they followed the route of the ambulance to the hospital on Lenox Avenue. The crowd following the small force of men grew as they passed through the streets. By the time they had reached Harlem Hospital the crowd had grown sufficiently for the local police to contact police headquarters in lower Manhattan.

A police official approached Malcolm X and told him bluntly that he would have to move his people away from the hospital.

Malcolm refused, saying that the members of the Nation of Islam were standing peacefully, within their constitutional rights, and harming no one. The police officer looked at the men standing in ranks, and walked away. Malcolm sent one of the men into the hospital to check on the condition of Hinton.

The crowd behind the formation was growing more restless and more police were summoned. Soon there were two lines of men facing each other, one white, the other black. The policemen were not sure of what was happening. The men of the Nation of Islam were motionless.

The police official returned to Malcolm and told him that the crowd behind his formation was shouting at the police and acting in a manner that he could not tolerate.

Malcolm said that he would control the members of the Nation of Islam, and that the rest of the crowd was the problem of the police official. Again, the police official backed off.

The man that Malcolm had sent into the hospital returned. He told Malcolm the doctors had assured him that Hinton was getting the best care possible. Malcolm signaled the formation of men and they moved silently away.

That night and the next morning the community was filled with talk of “the Muslims,” and how they had confronted the police. The police talked about the incident as well and wondered exactly what challenge the Muslims presented to them and exactly who was this man who called himself Malcolm X.