

# Malcolm X's story critical in race relations

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**E**very so often a book comes along that changes the world in some way. Maybe it heralds the start of a social movement, or enlightens the world about events long hidden. Only in hindsight can we see what a difference such a book made. Here is one such book.

**What it is:** "The Autobiography of [Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley](#)" by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 1965

In this autobiography, readers learn about the life of the controversial civil rights activist. It recounts his transition from Malcolm Little the child to Malcolm X, the charismatic member of the Nation of Islam who later renounced the group.

Early on he learned about racial tension: His childhood home was burned down by the white supremacist organization Black Legion, and his favorite teacher told him his dreams of being a lawyer were "no realistic goal for (a racial epithet)."

Little turned to a life of crime and spent seven years in prison on burglary charges. While there he became a Muslim, and his views toward white people hardened. After leaving prison he became a national spokesman for the Nation of Islam. When he became disillusioned with its leader, Elijah Muhammad, he broke away to found his own group, the Muslim Mosque Inc., and undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, which led to a softening of his stance toward white people. In 1965 he was assassinated by three members of the Nation of Islam.

**How it changed the world:** The book "provided a road map of how a black man transformed himself from a street hustler to one of the most respected men in the black community, and, accordingly, showed young black men in the 1960s they could also grow up, become transformed and become someone like Malcolm," said Dr. Carl Bell, a psychiatrist who specializes in mental wellness, violence prevention and stress caused by violence.

"I think it also showed other races that young black boys can be transformed and redeemed. They might have viewed black people a little differently. Malcolm X commanded respect and told people 'Don't play with me. I respect myself, so you will respect me.'"

**Why you should read it now:** Although racism isn't as relentless as it was during the time of Malcolm X (1925-1965), his journey shows the African-American community what those before us endured so that we could have the freedoms we do today.

**What we think of it:** I read this book for the first time when I was in sixth grade, and I saw Spike Lee's film "Malcolm X" (1992) shortly afterward. This is a heavy book for someone who is 11 years old, but I was fascinated by his journey. I had always been a big fan of African-American history, but I read it for several other reasons: I wanted to know what made Malcolm X take a different approach to racism than Martin Luther King Jr., how Malcolm X felt about King's nonviolent mission, why he went from trying to assimilate to rebelling against anything that was not of black culture, and what his visit to Mecca was really like. Even though I didn't agree with all his actions, I respected his struggle. Malcolm X's legacy led reading — and not just in February (Black History Month).

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