



Malcolm Before X

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Malcolm Before X focuses on the early years of Malcolm X's life and the experiences that shaped the man he became.

Though its biographical portions cover only the first twenty-seven years of Malcolm's life, the book spans decades, going back to tell the story of Malcolm's great-great-grandparents. Both maternal and paternal ancestors are followed, tracing the sides of Malcolm's story to establish both the family and sociopolitical contexts he was born into.

After navigating a tumultuous childhood in Lansing, Michigan, Malcolm moved to the East Coast as a teenager, finding work as an emcee and doing side jobs to earn money. He also broke into several homes, stealing jewelry and fur coats to pawn. Those break-ins lead to his arrest; he was sentenced to eight to ten years in prison. While in prison, he turned to education and then religion in search of a new path forward.

The book often pulls from Malcolm X's autobiography for his perspective on his situation. These excerpts are supplemented with accounts from his family and friends, providing external perspectives that at times conflict with his own. The multiple accounts are managed well, adding layers and widening the scope of the narrative. The backstory of each key player in Malcolm's life is told, and these establishing details emphasize the impact that Malcolm X's community had on him. Similar space is given to the three prisons Malcolm stayed in during his incarceration. Each facility's origin story is shared, as well as the schedules of the incarcerated people there to give a sense of daily life.

Expansive descriptions of the different settings and people who shaped Malcolm X's coming-of-age make the biography *Malcolm Before X* holistic.

JULIA DILLMAN (November / December 2024)

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