Malcolm X: the man behind the myth

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Malcolm X speaking in 1964, the year he broke away from the Nation of Islam. Photograph: Robert Parent/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Image

The shot that killed Malcolm X in February 1965 as he stood on a podium in New York tore through his chest and resounded around the world. The talisman for black America was lifeless as supporters wheeled his body towards the hospital closest to the Audubon Ballroom, where he had just begun the night's oration. An ambulance had been called. None came. But even at that stage, Malcolm X was already thwarting the hopes of those who took his life to curtail his influence; and the authorities whose silent complicity assisted the murder.

None among the conspirators in the Nation of Islam (NoI), who spent months plotting his demise, could have predicted that anyone would be talking about Malcolm X 46 years on. Neither could the FBI, whose operatives listened in on his conversations. Who knew that the man they viewed as the most dangerous in America could enjoy such longevity?

The legend peaks and troughs and every few years enjoys a kick-start. First the classic autobiography in conjunction with Alex Haley, hailed by Time magazine as one of the 10 most influential non-fiction books of the 20th century. Followed by lionisation by the Black Power movement. Then, decades later, his adoption by the giants of hip-hop as a symbol of black pride and non-conformity.

And now Malcolm X is the subject of a new warts-and-all biography that took 12 years to write and prompts fresh reflection on the man white America feared above all others. It's another kick-start, even if it does take the Malcolm we know from Haley's book into places Malcolm X wouldn't have wanted it to go.
Manning Marable, an academic and respected authority on black America, doesn't use his book *Malcolm X: A Life in Reinvention*, to destroy the reputation of the man who told the heartlands that the assassination of President Kennedy represented "chickens coming home to roost". But, over 487 pages, Marable does effectively destroy the cultivated brand. There is a wealth of detail, some of it new, some of it old stories confirmed, all aided by documents and new recollections from the US government, the FBI and the Nation of Islam, whose leader Louis Farrakhan gave the author an unprecedented nine-hour interview. At the end of it all, Malcolm X remains Malcolm X, for good or ill, one of the most fascinating historical figures of the 20th century. But it is difficult to see him in the same way again.

There is a poignancy to the project too, for although Marable wrote more than 20 books – including a 1992 pamphlet about Malcolm X's politics – this attempt to find the man behind the legend was a labour of love. Marable was a college freshman in the early 70s when the character of Malcolm X first intrigued him. His work on the biography was severely hampered by ill health. For 25 years he suffered sarcoidosis, an illness that gradually eroded his pulmonary functions. In the last year of research, he needed oxygen tanks to breathe, and the author had a double lung transplant last year. Marable died last Friday from complications related to pneumonia, three days before the worldwide publication of his book.

It was, in more ways than one, a courageous endeavour. "The great temptation for a biographer of an iconic figure," writes Marable, "is to portray him or her as a virtual saint, without the normal contradictions and blemishes all human beings have. I have devoted so many years in the effort to understand the interior personality and mind of Malcolm that this temptation disappeared long ago." Freed from the restrictions imposed by this "mythic legend" and the constraints of "Malcolmology", Marable opted to shine a light.

So we meet a Malcolm X whose words of piety and purity as the public face of the Nation of Islam, and then as a spokesman for mainstream Islam in his own right, were not always matched by deeds. This Malcolm apparently drank wine on at least one occasion recorded by Marable, and rum and Coke on another. He also appears to have had an extramarital affair with a female follower and probably a tryst with an admirer while travelling abroad.
We meet Malcolm the serial embellisher, who talked up the extent of his criminal background as a young man in Detroit to better shape his public persona – going so far as to appropriate the criminal histories of others. Malcolm also left out of his autobiography parts that might have been damaging once he became a spokesman for urban black America, such as the extent of his addiction to drugs, the crimes he committed against others in the black community, including his robbery of one of his own acquaintances, and the depth of his involvement in the running of prostitutes.

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There is virtual confirmation of the claim that in his pre-Nation of Islam hustling days, Malcolm Little, as he was, hired himself out as source of sexual gratification for an older white male benefactor. The story is recounted in the autobiography, but there the hustler is a third party called Rudy. Rudy, according to the autobiography, would "be paid to undress them both, then pick up the old man like a baby, lay him on his bed, then stand over him and sprinkle him all over with talcum powder. Rudy said the old man would actually reach his climax from that." Based on "circumstantial but strong evidence, Malcolm was probably describing his own homosexual encounters," Marable says.

Malcolm X was depicted in his pomp as a strong figure of uncompromising masculinity but, tearing back the layers, Marable finds that Malcolm and his wife Betty had an unsatisfying sex life. This was more than a personal difficulty, for enemies in the Nation of Islam used it to humiliate him in public. Though he had family, Malcolm, unhappy for long periods in that marriage, travelled extensively, giving press conferences and standing-room-only lectures, including one in 1964 to the Oxford Union. Feeling abandoned, says Marable, Betty almost certainly sought comfort and companionship in an affair with one of his associates.

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There is a claim that, towards the end, he lapsed into depression. There is much in Marable's new account of Malcolm's life to perturb the modern reader. Misogyny and, indeed, violence against women, prior to Malcolm's embrace of the Nation of Islam. His casual antisemitism as spokesman for the Nation of Islam and its leader Elijah Muhammad, and later as a wooer of Arab leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. The harshness of his language: "There will be more violence than ever this year," he told a New York Times reporter in 1964. "The whites had better understand this while there is still time. The negroes at the mass level are ready to act." The glaring errors: such as his decision to go along with Muhammed's tactic of making common nationalist cause with the racist, separatist lynchers of the Ku Klux Klan. His oft-repeated disdain for Martin Luther King and others who sought change through non-violent action.
But a character based solely on the deep flaws outlined in the new book would have expired on the gurney after the assassination at the Audubon. What saves Marable’s Malcolm – and the Malcolm of Haley’s autobiography – is the struggle towards humanity and the redemption he experiences on his journey; twists and turns recorded by Marable with the intensity of a fly-on-the-wall documentary. Marable’s Malcolm, who died aged 39, is steadfast in his beliefs throughout, but those beliefs evolve to the point that he finds himself condemning and regretting stances he had previously taken. Not a life of consistency, by any means. Neither are the inconsistencies resolved by the time of his death.

It is, as Manning’s title says, not one reinvention, but several. White America in the mid-60s could not stomach the black nationalist for ever pointing his finger. It didn’t like Malcolm Little, the sleazy street hustler who had earlier existed in the underbelly of Detroit and New York. But it could do business with the Malcolm slain at the Audubon, for by then he had shed the skin of Malcolm Little, and the layer that embraced the separatist, racist Nation of Islam. He had undertaken the hajj and, noting how people of different races embraced mainstream Islam, he rejected his earlier racism. He recalled in the days before his death his curt dismissal some years earlier of a white college girl who said she wanted to help and was sent away crying. One of his strengths, says Marable, certainly towards the end, was self-awareness. "I did a lot of things as a Muslim that I am sorry for now," Malcolm X was to say.

He was still a danger, to the government and the NoI, for by then his strategy was to make loud and common cause between the disadvantaged African-American communities of the US and administrations with whom he had forged alliances in Africa. He planned to make black America’s fight an international one, pursued through the UN. And he had that voice. The "ability to speak on behalf of those to whom society and state had denied a voice due to racial prejudice. He understood their yearnings and anticipated their actions," as Marable writes.

But the threat was of a different quality, for towards the end of his life Malcolm was in favour of using the system to improve the system rather than standing aside. And by 1999, 34 years after his death, the journey was completed to mainstream America’s satisfaction. The US postal service, Marable notes, celebrated Malcolm X and his "universal multiculturalism" with a commemorative stamp.

This wasn’t a journey his erstwhile friends in the Nation of Islam wanted him to make, and one of Marable’s great tasks over the years of research was to piece together the parts played by the Nation and the FBI in the murder of Malcolm X. Three men, all members of the Nation of Islam, were jailed for the murder but few considered the convictions safe, even at the outset. One assassin was himself shot at the scene and was clearly culpable, but the other two were merely NoI enforcers regarded by the police and the FBI as credible, useful suspects. The system condemned them and barely paused for breath.

Marable concludes that the gunmen and the helpers came from the NoI’s Newark Mosque and says, as others have before him, that the fatal shot was fired by a 26-year-old man who escaped capture. "This was the kill shot," he says, "cutting a 7in-wide circle around his heart and left chest."
Malcolm X with Martin Luther King on 26 March 1964, the only time the two men ever met. Photograph: Alamy

Were the authorities involved? Not obviously or directly so, according to the evidence here, though there is speculation. But indisputably there was bitterness that the authorities, who were monitoring most of the major players, were unwilling or unable to save Malcolm X from the ambush at the Audubon. These frustrations are voiced by Peter Bailey, a former aide to Malcolm in one of the two groups he established on leaving the Nation of Islam. The New York Police Department and the FBI "knew that Brother Malcolm's destiny was assigned for assassination," he says.

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But then, Malcolm knew it himself. He predicted to Haley that he probably wouldn't be around to see the publication of the autobiography, and he was right: it went on sale through a small radical imprint, Grove House, nine months after his death.

His actions and his words set a collision course that he couldn't or wouldn't alter. Former allies in the Nation boiled over at his renunciation of separatism and his personal criticisms of Muhammed, particularly his sharing of the open secret that the Nation's leader, while professing piety, fathered several children with his various secretaries. Malcolm himself, reports Marable, had a deep affection for one of them.

But Malcolm didn't need to attack the Nation directly to seem dangerous to it. His pull was such, it was said, that merely by choosing a new path, he encouraged others to follow him. His willingness to work politically, not for civil rights but internationally for human rights, risked marginalising the Nation's insular appeal to African Americans. There were personal, philosophical and commercial reasons to be rid of him. "In his final days," says Marable, "he seemed of two minds, partly accepting of what he believed to be his fate and partly wishing or hoping that the problems might disappear and allow him to go back to a normal life . . . That he continued to harangue the Nation even when he knew that doing so would leave little choice but to strike at him seems to suggest that on some level he may have been inviting death."

Pop psychology, perhaps. But there are questions. Why, knowing he was a target and having seen his home
firebombed (from whence comes the iconic poster of Malcolm standing at the window with an automatic rifle — a message to his former comrades rather than white America), did he refuse to travel with bodyguards? Why did he insist that only one of his followers be armed that night at the Audubon? Why did he refuse to allow a weapons search of the audience prior to admission? Why were inexperienced and easily distracted guards posted on the podium? How to explain his changed demeanour towards the end? "He always seemed to be tired, even exhausted and depressed. His shoes weren't shined, his clothing was frequently wrinkled," writes Marable. One researcher into his mood at that time speaks of a "kind of fatalism".

These unanswered questions, as much as Malcolm's journey itself and what it says about the history of black America, help keep the legend alive. He was America's harshest critic. But he was, in fact, a potent symbol of America: the land of progression, growth, contradictions and, above all, constant reinvention. The black British academic Dr Robert Beckford says the new book will place him at the forefront again: "I would say he was one of the greatest sociologists of 'race' in America. As great as Frantz Fanon in registering the impact of internalised racism and as brilliant as WEB Du Bois was in 'outing' the systemic nature of white supremacy. He inspired a generation of intellectuals in religion (James Cone, Mike Dyson), philosophy (Cornel West) and feminist theory (bell hooks) to rage against black passivity and complicity with racism."

The writer and broadcaster Henry Bonsu, a founder of the black British digital radio station Colourful, says the impact endures in Britain, not just among the black intelligentsia but at grassroots: "People may not know the details and they may not care about some of the less palatable facts, because even now he presents as a man who said what needed saying when saying it took a lot of personal courage."

The Malcolm that Marable leaves behind is more complex, less sure-footed than before, but, fleshed out, he is more compelling. He is, Marable concludes, "the definitive yardstick by which all other Americans who aspire to the mantle of leadership should be measured".