



actions with other people. Why do you think she chose to rely on dialogue for these two scenes? What does this dialogue contribute to her narrative?

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330–31 ◆

3. Well-written literacy narratives typically include **VIVID DETAILS**. What details does Nemat include about the setting and people in her narrative? Point to specific passages as examples. What **DOMINANT IMPRESSION** do they create in her descriptions of both the secondhand bookstore and of her friend Sarah's home?
4. Early in her narrative, Nemat observes that "In a way, books had saved us both," referring to herself and her mother. What role do you think books played in this part of Nemat's life? How might they have saved her later in her life under Ayatollah Khomeini's regime? What does her observation reveal about the **SIGNIFICANCE** of the bookseller, and of books, in her life?
5. **For Writing.** Explore your earliest memory of securing reading material on your own. What kinds of reading material did you seek? Was it print or digital, or both? Where did you look for it — at a library? In a store? Online? Elsewhere? What attracted you to particular topics or genres? Did you have to resort to any of the kind of secrecy or sacrifice that Nemat did? Write a **LITERACY NARRATIVE** in which you describe your hunt for reading material. Incorporate vivid detail and, if appropriate, dialogue, and be sure to give some indication of your story's significance.

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21–37 ▲



MALCOLM X

Literacy Behind Bars

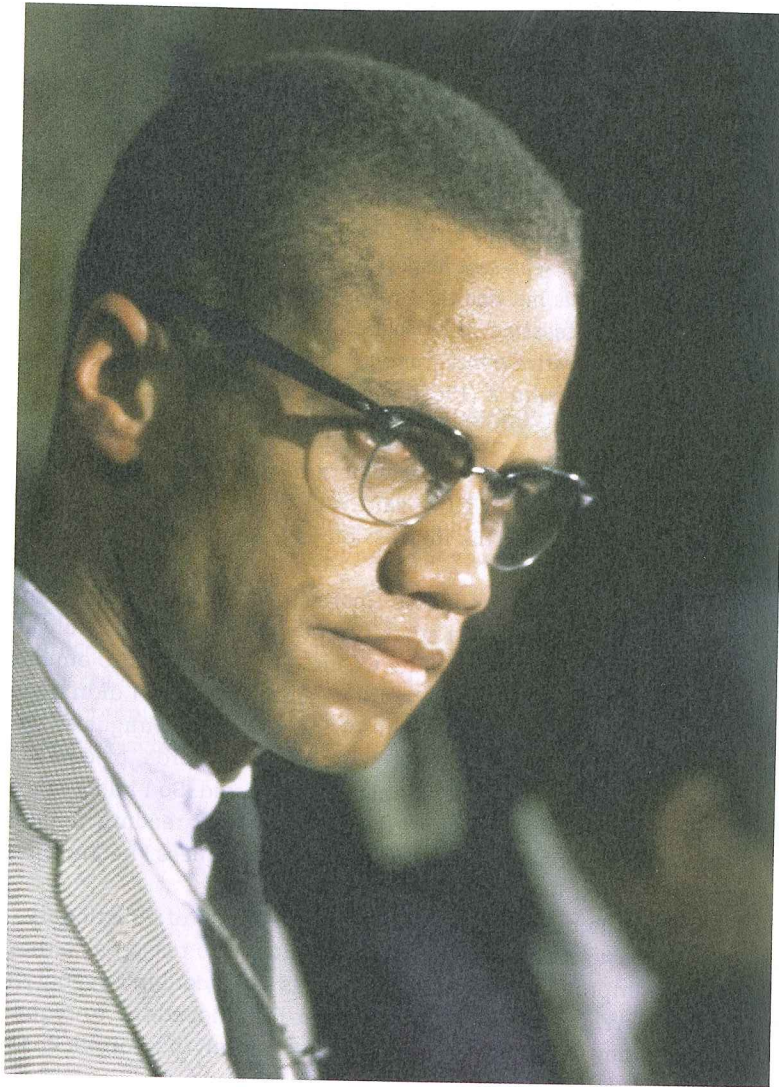
Best known as a militant black nationalist leader who rose to global fame as an advocate for Pan-Africanism (a movement that aims to unite all people of African descent), Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little in 1925. He replaced the name Little, which he considered a slave name, with the letter X to represent his lost African tribal name. Founder of the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Malcolm X was assassinated by political rivals on February 21, 1965. The following narrative comes from his autobiography, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), which he wrote with Alex Haley.

MANY WHO TODAY HEAR ME somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.

It had really begun back in the Charlestown Prison,* when Bimbi first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversation he was in, and I had tried to emulate him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did.

I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary — to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some tablets and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

*Charlestown Prison: a prison near Boston, Massachusetts. [Editor's note]



Malcolm X, 1964.



I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know *which* words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet 5 everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks.

I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting.

I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words — immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now, that "aardvark" springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.

I was so fascinated that I went on — I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole tablet — and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my



correspondence, my visitors — usually Ella and Reginald — and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

As you can imagine, especially in a prison where there was heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, an inmate was smiled upon if he demonstrated an unusually intense interest in books. There was a sizable number of well-read inmates, especially the popular debaters. Some were said by many to be practically walking encyclopedias. They were almost celebrities. No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand.

I read more in my room than in the library itself. An inmate who was known to read a lot could check out more than the permitted maximum number of books. I preferred reading in the total isolation of my own room.

When I had progressed to really serious reading, every night at about ten P.M. I would be outraged with the “lights out.” It always seemed to catch me right in the middle of something engrossing.

Fortunately, right outside my door was a corridor light that cast a glow into my room. The glow was enough to read by, once my eyes adjusted to it. So when “lights out” came, I would sit on the floor where I could continue reading in that glow.

At one-hour intervals the night guards paced past every room. Each time I heard the approaching footsteps, I jumped into bed and feigned sleep. And as soon as the guard passed, I got back out of bed onto the floor area of that light-glow, where I would read for another fifty-eight minutes — until the guard approached again. That went on until three or four every morning. Three or four hours of sleep a night was enough for me. Often in the years in the streets I had slept less than that. [. . .]

I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn’t seeking any degree, the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book



that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America. Not long ago, an English writer telephoned me from London, asking questions. One was, “What’s your alma mater?” I told him, “Books.” You will never catch me with a free fifteen minutes in which I’m not studying something I feel might be able to help the black man. [. . .]

Every time I catch a plane, I have with me a book that I want to read — and that’s a lot of books these days. If I weren’t out here every day battling the white man, I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity — because you can hardly mention anything I’m not curious about. I don’t think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did. In fact, prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college. I imagine that one of the biggest troubles with colleges is there are too many distractions, too much panty-raiding, fraternities, and boola-boola and all of that. Where else but in a prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day.

Engaging with the Text

1. In **DESCRIBING** how he felt after learning to read and write more fluently, Malcolm X states that even though he was in prison, he “never had been so truly free in [his] life.” There is a certain irony that anyone would feel free while incarcerated. What does his narrative suggest about the relationship between literacy and freedom?
2. How would you characterize Malcolm X’s **STANCE**? Where in his narrative is this stance made most explicit? Point to specific words and phrases that convey his stance.
3. As he describes his efforts to learn to read and write, do you think Malcolm X is **OBJECTIVE**, **SUBJECTIVE**, or a mixture of both? Give examples from the text to support your answer. Why do you think he chose to write that way?



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4. Discuss the **SIGNIFICANCE** of Malcolm X's narrative, and by implication the significance of learning to read and write. What lessons does his experience teach us about the power of reading and writing?
5. **For Writing.** Malcolm X advocates reading as an excellent road to education, but a college education consists of far more than reading. Write a **LITERACY NARRATIVE** looking at the role that reading has played in your education so far. Consider the kinds of texts you've read — those you've been assigned to read, and also those you yourself have chosen to read. Consider also the other kinds of work you've done at school — lectures you've attended, exams you've taken, discussions you've participated in, essays you've written, blogs you've created. How important is reading compared with this other work?

21–37 ▲



ALISON BECHDEL

The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death

Alison Bechdel grew up in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, where her parents, both high school English teachers, ran a funeral parlor that doubled as their family home. A graduate of Oberlin College, Bechdel applied to art schools and, failing to get in, took positions in various publishing companies. She went on to become an award-winning cartoonist. This selection is from *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), which was named by *Time* magazine as number one of its 10 Best Books of the Year. In this graphic memoir, Bechdel narrates her childhood, moving back and forth between the years prior to and following her father's death, and explores her coming to understand her and her father's sexuality. Bechdel's work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Slate*, *The Village Voice*, and *The Advocate*.

