



Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X

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In 1962, boxing writers and fans considered Cassius Clay an obnoxious self-promoter, and few believed that he would become the heavyweight champion of the world. But Malcolm X, the most famous minister in the Nation of Islam—a sect many white Americans deemed a hate cult—saw the potential in Clay, not just for boxing greatness, but as a means of spreading the Nation's message. The two became fast friends, keeping their interactions secret from the press for fear of jeopardizing Clay's career. Clay began living a double life—a patriotic "good Negro" in public, and a radical reformer behind the scenes. Soon, however, their friendship would sour, with disastrous and far-reaching consequences.

Based on previously untapped sources, from Malcolm's personal papers to FBI records, *Blood Brothers* is the first book to offer an in-depth portrait of this complex bond. Acclaimed historians Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith reconstruct the worlds that shaped Malcolm and Clay, from the boxing arenas and mosques, to postwar New York and civil rights-era Miami. In an impressively detailed account, they reveal how Malcolm molded Cassius Clay into Muhammad Ali, helping him become an international symbol of black pride and black independence. Yet when Malcolm was barred from the Nation for criticizing the philandering of its leader, Elijah Muhammad, Ali turned his back on Malcolm—a choice that tragically contributed to the latter's assassination in February 1965.

Malcolm's death marked the end of a critical phase of the civil rights movement, but the legacy of his friendship with Ali has endured. We inhabit a new era where the roles of entertainer and activist, of sports and politics, are more entwined than ever before. *Blood Brothers* is the story of how Ali redefined what it means to be a black athlete in America—after Malcolm first enlightened him. An extraordinary narrative of love and deep affection, as well as deceit, betrayal, and violence, this story is a window into the public and private lives of two of our greatest national icons, and the tumultuous period in American history that they helped to shape.

Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X Details

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Malcolm X Randy Roberts , Johnny Smith**

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Jsavett1 says

I picked this up in the wake of Ali's death; so many great writers spoke of the complexities of Ali's life likely to be glossed over in the deluge of encomiums which follow the death of someone so great. Such is the case with almost any person. This phenomenon is even more pronounced when the deceased is the often proclaimed Greatest of All Time.

One of these complexities was Ali's relationship to Malcolm X. This book explores that relationship in tremendously compelling detail. Without revealing any "spoilers," it's difficult for me to sit here, in 2016, and listen to all the praise heaped upon Ali without wondering where the censure is for his treatment of Malcolm before his assassination. History is also clearer from the safe distance of the present, and so is the morality and consequence of the choices we make. And Ali was certainly, without question, a transcendent talent and superstar. He displayed courage both in and out of the ring. But this book provides an indispensable perspective which must be included in the discussion. Ali's relationship with Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam reminds us that people are always more complicated than they seem.

ck says

[ARC courtesy Amazon Vine program]

This book was breathtaking. Like something pressing on your chest, squeezing all the air out breathtaking.

You don't have to be a boxer to read this book. (Heck, it's heresy, but you can gloss over the detailed, vivid description of matches if you like. This is much more than a recap of the development of Muhammad Ali's career.)

Thorough and thoroughly footnoted. A lot to digest. There's history here beyond a significant chapter in the annals of boxing.

I am left wondering how various events might have unfolded differently if the events detailed here had not occurred in the 1960s.

Very visceral, as it should be. I commend the coauthors for maintaining tautness and immediacy throughout, even though this is about events of a half-century ago. The section of the book that details events after the title fight is particularly taut, almost unbearably so if you are reading this without knowing some elements that probably were common knowledge back then.

Carol Storm says

This is a classic story about a revolution in American sports. It's about how young Cassius Clay became

Mohammed Ali and completely changed how America looked at black men and black athletes in particular.

But this is more than just an important story about race. These two authors have created a literary work that approaches the level of tragedy. As I was reading about Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammed, and later about Malcolm and young Cassius Clay, I kept seeing parallels to classic literature. The same story seems to come up in every age. In the Old Testament there's the story of David's son Absalom, the favorite "without a blemish on his body." (pretty young Cassius Clay would have been perfect as Absalom.) Then there's the novel by William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, about the man who "wanted sons and had too many." There's even a few echoes of Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part One and Part Two, with the carefree young prince being educated in the rougher side of life by a fascinating older man he loves but must eventually destroy.

Leaving all that aside, I was shocked by the realism of the story too. I never realized how many of Cassius Clay's worst enemies were sportswriters. It made me so mad to hear what a bully boy and bigot like Jimmy Cannon had to say about the young champ. Not so much because his racism surprised me, but because this is one of the crew of old timers that David Halberstam sentimentalized to the point of sainthood in his highly overrated SUMMER OF 49. Makes you wonder where David Halberstam really stood on Civil Rights!

Of course, there is a darker side to Muhammad Ali's view of race as well. The authors keep quoting him quoting Black Muslim doctrine, i.e. blacks should avoid whites and stick together. And Ali became a hero to people of color worldwide. But for a man who put his life on the line to help black people, Ali certainly spent a lot of time beating up black men. And not just beating them up in the ring, but mocking them, humiliating them, belittling them in public, etc. It seems there were certain kinds of black men young Cassius Clay really hated. Older men who reminded him of his father? The authors never comment. But it's a classic book!

Gayle says

Although I've read much about Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali hasn't really been on my radar. I've never been a summer Olympics fan, nor a boxing fan. I remembered Ali as a loud-mouth booster, another thing I'm not found of. After reading Blood Brothers, I perhaps have a bit better insight into the minds of both men; I say a "bit" because I'm becoming more and more convinced of the inability of white Americans to write about the experiences of black Americans, no matter how much they have studied, or how many degrees they have.

Roberts' description of Ali only confused me because it ran the scale from intelligent enough to put on a show in order to save a sport seemingly well on its way out for good in the US, to dull and slow enough to have been a sucker for the exploitation of Elijah Muhammad. Maybe this is simply a reflection of Ali's truly complicated personality.

I enjoyed hearing more about Malcolm X who no one can accuse of being slow or a clown act. This man took it upon himself to learn, and to use that information to grow. That is a rare and beautiful quality in a man.

In spite of my reservations, above, I could not put the book down. The relationship between Ali and Malcolm was beautiful and tragic at the same time. They showed great love and respect, yet Ali's great success overwhelmed the relationship, sadly making him a great public relations tool for both Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad.

I cannot judge any of these men; the era was both violent and exciting at the same time...a place in our history when blacks were just beginning to express the thought that black lives matter. I don't doubt that each of them acted with the conviction that it was not about individuals and that sacrifices needed to be made in

the name of the fight. Each man knew what was needed, and did his part.

Adna says

A book about history, sports and politics tracing the lives of two important men.

Don Gorman says

(2) Many years ago, I read the wonderful Alex Haley book, "the Autobiography of Malcolm X." This book recounts a great deal of that information but offers more as well. Some of the new insight into the career of Muhammad Ali and his involvement with the Black Muslim movement seems more pertinent due to his recent death. A political book, a sports book, a modern history book as well, this has its very interesting moments and some pretty slow ones as well. A nice trip back to my teens in the 60's.

Patrick Macke says

well written and engaging ... it's a one-of-a-kind story, two fascinating people whose lives intersect at the definitive moment ... in telling of their encounter, instead of full-blown biographies of the two, the author creates a fast-paced and gripping moment in time ... well played

Carlos Pelot says

Blood Brothers narrates the tragic real life story of a beautiful friendship blossomed and then cut short because of one sorry religious lie. Two icons of an era- one a leading and powerful voice in the civil rights movement of the late 50s and early 60s, the other the greatest sports figure and also a powerful voice for civil rights during the same time- saw their paths crossed, united and violently rent assunder under the powerful but shady banner of the Nation of Islam.

The book plunges us into a delightful journey in which we see a young Cassius Clay turn into the infamous Louisville Lip. The Kentucky native assumed an outlandishly vocal personality, all part of his plan to get into Sonny Liston's head. Liston was to that point the uncontested boxing heavyweight champion of the world and the only obstacle between him that the champion's belt. In the end, it wasn't his brazen mouth that helped Clay win the title. Clay won his first fight against Liston fair and square by outboxing him at every level and in every round of the match. When Liston didn't come out on the seventh round it was clear that the new champ had "shook up the world." The rest as they say is history.

"Float like a butterfly. Sting like a bee. Aaaahh! Rumble, young man, rumble! Aaaahh!"

The authors of Blood Brothers superbly use new research and recently unearthed documents about Malcom X, demythologizing some assumed notions about the storied history of the Muslim preacher. Malcolm was extremely articulate and smart, an able debater and defender of the faith according to the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his cultic Nation of Islam. Yet, once Malcolm severed ties with the NOI he became expendable to them. His confrontational and fearless approach in denouncing the NOI's abuse of power and

exploitation of people, particularly women, at the highest levels of the Muslim cult ultimately cost him his life in what was a vicious public murder at the hands of NOI's assassins.

Shortly before his death, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, his given name as a convert of the NOI, had severed ties, mainly due to the first's fierce accusations of corruption regarding the NOI. Ali would admit years later his regret in disavowing Malcolm, whom he considered in hindsight his true friend and brother. He came to recognize that Malcolm had been right all along in his critique of the leader of the NOI at the time, Elijah Muhammad, and that it was a mix of fear and the naive zeal of a young convert that drove him to close ranks with the NOI instead of Malcolm. This was extremely painful to Malcolm, who claimed throughout that the Champ was being manipulated by powerful elements within the NOI.

I wonder what could have happened if Malcolm had not died in 1965 but had been given the chance to live a much longer life. What kind of synergy for the greater good would we had been able to witness had this friendship been reconciled and continued to blossom thereafter? Malcolm loved Ali. Ali loved Malcolm. This is the testament that Blood Brothers puts forth and no one today can deny it. Destiny brought them together. Sadly, there are sometimes greater forces of evil and falsehood hard at work in order to ruin what could have otherwise been a blessing for the world.

The brief moment in time that these two towering figures coincided is loaded with powerful history. The power of religion to shape the mind of a people, the influence of a sport like boxing as a vehicle to achieve greater ends in benefit of those who are oppressed, the skillful use of the spoken word to denounce the injustices of the day against not only the American black man but people oppressed everywhere, the grip of conviction even to the point of losing it all, one's life included, these and much more make the gift titled Blood Brothers a rapturing read.

J.S. Green says

I've never been a fan of boxing and I'm no expert on the Civil Rights era, but this was a very compelling read. Malcolm X was a minister for the Nation of Islam (NOI) and basically a black supremacist. Cassius Clay was a talented young boxer with a big mouth and a gift for self-promotion. Their unlikely friendship, however, had dangerous results for both of them.

Malcolm X disagreed with the non-confrontational and patient "we shall overcome" approach of Martin Luther King, advocating instead for violent means if necessary to secure respect and rights for blacks. He became a rising star in the NOI and was known as "The Messenger" for Elijah Muhammad, the frail but self-proclaimed prophet Muhammad, for his fierce loyalty and captivating speaking ability.

Cassius Clay was also a rising star in the boxing world. After winning a gold medal at the Rome Olympics, he commenced a professional boxing career, winning most of his fights by knockout. He adopted an egotistical style of self-promotion but was really a quiet and thoughtful person who strongly believed in clean living and was drawn to the doctrines of the NOI because of his upbringing and the friendship with Malcolm X.

At the time Clay defeated Sonny Liston for the heavyweight title, Malcolm's standing in the NOI was declining. He was bothered by the passive stand the NOI took on black rights, but he'd also learned of Elijah Muhammad's many infidelities and was bothered by the NOI's exploitation of poor blacks. Clay, however, became caught in the middle between Malcolm and Elijah, and when Malcolm was ousted from the movement, Elijah pulled Clay in closer and gave him a new name: Muhammed Ali.

This is a fascinating look at the lives of both men and their relationship with the NOI - a relationship that eventually cost Malcolm X his life. I remember watching part of the fights against Leon Spinks as a kid in 1978, but knew nothing of his highly controversial past. I knew even less about Malcolm X, and was surprised at his extreme racism prior to his split with the NOI. (Honestly, neither of the men came off as likable, but the authors really illustrate the reasons behind their views and I felt I understood why they felt the way they did.) But this was an interesting book, and sometimes I could hardly put it down. (I received an advance copy from Amazon Vine.)

Ryan says

A beautiful glimpse at one of the most iconic relationships in the civil rights movement. The only drawback might be that it's about the two men as individuals more than it is about them as a pair...but considering how few people remain that can testify to what one or the other said about the opposite, this shouldn't be surprising.

Highly recommended for anyone who wants to learn about Malcolm or Muhammed.

Kyle says

Great study of these two iconic individuals of the 1960s.

Ian . says

Great book about two historic and mysterious guys. Didn't know much about them, about Nation of Islam and the life in sixties in the U.S. where black people were truly repressed. U.S. has gone a long way since then. It was a really interesting reading, kind of a history book in its own way.

Kusaimamekirai says

You'd be hard pressed to write a dual biography of two more polarizing figures during their lives than Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. In Blood Brothers, Randy Roberts for the most part restricts himself to the short window of time where the two men became friends, religious brethren in the Nation of Islam, and later after a falling out, enemies. It's a highly compelling narrative at the forces that brought them together and later drove an irreparable wedge between them.

It's also a story where neither Ali or Malcolm are depicted as saints. Both men were undoubtedly good men who believed they were doing what was right for themselves and for black people in general. Yet this didn't stop either man from manipulating their relationship to serve their own ends. For Malcolm in the immediate aftermath of his expulsion from the Nation of Islam, he saw his friendship with Ali as a chip he could cash in to perhaps return to the good graces of the Nation of Islam by delivering him to Elijah Muhammad. For Ali, repeating the Nation's violent rhetoric about Malcolm deserving to die, was a way to establish his loyalty by casting aside his friendship with Malcolm. These were not the shining moments of either of these men's lives.

And yet they are ultimately tragic figures who were caught up in the petty jealousies and paranoia of Elijah

Muhammad as well as the racism and surveillance of the FBI that sought to destroy them both. I put down this book, as I often do with books about the 1960's, and wondered... what if? What if Malcolm hadn't been assassinated that day in the Audubon ballroom? He was at the time creating a pan-african, multi-racial organization that would've been one of the more dynamic groups of it's time. Had he lived, would he even have joined up with Martin Luther King who despite his formerly harsh rhetoric toward him, seemed to be warming to him? What if Ali had left the Nation of Islam at the same time Malcolm had? Malcolm certainly tried to bring Ali along. Out of self interest to be sure, but Malcolm also had a genuine affection for Ali and wanted him to see where the Nation had gone wrong. Would an Ali aligned with Malcom X have prevented or at least delayed the death sentence put on Malcolm? Would Ali have gone to Vietnam to do a short tour (Ali reportedly was told by the Nation that he was forbidden to serve in Vietnam and if he did he was as good as dead) and thus never been stripped of his livelihood for 3 long years? We will never know the answers to these questions, however what we do know, and what we learn from this book is that whether the time allotted to their lives on earth was long or short, both men used every moment of it to the fullest to try to make other peoples lives better. While their friendship was brief, it was one of genuine love that both men were unwilling to, but were forced by circumstance, to sever.

Marcus Nelson says

BLOOD BROTHERS: The fatal friendship between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X – Johnny Smith and Randy Roberts.

What hurts most about all of this is what could have become of Malcolm. I can understand the turmoil of the moment, the hatred towards him from his expulsion from the Nation but man, Malcolm really was on to something special...

This book chronicles Ali's rise, or should I say Cassius', from his arrival in Miami to begin his professional career to his second victory over Sonny Liston. And how as the Louisville Lip, he built the persona of a boorish clown with his boisterous antics, but once he met Malcolm, learned about the Nation, became Cassius X, defeated Sonny Liston and became heavyweight champion of the world; it was Malcolm's influence directing his path on becoming a global phenom and world ambassador.

They only knew each other for less than 2 years but they became brothers and inseparable as Ali transformed, through Malcolm's teachings, into a conscientious Black Man. But soon after, the scandal of Elijah was revealed, which ultimately led to Malcolm's banishment from the nation and his untimely death. During this period Ali had to choose, follow Malcolm or stay with the Nation. He chose the Nation. But look at Ali post Malcolm's death, who is he?

Malcolm X.

You'll learn why Ali made his choice and how he truly felt about Malcolm and The Nation for that matter but most importantly you'll learn how the man we all love today as Muhammad Ali is a result of the 19 months he spent with Malcolm.

A must read!

Joseph Hirsch says

Someone once said words to the effect of "Show me someone with heroes, and I'll show you someone in the third grade." That's a bit harsh, but there's more than a kernel of truth to the statement.

For the last thirty years or so (since pugilistic dementia/Parkinson's had him in its grip), Muhammad Ali's handlers have been speaking for him. Randy Roberts and his co-author take us back to a time when Ali could speak for himself, and, more importantly, act for himself. Ali, like any other man saddled with the label of "greatness" didn't always act like a great or even a good guy.

The book does a good job of chronicling the two separate lives of men born Cassius Clay and Malcolm Little, respectively. The work charts, in strong journalistic fashion, the rise of one man through the ranks of the heavyweight boxing circuit, and the course of another man through the echelons of the Nation of Islam.

At a certain point in the book, Malcolm X discovers that the man he worshiped and obeyed, Elijah Muhammad, was a serial adulterer, embezzler, and all around conman. It was at this point that X's life was in danger, and also at this juncture that Muhammad Ali was forced to choose between the Nation and Malcolm. He chose the former, and (the author argues credibly) helped seal the fate of his one-time friend and mentor, who was gunned down in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem shortly after Ali defected from his friend's side.

There are no heroes in this book, and the honor of now-canonized figures is even challenged at points. Malcolm used Muhammad to a certain extent, just as callously as perhaps Ali threw his old blood brother under the bus.

I came away from this book with a better understanding of the black nationalist history of the turbulent 1960s, as well as with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. The book is good, but it's not necessarily the kind of thing you want to read in the wake of Ali's death. Recommended, although be prepared to lose a little more faith in the American project and humanity in general.
