



## Betty Before X

*Ilyasah Shabazz, Renée Watson*

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**Betty Before X** Ilyasah Shabazz , Renée Watson

**A powerful middle-grade novel about the childhood activism of Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's wife, written by their daughter.**

In Detroit, 1945, eleven-year-old Betty's house doesn't quite feel like home. She believes her mother loves her, but she can't shake the feeling that her mother doesn't want her. Church helps those worries fade, if only for a little while. The singing, the preaching, the speeches from guest activists like Paul Robeson and Thurgood Marshall stir African Americans in her community to stand up for their rights. Betty quickly finds confidence and purpose in volunteering for the Housewives League, an organization that supports black-owned businesses. Soon, the American civil rights icon we now know as Dr. Betty Shabazz is born.

Collaborating with novelist Renée Watson, Ilyasah Shabazz illuminates four poignant years in her mother's childhood, painting a beautiful and inspiring portrait of a girl overcoming the challenges of self-acceptance and belonging that will resonate with young readers today.

## Betty Before X Details

Date : Published January 2018 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux

ISBN :

Author : Ilyasah Shabazz , Renée Watson

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Childrens, Middle Grade, Cultural, African American

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## From Reader Review Betty Before X for online ebook

### Laura (bbliophile) says

A really good and super informative middle grade book. I'm glad I got to know a little more about Betty Shabazz. The book was hard to read sometimes because of the subject matters it dealt with (trigger warnings for racism and racially charged violence, including lynchings), but it dealt with these subject matters in a great way. I would definitely recommend this book.

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### Brandy Painter says

This book is a narrative on the life of Betty Shabazz's childhood. This is the little girl who would grow up to be the wife of Malcom X and a community leader. It is considered fiction because of the way the story is told, but her daughter is one of the author's so the basic facts of Betty's life are true. The book is a short, quick read. It's perfect for kids who love historical fiction or stories about complicated families and friendships. I found it engaging and hard to book down.

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### Suzy says

Up until reading this book I knew nothing about Betty Shabazz, other than her name. You could chalk that up to privilege or to my ignorance. Anyway, I am extremely grateful for the books that Ilyasah Shabazz -- the daughter of Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X -- has been writing. I read her fictionalized biography of her father last year, and now this one about her mother. Betty Shabazz, born in Georgia to a teenaged mother, her paternal grandmother suspected she was being abused and removed her from the home, giving Betty to her Aunt Fannie Mae to raise. The aunt died when Betty was 7, and Betty was sent to Detroit to be reunited with her mother, her mother's husband, 3 half sisters and 2 step brothers. For reasons only hinted at, Betty's mother (she calls her by her first name always, Ollie Mae) is very hard on her eldest daughter, and Betty's struggle for her mother's love is a central theme in the story. This book was an enlightening look at Detroit in the 1940s and the nascent Civil Rights Movement, as well as an introduction to a really strong and influential woman who deserves to have far more recognition. I loved this book!

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### Ms. Yingling says

E ARC from Edelweiss Plus

In the 1940s, young Betty Dean is being raised by a beloved aunt who feels that Betty's mother didn't take good care of her. The mother has remarried, moved to Detroit, and had other young daughters. When her aunt dies, Betty is forced to leave her comfortable life in the south to be raised in a crowded apartment with her step sisters. She spends a lot of time at church and hanging out with her girlfriends. The girls are especially interested in the work of the Housewives' League, a Civil Rights organization that is trying to convince the black community that they should not shop at stores that would not hire them. When she has some fights with her mother, Betty is taken in by the Malloys, who go to her church and are very active in the civil rights movement, and she enjoys living with them very much. There are a lot of things going on in Chicago at this time, and Betty learns to be aware of the position of people in her community and is

interested in all of the activists who visit and show her more of what is going on in the world.

**Strengths:** This is a great slice-of-life title for this time period, and FINALLY we have a book from the point of view of a young black person instead of a Civil Rights story told through a white lens! The details of every day life AND of the social mores of the time are absolutely fascinating, and it's even better since this is a fictionalized account of Shabazz's mother, who later married Malcolm X. Watson's input makes this highly readable and engaging, and historical notes at the end remind readers that this story is based on real events.

**Weaknesses:** The cover is very young for a book that really should be read by middle school and even high school students. There is a scene of a lynching that might need to be processed with younger readers, who might be attracted to the pretty, sunny cover.

**What I really think:** Definitely purchasing, even though I find Malcolm X to be a problematic historical figure. If you have Shabazz and Magoon's X, you should definitely read this!

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### **Hoover Public Library Kids and Teens says**

Before she married Malcolm X, Betty was a girl full of her own dreams for a better future. Written by one of her daughters.

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### **Sarah says**

I read an ARC of this fascinating story about the childhood of Dr. Betty Shabazz. This is the kind of book that makes history come to life, and I sure wish I had more of these available as a younger reader. It did end abruptly- I had anticipated more of a traditional biography, but this focuses just on a few pivotal years of her life. The back matter is not to be missed. This will lend itself to powerful student discussions.

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### **Karen Arendt says**

I have seen quite a bit of publicity about this title, and am glad I took the time to read it. Betty is a strong, loving, forgiving character shown by her continued love and her respect for her mother despite her living away from her much of the time. Betty's character experiences much during the story set in the 1940s of Detroit. Readers learn about the efforts to improve conditions of African-Americans as well.

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### **Racheal says**

I'm going to give this a tentative 3.5 stars because I don't entirely know how to rate it. The first half was beautiful, full of tenderness and humanity; I loved it. Loved it!

About halfway through, though, it morphs into a series of didactic adult conversations overheard by Betty before ending rather abruptly. When all is said and done, there's no real story arc to speak of.

The writing is approachable and this would probably be a fine introduction to the civil rights movement to a middle grade reader on the younger side, but as a complete story or early biography it has me a bit stumped.

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### **Leonard Kim says**

I thought most of this was quite good, so the spots that lapsed into telling not showing did stick out a bit. The endnote says some things were fabricated to be more educational, and in retrospect that shows and I wish they hadn't done that. We learn a great deal just from Betty's experience.

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### **Susan Morris says**

Great historical fiction book on childhood of Dr. Betty Shabazz, wife of Malcolm X. I learned so much from this., and hope young readers will enjoy it, too. (Library)

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### **Mary Lee says**

An important story that shows how the seeds of the Civil Rights Movement were planted in the 1940's.

Side note -- I'm currently listening to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (MASTERFULLY) read by Ruby Dee, so I was especially interested to note the connections between her and the adult Betty.

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### **Elizabeth says**

It's a miracle I'm alive to tell you about "Betty Before X." I listened to it as an audiobook, flying south on Connecticut's winding Merritt parkway in the dark, well over the speed limit, with tears pouring down my face.

This wonderful historical retelling of the life of Betty Dean Sanders (later the wife of Malcom X, among MANY other achievements) is heart-warming, shocking, sad, and funny. I loved it because it offered the domestic and peer-centric warmth of a middle grade novel while simultaneously imparting a great deal of biographical and historical information. Like the proverbial spoonful of sugar, it helps the medicine of the early years of the civil rights movement go down. Written by one of Betty's daughters—along with powerhouse novelist Renée Watson—it is well-structured, pacey and beautifully told.

Betty Dean Sanders was a person of great strength and character, even from a young age, and readers will find much to be inspired by in this book. Like most middle graders, she had a smashing mix of fearlessness and vulnerability, and here it is writ large against many circumstances beyond her control.

Bounced around from one household to another, Betty ultimately chooses new parents for herself as a tween, and then models herself on their brave, charitable, upstanding characters. It is a great choice by Betty, and one that lands her squarely in the lap of the beginnings of Detroit's civil rights movement. Her rise as an activist was inevitable, based on her character, but it was her foster parents who guided her to her cause. Though the story is lightly fictionalized to make it flow, the end of the book has twenty pages of actual historical information (including a timeline) that give readers the facts. They also make it useful for research, reference, and in-school use.

WOULD I RECOMMEND IT: Wholeheartedly yes, and especially for schools and libraries.

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## Amy says

### Summary

Betty Dean, age eleven, moves up north to Detroit in the early 1940s to live with her mother after her Aunt Fannie Mae dies. Betty's mother, whom she calls Ollie Mae, had Betty as a teenager and their relationship is distant. Betty isn't quite old enough to understand why her mother tells her that she is ungrateful, ornery, and like her daddy, bad to the core.

Fellow churchgoers Mr. and Mrs. Malloy take Betty in. Mrs. Malloy is a leader in the Housewives League, and organization that boycotts businesses that don't hire black employees or treat customers fairly. The goal is to, as Betty and Mrs. Malloy say, "Hurt them in their pocket."

### Appeal

I liked the time and place of this story, in part because it sets (at least in my somewhat naive American history mind) the beginnings of the civil rights movement and the forms of nonviolent protest to a different time and place. Not to say that the Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott story isn't important, but rather to acknowledge that others did this work, too. At one point in the story, Betty thanks Mrs. Peck, founder of the Housewives League for her leadership as "an example to all of us girls, and even the boys." Fannie Peck is the godmother of current day movements like #grabyourwallet.

I also appreciate the brief conversations and complications of what I learned in school about race relations. For example, I always assumed that integration was universally desired by black Americans, and it wasn't until I read Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* that I realized that wasn't true. Mr. Malloy questions the outcomes of school integration in a conversation Betty overhears: "I'm not sure what desegregated schools are going to do for the Negro man. Let's think about this -- what will happen to Negro teachers? What will happen to our children who will be sitting next to white children for the first time with no one preparing them? Why isn't anyone talking about white children integrating into Negro schools? It's imposing the nothing that we are inferior, and by having our children travel across town, it's imposing the nation that white schools are superior."

Period details also make this piece stand out: references to Billie Holiday, Billy Eckstein, Paul Robeson, the Rose-Meta House of Beauty, Nadinola Bleaching Cream.

### Issues with comprehension

The title. Most of my students don't know who Malcolm X is, and I think some of them will take the title literally. (As in, they might expect the letter X to play a role in the story.) Yes, it's explained in the inside cover, but will my students look there? I am not sure. I might need to contextualize author Ilyasah Shabazz, Malcolm X, and Betty Shabazz in my book talk.

### Recommended for

A lovely coming of age story that blends some family and friendship themes with a social protest backdrop. There are some heavy topics woven in here (lynchings, police violence, and riots) but those topics are protected through the lens of cautious adults and somewhat naive children.

## Michelle says

This is a great overview of the childhood of Betty Shabazz - a woman who would eventually become the wife of Malcolm X. This is fiction, but Renee Watson worked with Ilyasah Shabazz, one of Betty's daughters, so the facts here are about as true as a recounting of history can be.

Presenting this as a story will definitely make this material more palatable for younger readers which is fantastic. This book breaches a lot of topics, such as social justice, segregation, and privilege (among other things). This is an accessible way for young readers to broach these still relevant political issues.

There's also some very informational material at the end of the book. I really enjoyed Shabazz's author's note. There, she delves into how the book was researched and written, and provides some context to some of the changes that Shabazz made when recounting her mother's life to better serve the story and its readers.

While it makes perfect sense for this novel to focus on Betty's childhood, reading this made me wish that there was some kind of sequel planned that would tackle Betty's later years as a teen, and young adult. The seeds are sowed for the great things she would go on to do, but I wanted to see those things first hand! I don't mean for this to sound like a critique; rather, I want this to demonstrate how compelling this narrative was, as it made me want more. I hope it does the same for younger readers and inspires them to seek to learn more about not only Betty, but the issues she dedicated her life to fighting against.

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## Sierra says

Betty struggles with being an African American in the 1940s and her relationship with her mother, and friends. When she starts to volunteer with at an organization with some women at her church and with her closest friend, she starts to become more confident about who she is and figures out what's right and what is wrong. It is AMAZING and I could not put it down.

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