

The Last American

Spike Lee forgives us, sort of



Denzel Washington as Malcolm X: More a conjuration than mere portrayal

BY STEVE ERICKSON

I HAVE A RUNNING DEBATE IN MY HEAD ABOUT Spike Lee. Sometimes I think his talent exceeds his intelligence and other times I think his intelligence exceeds his talent. Before *Malcolm X* this argument may have been more pertinent, particularly in the case of Lee's most notable and controversial movie, *Do the Right Thing*, whose coda quoting both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. rendered the film as philosophically muddled as it was brilliant. But it's also possible that, in judging Lee's work, I haven't made allowances for the sort of ambiguity I would automatically credit as artistic complexity in a white filmmaker, which may say more about the limits of my own racial understanding. Or it may be I can't imagine a black artist being ambiguous about race, which says more about the limits of my own imagination. At any rate, by the time of *Jungle Fever* the nexus between Lee's talent and intelligence had already become knottier, especially since the movie sometimes seemed neither able nor smart, a statement about interracial love undermined by the fact that the white woman barely existed as a character, except for some perfunctory family history and what actress Annabella Sciorra brought to the role. It also doesn't help that, to put it plainly, Spike Lee often talks like a fool, calling Thurgood Marshall "ignorant" on Jesse Jackson's TV show, for instance.

In any event, *Malcolm X* renders the talents-intelligence issue moot. If it lacks the shot-for-shot assurance of *Do the Right Thing*, it's still an unfathomably ambitious work that means to apotheosize the black consciousness of the last 50 years, and succeeds better than anyone has a right to expect. In the final analysis Lee was both smart and talented enough to understand that the drama of Malcolm's life lay not in its politics, not in its metaphor, not even in its legend, but in its capacity for transformation; and the extent to which that life was a statement of politics and metaphor and legend, it was such not simply for black America but all America, at least all of America in a period — the '60s — when transformation was the difference between spiritual

passage and spiritual death.

Malcolm was this transformation in the extreme, from racketeer and cocaine addict to prophet to something verging on mystic. At every juncture when the choice was to transcend or die, he transcended. Lee, to be sure, has burnished this metamorphosis to an almost divine glow. You also get the feeling he maybe watched *JFK* one too many times, with hints of white conspiracy that may or may not be based on facts. But that part of the story isn't Lee's main interest anyway, and if by the end you also get the idea he still isn't too crazy about white people, the literally incendiary opening moments have given way to the half-life of Malcolm's final light, in which race was reduced to a puny concern by the epiphanies of Mecca. That Lee himself has come to a similar revelation would obviously be an irony of the first order, since one suspects he made this film not as a

manifesto of blackness. The evidence of the film is that his own feelings about Malcolm X may have become deeper in the course of making the film, and more complicated than he ever would have anticipated.

There are moments he seems overwhelmed by it all. The movie lurches stylistically from David Lean bio-pic to Oliver Stone pseudo-doc, resorting to dramatic clichés one moment and odd bits of visual business the next, Malcolm's face spinning around the screen like the hands of a clock to the ringing of an ominous tele-

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phone. It's as though Lee had momentary lapses of confidence in his ability to tell such a big story or shoulder the responsibility for a story that means so much to black Americans. His well-publicized campaign to take away the rights to Malcolm's life from (white) director Norman Jewison probably only added to the pressure, especially in the subsequent hail of charges from other African-Americans that Lee himself wasn't quite black enough for the job.

While the stylistic shifts may correspond to the thematic upheavals of Malcolm's life, they do so to curious effect. The life of Malcolm the young stud looks a lot less oppressive than that of Malcolm the liberated visionary, the rage of the flames that open the film washing into a golden blaze of friendly Harlem sunlight, as though Lee was apparently so enthralled by the opportunity to make a period epic that he couldn't resist making it look wonderful. As shot by cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, who did such knockout work on *Do the Right Thing* as well as other Lee films, Harlem in the '40s looks a little too much like fun, with nightclubs and great music and all the juice of a vivid black culture, albeit laced with the poisonous demands of a white culture that compel black people to painfully conk their hair and dress, in Malcolm's words later, "like monkeys."

The movie's biggest failure (perhaps an inevitable one) is to answer the mystery (perhaps an insoluble one) of Malcolm's transformation, to

light the dim corridors of his psyche wherein he walked from one incarnation to the next. The childhood memory of his parents and brothers and sisters being burned out of their house by the Klan is remarkably lacking in power, introduced before we have any feeling for Malcolm as a man; it also presents in heroic terms a father who in fact routinely beat Malcolm's brothers and sisters for being darker than he was. Later in the film, when Malcolm grows up and his own family is burned out of their house, the parallels with the past are a little unnecessary, since we're perfectly capable of making the connection ourselves. The literalization of Malcolm's visions, such as the appearance of the Nation of Islam's leader Elijah Muhammad in his jail cell, manage the dubious accomplishment of being overdrawn and ordinary at the same time. It would be more effective if we could not see what Malcolm sees, even if it meant a momentary departure from his viewpoint, but the relationship of the film to Malcolm's viewpoint is part of the problem. The movie never quite knows whether to get inside Malcolm or stay outside, leaving us somewhere between objectivity and subjectivity, where Lee finds himself stranded as well.

The basic material of Malcolm's story, however, and the fervor of Lee's execution overcome these lapses. The film's errant moments are swept aside by its thunderous scope and the electrifying verisimilitude of Malcolm's speeches to the Nation of Islam and his assassination, as well as images that tap into the most primal African-American nightmare: the Klan disappearing over the hill before a giant white moon, as though swallowed by the livid mouth of the night. As usual Lee gets first-rate work from his most populous ensemble of actors yet, in particular Delroy Lindo's Harlem boss West Indian Archie, and Al Freeman Jr.'s uncanny impersonation of Elijah Muhammad. And when the entropy of Lee's audacity threatens to send the film flying off in pieces, the gravitational force of Denzel Washington's Malcolm holds it together.

That Washington seemed an inspiration almost from the moment he was cast still doesn't prepare you for the enormity of the performance, which is more a conjuration than mere portrayal. Like Daniel Day-Lewis and Wesley Snipes, Washington is one of the few new young actors who naturally melds genius with sexual charisma, and his mesmerizing Malcolm not only conveys a sociopath's soul — which is never completely abandoned even when his pathology takes a radically new form — but the soul of an innocent. As Marshall Frady noted in his excellent piece in *The New Yorker* last month, Malcolm's "wonder and elation" in discovering that the white man might not be the devil after all "hinted at the childlike simplicity... that had lurked all along under the ferocities of his racial exhortations." When we see clips of the real Malcolm at the end, Washington's interpretation is only revealed as more monumental rather than less, enhanced rather than diminished by the real thing. If the film doesn't provide the psychological links in Malcolm's transformation, if Malcolm himself didn't provide them in his own autobiography on which the film is based, Washington appears to have stumbled on them anyway, not only in the steeliness that threads its way through the life of a young con playing Russian roulette, until the con man dies and the new man is born, but in his haunting smile at the end, confronted by a shotgun's serene doom.

THE HEART OF MALCOLM'S PROPHECY WAS America's shame, of course, which is what made his presence so unbearable. If he was right that white people couldn't look at black people without seeing their guilt, then America couldn't look at Malcolm without seeing the irredeemable. The heart of America's prophecy is that everything can be redeemed, that the past can be retold or obliterated, that the present can be reinvented at will, that the future comes in choices — that destiny, in short,

FOR ADDITIONAL FILM REVIEWS, SEE THE CALENDAR FILM SECTION ON PAGE 75.

MALCOLM X

Directed by SPIKE LEE
Written by ARNOLD PERL and SPIKE LEE
Based on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as told to ALEX HALEY
Produced by MARVIN WORTH and SPIKE LEE
Starring DENZEL WASHINGTON, ANGELA BASSETT, ALBERT HALL, AL FREEMAN JR. and DELROY LINDO
Distributed by Warner Bros. Citywide

is subject to America's intentions even as history is subject to destiny's. Malcolm's life said: No. It said some things can't be undone or taken back, that the shame of what America did to the Americans brought here in captivity and held in servitude, and what it did to the Americans who were here before America was, is as much a part of the country as its promise. Those of us who insist on believing in America, who can't help believing in it the same way a junkie can't help needing a fix, might hope, out of sheer optimism if not sentimentality, that at least America

is forged out of the tension between what must be redeemed and what can never be redeemed, that it's America's mission to redeem the part of itself which is irrevocably damned.

That national redemption was what Martin Luther King Jr. would give to America, and what Malcolm would deny, before the conversion of his last years. King told America it could still save itself, while Malcolm wasn't about to let it; King wanted more from America, while Malcolm wanted nothing. Malcolm did not have the luxury of King's own clear racial

identity: like Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August*, who literally does not know if he's black or white and thus embodies both the salvation and loss of America, the quarter of Malcolm that was white was a source of not just his rage but his possession. It isn't clear to me — maybe it isn't clear to anybody, including Spike Lee and the ghost of Malcolm himself — whether he died believing, as he did before the Black Muslims he served so spectacularly cast him out, that the Americanism of black people is artificial, that the fulfillment of black people in

nakedly American terms is not only an impossibility but a corruption of the displaced African, and that such fulfillment is something America needs a lot more from black people than black people need from it. Though before he died Malcolm came to forgive the white man under the eyes of his new God, it's not clear he came to forgive America.

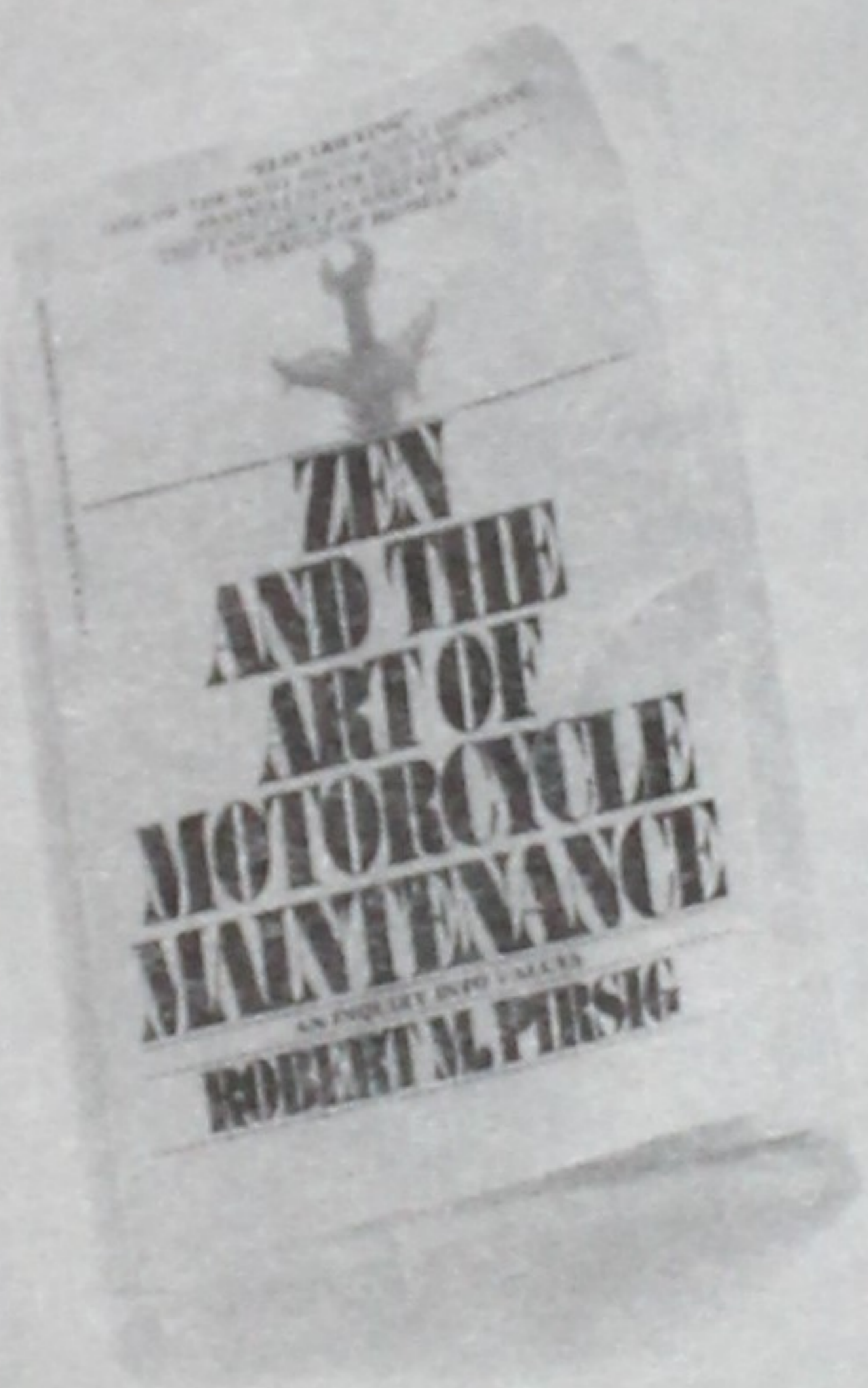
No doubt Spike Lee will go on sorting that one out. "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock," Malcolm cries to his congregation in one scene, "Plymouth Rock landed on us," and after the film is over you're still going to remember those opening minutes, an American flag burning down to the form of an X as scenes of Rodney King's vicious beating blurt throughout. If the fury is colder by the end, when a self-conscious young white woman — whose guilt is the most obsequious thing about her — approaches Malcolm and asks what she can do as an act of social and racial contrition, it's also more contemptuous; Malcolm the man extends no absolution to tortured whites. Whether *Malcolm* the movie does is another question, and that it's unsure of its own answer no longer strikes me as a matter of either talent or intelligence, but a wisdom it would be presumptuous for any white movie critic to comment on. It has to be pointed out that Lee still has some serious problems with white women, the fascination in *Jungle Fever* disintegrating here to something more loathsome: the white women of *Malcolm X* are flaxen trash, wan bleached wombs emptying black men of their manhood, luring black men into bad schemes and deserving the retribution of black humiliation for what white men did to black female slaves. Indeed, the white blood that flowed through Malcolm's veins was that of the man who raped his grandmother. One of the signs of Malcolm's political and spiritual evolution is how he gives up white women the way he gives up drugs and pork.

In the end, however, Lee's film isn't quite as angry as it wants to be. In the end one hears the director not so much proclaiming Malcolm's maxim "by any means necessary" as clinging to it, and while it would have been a better, edgier movie without the concluding eulogy, which insists on turning the previous three and a quarter hours into a choral hymn, it would not have been a better or more generous message. Lee's awe of Malcolm remains so heartfelt that any complaints about subtlety must necessarily be cynical. The movie is a glorification of its subject, to be sure. It disregards a few of the more unseemly episodes of Malcolm's biography, like his surreal meeting with the Klan in 1961 to forge a separatist alliance; and the anti-Semitism that regarded the Holocaust as just some kind of overblown gangland massacre. But if *Malcolm X* is one step back and three steps forward on Spike Lee's road to movie mecca, it is also his vindication. His self-promotional instincts notwithstanding, he's right about its importance: America should see this movie. It's unlikely that Malcolm himself would have thought there was much difference between Bill Clinton and George Bush, but in the hopeful glow of a Clinton victory rather than the nihilistic aftermath of a Bush re-election, we can more easily accept Lee's wary, perhaps unwitting murmur of forgiveness, at least as an act of the mind. Until, some other film down the line, it becomes an act of the heart. **LA**

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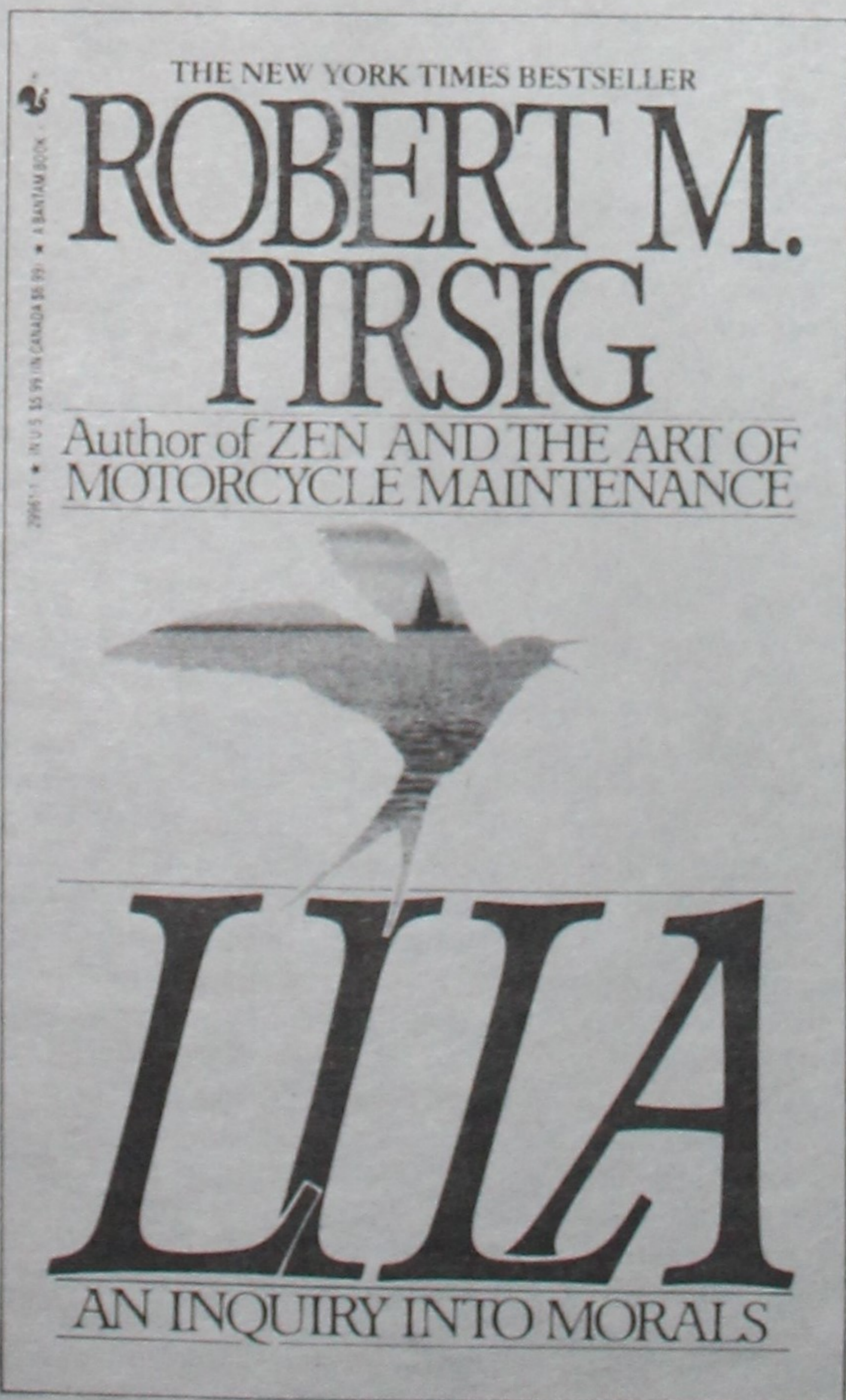
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