

Dreams from My Father by Barack Obama

About the book...

Nine years before his Senate campaign—and 13 before his US presidential election—Barack Obama published this powerfully affecting memoir, which became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller when it was reissued in 2004.

***Dreams from My Father* tells the story of Obama's struggle to understand the forces that shaped him as the son of a black African father and white American mother—a struggle that takes him from the American heartland to the ancestral home of his great-aunt in the tiny African village of Alego.**

Obama opens his story in New York, where he hears that his father—a figure he knows more as a myth than as a man—has died in a car accident. The news triggers a chain of memories as Barack retraces his family's unusual history: the migration of his mother's family from small-town Kansas to the Hawaiian islands; the love that develops between

his mother and a promising young Kenyan student, a love nurtured by youthful innocence and the integrationist spirit of the early sixties; his father's departure from Hawaii when Barack was two, as the realities of race and power reassert themselves; and Barack's own awakening to the fears and doubts that exist not just between the larger black and white worlds but within himself.

Propelled by a desire to understand both the forces that shaped him and his father's legacy, Barack moves to Chicago to work as a community organizer. There, against the backdrop of tumultuous political and racial conflict, he works to turn back the mounting despair of the inner city. His story becomes one with those of the people he works with as he learns about the value of community, the necessity of healing old wounds, and the possibility of faith in the midst of adversity.

Barack's journey comes full circle in Kenya, where he finally meets the African side of his family and confronts the bitter truth of his father's life. Traveling through a country racked by brutal poverty and

tribal conflict, but whose people are sustained by a spirit of endurance and hope, Barack discovers that he is inescapably bound to brothers and sisters living an ocean away—and that by embracing their common struggles he can finally reconcile his divided inheritance.

A searching meditation on the meaning of identity in America, *Dreams from My Father* might be the most revealing portrait we have of a major American leader—a man who is playing the nation's most prominent role in healing a fractious and fragmented world.

About the Author...

Prior to his 2008 election for President, Barack Obama spent his career as a community organizer, civil rights attorney, and leader in the Illinois state Senate and US Senate.

Sworn into office as US Senator on January 4, 2005, Senator Obama focused on the challenges of a globalized, 21st-century world. Recognizing the terrorist threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, he traveled to Russia with Republican Richard Lugar to begin a new

generation of non-proliferation efforts designed to find and secure deadly weapons around the world.

Understanding the threat we face to our economy and our security from America's addiction to oil, he worked to promote the greater use of alternative fuels and higher fuel standards in our cars. He has championed ethics reform in Washington.

He has served as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Veterans Affairs Committee, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, and Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

During his eight years in the Illinois state Senate, Senator Obama worked to create the state Earned Income Tax Credit, an expansion of early childhood education, and draft legislation requiring the videotaping of interrogations and confessions in all capital cases.

Barack Obama was born on August 4th, 1961, in Hawaii to Barack Obama, Sr. and Ann Dunham. He graduated from Columbia University in 1983, and moved to Chicago in 1985 to work for a church-

based group seeking to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods plagued with crime and high unemployment. In 1991, Senator Obama graduated from Harvard Law School where he was the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review.

Book Reviews...

Barack Obama...has somehow managed to live an uncommonly interesting life, and writes about it frankly and well.... His account moves from Kansas to Hawaii to Kenya, with an emphasis on the father who died when Mr. Obama was very young. If he could rewrite it now, he says, the mother who raised him (and died after the book was published) would play a bigger role. But Mr. Obama would still break the mold of most memoir writers, if only because "an autobiography promises feats worthy of record, conversations with famous people, a central role in important events." With this thought comes a truly unusual acknowledgment: "There is none of that here."

Janet Maslin - New York Times (9/10/04)

Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois and the Democratic Party's new rock star, is that rare politician who can actually write – and write movingly and genuinely about himself.... Most memorably, the book gave the reader a heartfelt sense of what it was like to grow up in the 1960's and 70's, straddling America's color lines: the sense of knowing two worlds and belonging to neither, the sense of having to forge an identity of his own.

***Michiko Kakutani - New York Times
(10/17/06)***

Fluidly, calmly, insightfully, Obama guides us straight to the intersection of the most serious questions of identity, class, and race.

Washington Post Book World

Elected the first black president of the Harvard Law Review, Obama was offered a book contract, but the intellectual journey he planned to recount became instead this poignant, probing memoir of an unusual life. Born in 1961 to a white

American woman and a black Kenyan student, Obama was reared in Hawaii by his mother and her parents, his father having left for further study and a return home to Africa. So Obama's not-unhappy youth is nevertheless a lonely voyage to racial identity, tensions in school, struggling with black literature—with one month-long visit when he was 10 from his commanding father. After college, Obama became a community organizer in Chicago. He slowly found place and purpose among folks of similar hue but different memory, winning enough small victories to commit himself to the work—he's now a civil rights lawyer there. Before going to law school, he finally visited Kenya; with his father dead, he still confronted obligation and loss, and found wellsprings of love and attachment. Obama leaves some lingering questions—his mother is virtually absent—but still has written a resonant book.

Publishers Weekly

Obama argues with himself on almost every page of this lively autobiographical conversation. He gets you to agree with

him, and then he brings in a counternarrative that seems just as convincing. Son of a white American mother and of a black Kenyan father whom he never knew, Obama grew up mainly in Hawaii. After college, he worked for three years as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side. Then, finally, he went to Kenya, to find the world of his dead father, his "authentic" self. Will the truth set you free, Obama asks? Or will it disappoint? Both, it seems. His search for himself as a black American is rooted in the particulars of his daily life; it also reads like a wry commentary about all of us. He dismisses stereotypes of the "tragic mulatto" and then shows how much we are all caught between messy contradictions and disparate communities. He discovers that Kenya has 400 different tribes, each of them with stereotypes of the others. Obama is candid about racism and poverty and corruption, in Chicago and in Kenya. Yet he does find community and authenticity, not in any romantic cliché, but with "honest, decent men and women who have attainable ambitions and the determination to see them

through.
Booklist

Discussion Questions

- 1. Describe the difficulties Obama had as a child—not fitting in with white children and fearing social "out-casts."**
- 2. Is it possible for any individual born of two ethnic origins to find a society in which he or she truly belongs? Think of recent authors who have struggled with similar issues: Amy Tan (Chinese), Jhumpa Lahiri (Indian), Louise Erdrich (Native American). Also consider the classics of African-American writers like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.**
- 3. Discuss Obama's family. What about his mother—would you have liked more attention paid to her in this work? Also consider his grandparents and they role they played in his life.**
- 4. When he makes his trip to Kenya, what does he come to understand about his father—and his own heritage.**

5. Do you feel Obama's attitude toward the all-white culture is one of blame, acceptance, resignation? Or something else?

6. Ultimately, Obama's memoir is a coming-of-age story in which a young man who straddles two cultures seeks his identity in the adult world. How—or how well—does he succeed? What conclusions does he reach?

7. Talk about his work as a community social worker on Chicago's south side. What does he learn or come to realize about his role in the African-American community?

8. Knowing now, as we do, of Obama's election as President of the United States, how do you view the primary events in his memoirs? In what ways have they shaped his political success and his political views?