Dreams from my Father

Barack Obama
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About the author

Barack Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961. Obama is the 44th President of the United States of America and the first African American elected to Office.

Barack Obama received his early education in Jakarta, Indonesia and Hawaii before graduating with a BA in politics from Columbia University in 1983. Following his graduation from Columbia he moved to Chicago where he worked as a community organiser for low-income families in the Altgeld and Roseland Gardens public housing estates. He went on to study law at Harvard University, graduating with a Doctorate in 1991, and became the first African-American President of the Harvard Law Review. He worked as a Civil Rights Attorney and also lectured in constitutional law at the University of Chicago from 1992 until 2004 when he became the third African American elected to the senate since the period of Reconstruction (1865–1877). The Reconstruction period saw the rebuilding of American society following the abolition of slavery. Barack Obama married Harvard graduate and lawyer Michelle Robinson in 1992. They have two daughters, Malia and Sasha. Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.

The son of a white American woman and a Kenyan man, Barack Obama grew up negotiating the divided worlds of his American and African heritage. His parents separated when he was two years of age and divorced in 1964. His mother, Ann Dunham, an activist and social scientist, died of ovarian cancer in 1995 at the age of 52. Barack Obama’s father, also called Barack, graduated with an MA in economics from Harvard University and worked as a senior economist in the Kenyan Ministry of Finance. He died in a car accident in 1982 at the age of 46.

*Dreams from my Father* charts Barack Obama’s journey from childhood though his years as a community organiser and concludes with his first journey to Kenya in 1987. First published in 1995, a second edition was published with a new preface in 2004. *Dreams from my
Father has been translated into ten different languages. Barack Obama is also the author of The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream (2006).

Synopsis

Dreams from my Father is the author’s personal account of race and inheritance. Divided into three parts and comprising 19 chapters, the book, as Obama states in the introduction, is ‘a record of a personal, interior journey – a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American’ (p.xvi). As the narrative unfolds, we see how this interior struggle is also tied to his search for belonging.

Part 1, ‘Origins’, details the early years of Barack Obama’s life in Hawaii and Jakarta. When he attends a prestigious and predominantly white school in Hawaii he is alerted to the auspices of race and what it means to be a black American.

Part 2, ‘Chicago’, documents Barack’s years involved with grassroots organisations and his dedicated work as a community organiser in impoverished parts of Chicago. In this section of the book we get a keen sense of the ways in which the seeds of his political aspirations were sown as he worked tirelessly to improve the social conditions of low-income earners.

Part 3, ‘Kenya’, concludes the journey as Barack goes to Kenya for the first time to meet his paternal relatives: his half-brother Roy, his grandmother, two of his father’s wives, and numerous other relatives. The reunion is an emotional one and it is made all the more poignant by Barack’s realisation that this is his second home and thus, he finds here, a sense of belonging. In Kenya he finally comes to ‘know’ his absent father and is able to reconcile his past.

Character summaries

Barack Obama: ‘I ceased to advertise my mother’s race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites’ (p.xv).
Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself as a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant’ (p.76).

Barack Obama is the author of the book, who narrates the story of his life from early childhood to his early 40s.

Maternal relations
Ann Durham (1942–1995): ‘“If you want to grow into a human being,” she would say to me, “you’re going to need some values”’ (p.49).

Durham is the mother of Barack and Maya Soetoro and the second wife of Barack Obama senior. Following her divorce from Obama she married Lolo Soetoro.

Madelyn Dunham (1922–2008): ‘What Toot believed kept her going were the needs of her grandchildren and the stoicism of her ancestors’ (p.57).

Madelyn Dunham is Barack’s white maternal grandmother (Toot) who partly raises him in Hawaii and is greatly influential in his life.

Paternal relations
Barack Obama senior (1936–1982): ‘… the important thing is that you know your people, and also that you know where you belong’ (p.114).

Barack Obama senior is the father of Barack and five other children, including Auma. He worked as a government economist in Kenya. Barack’s search for his absent father is what much of the book turns upon.

Stanley Dunham (1918–1992): ‘Racism was part of that past, his instincts told him, part of convention and respectability and status, the smirks and whispers and gossip that had kept him on the outside looking in’ (p.21).

Stanley Durham is Obama’s paternal grandfather.

Lolo Soetoro (1936–1987): ‘It was as if he had pulled into some dark hidden place, out of reach, taking with him the brightest part of himself’ (p.42).

Lolo was Barack’s Indonesian stepfather. We understand him as a kind man tortured by his country’s circumstances.

Auma (1960–): ‘I can’t say I really knew him … [h]is life was so scattered. People only knew scraps and pieces, even his children’ (p.212).
Auma is Barack’s half-sister and significant in her relationship to Barack in general, and to the book in particular, in that she prompts Barack to visit Kenya.

Roy (1958–): ‘I don’t think I really like myself. And I blame the Old Man for this’ (p.264).

Roy is Barack’s half-brother and Auma’s brother who, at the book’s conclusion, goes by his traditional African name, Abongo, and converts to the Muslim faith.

David Ndesandjo (Obama): ‘He became everybody’s favorite. He was so sweet, you know, and funny, even if he was sometimes too wild’ (p.339).

David is Barack’s half-brother and the son of Ruth and Barack senior. He is killed in a motorcycle accident, for which Roy blames himself.

Bernard Obama (1970–): ‘Me, I’m not so interested in books. I’m a man of action like Rambo’ (p.324).

Bernard is Barack’s half-brother, although there are questions surrounding his paternity.

Sarah Onyango Obama (1922): ‘I looked at Granny, and she nodded at me, and I knew then that at some point the joy I was feeling would pass and that that, too, was part of the circle’ (p.377).

Sarah is the third wife of Barack’s paternal grandfather. Barack calls her ‘Granny’. She is not to be confused with her stepdaughter, also called Sarah, who is the daughter of Onyango’s second wife, Akuma.

Akumu Onyango Obama (1918–): ‘Eventually she learned to do what was expected of her. But she quietly clung to her bitterness’ (p.408).

Akumu is Barack’s paternal grandmother and the second wife of his grandfather. She had three children.

Sarah Obama: ‘She’s had a hard life. She never had the chances the Old Man had, you see, to study or go abroad. It made her very bitter’ (p.318).

Sarah Obama is Barack senior’s sister. She feels cheated out of her brother’s inheritance.

Zeituni Onyango Obama (1952): ‘She can’t have her own children so she looks after others’ (p.317).

Barack’s half-aunt, she is referred to in the book as ‘Auntie Zeituni’.
Kezia Obama: “‘My son,’ Kezia repeated in English, nodding and pulling me into a hug. ‘My son has come home’” (p.316).

Kezia is Barack Obama senior’s first wife and the mother of Auma and Roy.

Other significant characters
Frank: ‘They’ll train you so good, you’ll start believing what they tell you about equal opportunity and the American way and all that shit … you may be a well-trained, well-paid nigger, but you’re a nigger just the same’ (p.97).

Frank is an African-American friend of Barack’s grandfather. He is a poet and also something of a sage and confidante to Barack.
Ray: ‘It’s their world, all right? They own it, and we in it. So just get the fuck outta my face’ (p.83).

Ray attends the same high school as Barack and they strike up a friendship since he is one of the three other African Americans enrolled at the school.
Regina: ‘Strange how a single conversation can change you … I know that after what seemed like a long absence, I had felt my voice returning to me that afternoon with Regina’ (p.105).

Regina attends the same university as Barack and is also African American. She forces Barack to confront his shortcomings.
Marty Kaufman: ‘… it occurred to me that he’d made no particular attachments to people or place during his three years in the area, that whatever human warmth or connection he might require came from elsewhere … In his work, it was only the idea that drove him …’ (p.228).

A community activist whom Barack meets in New York, Kaufman offers Barack a job as a community organiser in Chicago.
Marcus: ‘Marcus was the most conscious of brothers. He could tell you about his grandfather the Garveyite; about his mother in St. Louis who had raised her kids alone while working as a nurse; about his older sister who had been a founding member of the local Panther party; about his friends in the joint. His lineage was pure, his loyalties clear, and for that reason he always made me feel a little off-balance, like a younger brother who, no matter what he does, will always be one step behind’ (p.101).
Marcus is a university friend who, like Barack, struggles with questions of identity and belonging. He eventually drops out of university.

**Reverend Wright (1941–):** ‘Life’s not safe for a black man in this country, Barack. Never has been. Probably never will be’ (p.284).

Reverend Wright is the pastor of the church Barack attends.