



Dreams From My Father A Story of Race and Inheritance

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About The Author:

Barack Obama is the Senator-Elect from the state of Illinois and was the keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic Party national convention. Obama was the first African-American president of the Harvard Law Review.

Obama has worked as a community organizer, civil rights attorney and law professor at The University of Chicago. In 1997, he was elected to the Illinois General Assembly's state senate representing Chicago's South Side.

General Overview:

Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance was originally meant to focus on Obama's road to becoming the first black editor of the Harvard Law Review as well as a reflection on the efforts of civil rights litigation sprinkled with personal anecdotes, but the autobiography took a different direction. Obama felt that the best way to explain the landscape of race was through the stages of his life in two worlds. Through a unique journey, he reflects on the image he created of his absent father and how that absence, along with his unusual childhood, played a role in coming to grips with race and his own place in the world.

The book is written as a reflective memoir meant to explain Obama's experiences and perspectives, which were shaped by his relationships with his family, friends and African relatives along with the challenges of being biracial and authentic. Separated into three parts - his childhood, his life in Chicago and his trip to meet his father's family in Kenya - Obama carries the reader through the story of his efforts to understand what family means and to relate his personal experience to the American experience.

*** Please Note:** This CapitolReader.com summary does *not* offer judgment or opinion on the book's content. The ideas, viewpoints and arguments are presented just as the book's **author** has intended.

Origins

When Barack Obama was 21, he received a call from Kenya telling him that his father had died in a car accident. At this point of his life, Barack's father, of the same name, remained a myth to him and he had to struggle to measure his loss. His father had left Barack and his mother, Ann, when he was two years old and his only understanding of the man was through stories from his mother and maternal grandparents, Gramps and Toot. These stories created the image of a larger than life character.

They would laugh and their eyes always lit up when speaking of his father; a man described as a gracious, humorous, giving and intelligent man. He was honest above all, which made him a bit domineering at times, but mostly gentle, able to handle any situation and liked by everyone. Barack was always told that something he could learn from his father was confidence, the secret to a man's success. Along with a few photographs, Barack knew only the basics. His father was a Kenyan of the Luo tribe, born in Alego along the shores of Lake Victoria. After being married with one child and another on the way, Barack's father won a scholarship to study in Nairobi and then the University of Hawaii, as the school's first African student.

This was where he met Ann, an 18-year old daughter of Midwestern parents who had moved to Hawaii for work opportunities and a more inclusive culture. They were married and settled in Hawaii. When Barack was two, his father won a scholarship to pursue his PhD at Harvard, but could not afford to bring his family with him. After Harvard, Barack's father returned to Africa to fulfill his promise to his country of bringing his knowledge back to help his people. It was presented to Barack as a romantic tale despite loose ends and unanswered questions.

Early Years in Hawaii

Barack's life was heavily influenced by his grandparents. They would never fit into the traditional liberal ideology, but basically took each person for themselves and were offended by the racist attitudes they saw in the places they lived on the mainland such as Texas. They took to Barack's father immediately.

Race in Hawaii meant something different than on the continent. There was a sense that integration there was not a threat to the real American way of life, which was why Barack's race, very early in life, caused few problems. Hawaii was seen as an Eden of racial progress which the rest of the world would soon follow. There was only one problem; Barack's father was missing and none of the stories he was told could obviate that single, unassailable fact. Barack wondered why his father had left and why his father was presented as a prop in everyone's life.

When Barack was four, Ann met another man at the University of Hawaii, an Indonesian named Lolo, who was well mannered and graceful. After two years of dating, Lolo proposed to Ann and Barack was told the family would be moving to Indonesia.

Indonesia

Barack's life in Indonesia was eventful and educational and mostly enjoyable. He learned the language in six months while surviving chicken pox and measles. He ran in the streets with his friends and excelled in school. This was also Barack's first experience with a fatherly figure and he became close to Lolo, who introduced Barack to people as his son. Barack began to understand the pleasure of familiarity in having a man around and turned to Lolo for guidance and instruction.

Ann was grateful for the relationship, but Barack could see that she wasn't very happy. She was lonely and she didn't like the unrest around them that Barack was too young to really understand. The political unrest and undisguised power was too indiscriminate for her. Barack's closeness with Lolo and his assimilation in the culture gave her a sense of panic. Although she felt her heritage protected her, the way things worked in Indonesia, she began to fear that something could happen to her son.

When Barack's little sister Maya was born, Barack noticed a change in his mother's attitude toward him. Once encouraged to acculturate himself in Indonesia, she began to keep him away from a culture that could not offer him what his American culture could. She no longer wanted him to adjust to a world that was too focused on surviving life as opposed to taking advantage of it. She spent more time teaching him English and schooling him at home, reminding him of his father's character and educating him on black Americans such as Mahalia Jackson or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

When Race Became an Issue

In Indonesia, Barack came face to face with the affects of racism and it was a revelation for him. While visiting the American Embassy with his mother, he was looking through *Life* magazine and came across a series of pictures of a man in a raincoat. He found something peculiar about the man's skin, thinking he looked like the blood had been drawn from his flesh. Upon further study, he noticed the crinkly hair, the heavy lips and broad, fleshy nose. Deciding to read the article to find out what the man's sickness was, Barack realized he had received a chemical treatment to lighten his complexion so he could pass for white.

Barack's face got hot, his stomach knotted and the pictures became a blur. He had no understanding of what it meant, but he knew it scared him more than anything else had. Living a childhood relatively free from self-doubt, this idea was violent to him. He had spent that night in front of the mirror looking at himself and wondering if something was wrong with him. Although his anxiety passed, his vision was permanently altered. He became aware of the different role people of color played in television and movies; wondering why all the people in the Sears catalog were white and why Cosby never got the girl on *I Spy*. He began to believe that his place, as well as his father's place, in this world was somehow incomplete.

Back In Hawaii

Believing it was time for him to attend an American school, Ann sent a 10-year-old Barack to Hawaii to live with his grandparents who seemed like strangers to him at the time. They were no longer the ambitious, optimistic people that he remembered. The one happy occasion was when Barack was admitted to Punahou Academy, a prestigious prep school for island elites.

The first day of school, Barack heard the giggles at the mention of his last name, was asked by a girl if she could touch his hair and asked by a boy if his father ate people. Although it died down after a while, Barack's sense that he didn't belong was growing.

Barack spent a lot of time sharing his image of his father with his classmates. He told them his dad was a prince who would take over as king when his grandfather died. As the boys in the class changed their attitudes towards him, Barack began to believe his own story, which was why it hit it hard when he came home from school one day to hear that his father would be coming to visit him only two weeks after his mother would be coming home for good, having separated from Lolo.

Obama's Visit

Prior to his father's visit, Barack's mother tried to reassure him by telling him about her continued correspondence with Obama over the years. He had remarried and had six children and this trip was recuperation after a bad car accident.

When he met his father, Barack immediately recognized the fallacies of the heroic image he had created. His father was thin and fragile, which didn't fit with the image of the hearty warrior Barack had in his mind. Over the course of the month his father would be in Hawaii, they spent days driving around the islands and nights in his grandparent's home.

Barack can't retrieve the memories of their small interactions or conversations, but he remembered not speaking much around his father at first. He remembers his father's laughter, his grip on Barack's shoulder and the way he stroked his goatee. Mostly he remembered how his father's presence had summoned back the older days for his grandparents and he saw them smile and seem happy again when listening to Obama tell his stories.

Barack was fascinated by the power his father had over people and began to think of him as real, immediate and even permanent. This temporary happiness was shattered when Barack was told that his father would be coming to school to talk to his class. Barack couldn't bear his lies being found out, but he had no way of stopping it. What happened turned into one of Barack's fondest memories.

At school, his father described a land where mankind first appeared, wild animals and tribes that required a boy to kill a lion to prove his manhood. He spoke of the struggle for freedom from the British, tradition, pride and respect. Barack's classmates applauded heartily and remarked to him how cool his father was.

Two weeks later, the day he was to leave, Barack remembered feeling accustomed to his father's company and laughing while they danced that day to a record his father had given him.

White Folks

During his teenage years, Barack experienced the same angst all teenagers had. He began to isolate himself from his mother and grandparents. After his mother returned to Indonesia with Maya, Barack was struggling to raise himself as a black man in America surrounded by people who had no idea what that meant. During that time, lacking a fatherly role model, Barack's confusion and anger was shaped by the few black teenagers on the islands, including his best friend Ray.

White folks became a phrase frequently used as they all discussed a ledger of slights in the way they were treated. There was an anger directed at whites in general that needed no object or confirmation. Barack began to build resentment based on his own experiences such as women clutching their purses when he entered the elevator or hearing the word *nigger* used. He was particularly struck when hearing his grandfather accuse his grandmother of not wanting to wait at the bus stop because of the black man who stood nearby.

The two worlds weren't merging well. Barack maintained a certain sense of discomfort because when his friends used the term *white folks*, he would suddenly remember his mother or his grandparents and grow very silent. He began to feel as if he had a secret to keep and searched to untangle the difficult thoughts he was having. There was a constant feeling that something wasn't quite right and Barack quickly learned to slip back and forth between his black and white worlds - understanding that each possessed its own language, customs and structures of meaning - convinced that eventually they would find a way to cohere.

Only they didn't and as time went on, Barack saw that he was playing on the white man's court. Even if the white man treated you like a man or came to your defense, it was because he knew that the words you spoke, the clothes you wore, the books you read, your ambitions and desires, were already his. Today looking back, Barack reflects on what he now calls maddening logic as an excuse to withdraw into a smaller coil of powerlessness until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness and defeat. He felt utterly alone.

Occidental College

Barack was headed for the fatal role of the young would-be black man; drinking and smoking pot while deciding not to care about anything. He had stopped writing his father because he was tired of trying to untangle a mess that wasn't his making. His mother was back in Hawaii at this time, but their relationship was very strained because of his slipping grades and belief that her faith in mankind's goodness had been misplaced. She never gave up and Barack credits her with his graduating from high school and getting into Occidental College in Los Angeles despite continued indifference.

At college, blacks still had the same grumblings and list of complaints, but Barack was beginning to see that most weren't interested in revolt and were tired of thinking about race all the time. The easiest way to do that was to keep to themselves, to avoid trying to guess what white people were thinking of them. Here, Barack had his first encounter with people, such as his friend Joyce, who refused to choose between their heritages. The terms multiracial or biracial began to pop up, but at the time he saw it as an excuse to avoid black people and Barack was becoming too aware of the need to show which side you were on and prove your loyalty.

Facing His Fear

Barack wasn't sure how he found his voice again, but believes it was about the time he realized that people began to listen to him and seek out his opinion. He developed a hunger for words that could carry a message and became involved in activities and speaking out for causes. He was feeling a connection with his crowd while still dealing with his judgment and skepticism.

He came to face his great fear, a crippling fear that told him unless he dodged and hid and pretended to be something he wasn't, he would forever remain an outsider and the rest of the world, black and white, would always stand in judgment. It didn't satisfy him and as he looked for answers to overcome this fear, he came to understand that one of his problems was that, for him, everything in his life before had been only about him. Despite the way the world was, he still had responsibilities and chose to believe that although his identity might begin with his race, it couldn't and didn't end there.

New York

Through a transfer program, Barack went to New York to finish his education at Columbia. He stayed with a friend, Sadik, and spent a lot of time reflecting and calming down his life. He stopped getting high, ran three miles a day and focused on his education. During this time, he became more aware of joint issues of race and class and made an attempt at socialism, but found it unsatisfying and continued to search for his entry into the world.

It was during this time that Barack's Aunt Jane called to tell him that his father was dead. He chose not to go the funeral, writing a letter of condolences and sharing an awkward phone conversation with one of his brothers. He felt no pain, only a vague sense of an opportunity lost and didn't want to look beyond that.

By 1983, Barack decided to become a community organizer with a goal of organizing black people for change. His dream was to create a real community, fought for and tended to like gardens through shared sacrifice. He started by writing to every civil rights organization, elected black official, neighborhood council and tenant rights group, but no one wrote back. He was eventually hired by a consulting firm as a research assistant and rode the corporate ladder to a position with an office, a secretary and financial success.

His dream was slipping away until he got a call from his half-sister, Auma, who had left Kenya to study in Germany. She was coming to New York and wanted to meet her

brother. Barack spent two weeks preparing until she called to say she couldn't come because their brother David had died in an accident. Like with his father, it struck Barack that he didn't know his own blood and couldn't even cry for his own brother. This experience reinvigorated his desire to be a community organizer and he quit his consulting job.

Chicago

After some small jobs, Barack joined Marty Kauffman, a white community leader in Chicago trying to pull urban blacks and whites together to save manufacturing jobs in the city. Known as America's most segregated city, a newly elected black mayor made Chicago exciting and interesting to Barack. He was impressed with the sense of pride and hope black Chicagoans had in Mayor Harold Washington and the belief that they would no longer be second-class citizens in their own city.

The more he connected with the community, the more Barack came to see the trends in disparity and uneasiness about the future. There was doubt that what little progress they had made would last. He saw the real differences in access to resources and their affect on progress. He also saw the devastating affect of absent fathers. He took on the public school system, which wasn't doing anything but teaching black children someone else's history and created programs and services to help bring hope and guidance to black boys who had no hand in their own development and no margin for error.

Completely absorbed in his work, Chicago held a series of ups and downs for Barack. He had to deal with some blacks who felt that any attempt to better their lives was hopeless and realized that if he was going to really affect change, he had to stop caring about whether people liked him. He was faced with disorganized plans, apathy and frustration. Despite big defeats, there were small victories and his commitment continued.

Barack dealt with community leaders who clearly did not have the best interest of their people at heart. While learning the political game, Barack found that most of the players were in it for themselves. In politics, power was in certainty and one man's certainty always threatened another.

He saw the affects of race baiting by both black and white politicians and so-called church leaders out for themselves. He saw the power of nationalism and preaching of victimization that made people honestly believe that whites were active and varied influences in their messy, contradictory daily lives. Despite it all, he saw heartfelt desire to make things better and was determined to match it with a real plan of action.

Barack also came to understand that the self-interest he was supposed to be looking for extended well beyond the immediacy of the issues. Beneath all the small talk, sketchy biographies and received opinions, people carried within them some central explanation of themselves. Through this understanding, Barack was able to break free from his feeling of isolation and share himself. The connections he built allowed him to bind his own world together and find a sense of place and purpose; a community.

Altgeld Gardens

Altgeld Gardens, a housing project built between the sewage treatment plant and city dump, was one of Barack's major projects in Chicago and a turning point in his own political career and popularity. He worked closely with the single mothers that lived there on the basic issues - crumbling ceilings, busted pipes, backed up toilets, garbage, etc. - through relentless street corner work. In the process of dealing with potholes and abandoned lots, it was discovered, through one of the national papers, that the Chicago Housing Authority was soliciting bids from contractors to remove asbestos from Altgeld's management office. None of the parents in the project had been told about potential asbestos.

Barack and the mothers went through several channels to get a resolution on this. They were met with brick walls and lies. They were told that the residences had been tested and were not in danger, but the CHA couldn't produce any documentation that this had been done. With a small group, Barack went to the CHA with a peaceful protest. They were ignored until camera crews showed up and the issue made the nightly news. Their demands were listened to and action was taken.

Barack was fundamentally changed as a result of this experience and more importantly, the parents began talking about ideas for future campaigns, getting more involved and reclaiming a power they had had all along.

Auma's Visit

Barack's sister was finally able to visit and her stay had a profound affect on him. Initially, both were reluctant to discuss their father, referred to as the Old Man by his family in Kenya. Auma told him about the rest of the family, both before Hawaii and after the Old Man had come back. In discussing their father, she described a man with a scattered life through very few memories of her own.

He was a successful and well-connected man, but when political unrest came to Kenya, the Old Man was one of the few to speak out against the changes. He warned against tribalism and the competency of the new leaders. As a result, he was blacklisted and fired. He lost his friends and was unable to get a good job, settling for lowly positions. He began to drink heavily and became a very difficult man to live with. It was a drunk driving incident, where a white farmer had been killed, that brought the Old Man to Hawaii for the only memory that Barack had of him. When he returned, his family was destitute until some governmental leaders died, when he was able to get a job in government again and things began to look up financially. He was still isolated and detached from his children.

Auma told Barack that the Old Man spoke of him all the time, showed his picture to everyone and was very proud. It was his mother's letters to the Old Man during that time when no one would speak to him that got him through. Still, Barack felt as if his world had been turned on its head. All of his life, he had carried a single image of his father, one that he had sometimes rebelled against, but never questioned. An image that he had

later tried to take as his own. He had never seen what most men saw at some point in their lives; their father's body shrinking, his best hopes dashed, and his face lined with grief and regret.

Barack had packed in his father's image all the attributes he sought in himself. That image was gone as he now saw a drunk, abusive husband and a lonely bureaucrat. The emerald curtain was pulled aside and Barack felt as if he could do whatever he pleased because whatever it was, he wouldn't do much worse than his own father. There was little satisfaction in his newfound liberation because he still wasn't clear what stood in the way of his succumbing to the same defeat that had brought down the Old Man.

Harvard Law & Coming Back

Barack had been reluctant to tell people that he had applied to Harvard Law School, to which he was later accepted, because he thought they would see it as abandonment. But to his surprise, very few reacted as he expected. Most of them were more surprised that he hadn't made the choice earlier. He was disappointed that very few of them believed he would come back to Chicago after it was all over. He was determined to come back, but feared his return might resemble the fate of his father's own return to Kenya, which had been for the purpose of making things better as well.

Finding Religion & the Death of a Leader

Throughout his work with the churches in Chicago, Barack was continually asked about his own religious or spiritual state to which he had no reply. He had developed a distaste for preachers, finding them either sanctimonious beards preaching pie-in-the-sky or slick holy rollers with flashy cars and eyes on the collection plates.

This changed when he met Reverend Wright of Trinity Baptist Church. Barack took to the preacher and particularly liked what he referred to as "A Disavowal of the Pursuit of Middle-classness." Separate from middle-incomeness, which was perfectly fine to pursue, the church believed that blacks must avoid the psychological entrapment that hypnotizes them into believing they are better than the rest and teaches them to think in terms of "we" and "they" instead of "us."

Barack still saw most faith as folly or nothing more than simple endurance and wasn't willing to accept salvation so easily. Then, the day before Thanksgiving, Mayor Washington died only months after winning reelection and the city of Chicago was devastated. What was additionally heartbreaking to Barack was that he saw there was no political organization in place beyond the man. The entire foundation of black politics in the city centered on one man who radiated like the sun and what ensued was squabbling among loyalists and factions emerging.

Although Holy Trinity had a reputation for catering to the buppie set, Barack decided to give it a try and found an incredibly emotional connection. Reverend Wright's sermon on "The Audacity of Hope" brought him to tears that first day as he realized how the spirit of faith carried within it the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams.

Kenya

Coming to terms with the Old Man was a reality that Barack could no longer avoid, which was why he finally made the decision to travel to Kenya before going to Harvard. Having been stripped of all his past isolations and racial obsessions, he was forced to look inside himself and face the emptiness he felt. He was afraid that his father's leaving and death would all mean nothing and their ties would only be a matter of blood type, but had to find the truth anyway.

What hit Barack immediately was the reaction to his name, or lack of reaction; an affect he had underestimated. For the first time, he felt the comfort, the firmness of identity that a name might provide, how it could carry an entire history in other people's memories. His name belonged and that meant he belonged. He relished in the ability to experience the freedom that comes from not feeling watched and the freedom of believing that your hair grows as it's supposed to grow. In a world that was black, you were just you and one was free to discover all those things unique to their life without living a lie or committing betrayal. Barack wished he could take this reality back with him to America.

After some time in Kenya, Barack realized the reality of life wasn't all good and, much like Chicago, the lines of division were varied and fine. Tribal factions and European and Asian influences created tension and separated loyalties. The AIDS infection rate in some villages had reached 50 percent. He saw the quest for wealth destroying the families and towns. The idea of poverty and a new standard of need had been imported by those coming back from the West.

The Family

Barack began to feel his father's presence as he traveled Kenya in the customs, the smells, sights and sounds and believed that it was all part of his father asking him to understand. As they visited various towns over the weeks, Auma introduced Barack to the entire clan of brothers, sisters, aunts and others. He met Aunt Jane, who had called to tell him the Old Man had died and his other mixed-raced brothers from his father's marriage to another white woman named Ruth. While noting the absence of men in their lives, he learned about his history as well as the good and bad of his grandfather and father. He learned the contention existing within the family as they dealt with the Old Man's estate; further complicated by having so many wives and children. He learned of the complications of life in Africa and the damaging affect his father's silence and absence had had on all of his children.

Barack found himself understanding the real meaning of family as more than a genetic chain, social construct, economic unit or division of labor. He had considered it all an inner circle of constant unquestioned love, a second circle of negotiated commitments and a third circle of acquaintances. Kenya changed that because now family was everywhere. Whether he was at the post office or the park, his father's name evoked responses and memories. Any need he had would be met by someone at sometime no matter what lengths they went through to fulfill them.

Barack realized that as a member of this family, he had responsibilities too, but wasn't sure what that meant. Unlike in Chicago, where responsibility translated into politics, those gestures were abstract and even self-indulgent in Kenya. Barack was frustrated because like in Hawaii, no one could tell him what his blood ties demanded or how they could be reconciled with some larger idea of human association.

Visiting His Father

In Nairobi, Barack's Aunt Sarah told him more about his father; a man who suffered because his heart was too big. He learned of a man who, after recovering from his low point, continued to give to even those who had shunned or mistreated him when he was blacklisted and destitute.

Everyone has a *Home Squared*; a term used for the home where their people came from. For Barack, his family's *home squared* was in Alego where he met his grandmother. He also saw his father's Harvard diploma and several pictures. After unpacking, his brother Roy led him outside where, at the foot of a mango tree, two long rectangular cement blocks jutted out from the ground. They were the graves of Barack's father and grandfather. Although his grandfather's stone was marked with his name and life span, his father's stone was covered with yellow bathroom tiles and a bare space where the plaque should have been. In six years, nothing had been put there.

Barack's emotions from his stay at Alego came down to a sense that everything he was doing, every touch and breath and word, carried the full weight of his life. A circle was beginning to close, so that he might finally recognize himself as he was. More importantly, he came to understand and accept that even the joy he felt at the connection with his people would pass. That life was neither tidy nor static and hard choices would always remain; this was a part of everyone's circle.

The Old Man and His Father

Many of the stories that Barack remembered from his trip to Kenya were about his grandfather who had been an orphan. He became a prosperous man with four wives. He was curious by nature and with the new presence of white men, he found himself drawn to that world. He never believed the white man was superior and didn't respect most of his ways, but did learn to read and write, thus becoming valuable. He took on some of their customs, which caused him to become unsatisfied with Luo life. He became obsessed with a pristine cleanness and would beat his wives severely for not meeting his expectations.

Barack learned that his grandmother, Akumu, was given to his grandfather, but was never happy. They fought constantly and she tried to leave twice, but he found her and made her come back. After she gave birth to Auma, Akumu left and his grandfather could not get her back. She had wanted Barack's father and his sister, Sarah, to follow later, but they were unable to make it and stayed with their father. The Old Man became resentful of his mother after that.

Barack's grandfather beat his father often, although he was very proud of his intelligence. The Old Man left home early and took odd jobs in Mombasa while developing some interest in politics. By chance, he met two women teaching in Nairobi impressed with how smart he was. This relationship led to an opportunity to study in America. He had already married, but left his pregnant wife and son with his family and went to Hawaii.

These stories came to life for Obama and he could picture his father as a young boy realizing the power of his mind despite suffering. A young man who had invented himself as achieving more than he could have ever thought, more than his own father had imagined for him, only to have it escape him as an older man. Seeing this life as real and complete for the first time, Barack found himself on his knees in front of the unmarked grave crying and forgiving his father. He understood the man and his faith. He saw that his father had clung to too much of his past's suspicions, rigidity and male cruelties and had clung to too little of his past's laughter, loyalty and love.

After this moment, Barack felt a calm come over him and his circle finally close. He realized that who he was and what he cared about was no longer just a matter of intellect, obligation or a construct of words. He saw that his life in America - the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment he'd felt as a boy and the frustration and hope he'd witnessed in Chicago - was all connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away by more than the accident of name or the color of his skin. The pain he felt was his father's, the questions he had were his brother's and their struggle was his birthright.