

Reading Obama

Brendon O'Connor

AUTHENTICITY is a prized but rare commodity in politics. Few politicians are credited with having it to begin with; it is even more difficult to maintain during a political career. Part of the problem is that when politicians seek to understand and please the amorphous public, they generally turn to pollsters and advisers who end up scripting their words, campaigns and governing strategies. These gurus will even inform them what food is most appropriate (sandwiches with regular mustard, not Dijon, as one of Obama's aides told him during a visit to a diner in southern Illinois). Public appearances are selected based on voter resonance, though sometimes with jarring results, as with the appearance of then New South Wales premier, the urbane non-motorist Bob Carr, at the opening of a drag-car racing track. Male politicians are told to wear earthy colours to appear more manly. Those who end up on a television debate are advised to keep away the frowns and scowls, even when their opponents twist the truth.

Although this image management is aimed at making politicians more likeable, it often makes them seem phoney and disingenuous to the general public. Then there is the language that politicians use when they are being questioned by journalists or debating opponents – an often grating combination of overconfident partisan point-scoring and evasiveness. Nonetheless, despite these hurdles and a well-developed sense of public cynicism, it is clear that there is still a great collective urge for more authentic leaders.

It is this urge that significantly helped Barack Obama overcome concerns about his relative inexperience to become not just the forty-fourth president of the United States of America but the most globally feted leader in living memory. Obama claims to be a different type of person and a different type of politician (a post-partisan who speaks to the concerns, as his most famous speech goes, not just of liberal or conservative America, but of the United States of America). Obama's authenticity saw him attract an enormous groundswell of volunteers and small financial donations in America, and unprecedented support around the world.

For readers, the authentic Obama is first outlined in a deeply personal manner in his memoir *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995) and then, with much more direct political reference, in *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006). In an era of sanitised, often ghost-written biographies, *Dreams from My Father* offers an unusually candid self-portrait of a politician before his star has risen. This authenticity is the key to its popularity; the book is also unusually well-crafted and -structured for a memoir.

Despite Obama's rise to the presidency, there is a dearth of biographies. Consequently, these two self-authored books have become the touchstones in analysis of Obama and his

motives. Common sense would tell us that it is troubling that Obama has to date been the greatest authority and source of information on himself. Still, his charisma, freshness, charm and unusual personal biography have led to wide acceptance of his personal version.

Obama seems to have ignited in readers, campaign participants and world citizens fresh hopes and positive emotions, the like of which they never imagined feeling about a politician. His supposed authenticity derives significantly from how different he is from the average American (or Western) politician: he looks different, he sounds different, and his genealogy is so very different. His two books effectively highlight his unusual family background. In *Dreams from My Father*, he movingly and candidly chronicles his often lonely and restless search for identity during his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia, as a peripatetic university student in Los Angeles and New York, while working as a community organiser in one of America's most disadvantaged urban communities in Chicago, and during a lengthy trip to Kenya. The entirety of this memoir – its language, tone and structure – is near perfect in its ability to cut against a general cynicism with politicians, and to make people believe that Obama is indeed different from other politicians; that he is more genuine. Further, it was written before Obama had ever run for political office.

The contents of *Dreams from My Father* provide ample evidence of a politician from an unusual background, with a cast of characters, including his Kenyan father, Indonesian stepfather and anthropologist peacenik mother, who, in Obama's own words, taught him 'to disdain the blend of ignorance and arrogance that too often characterized Americans abroad'. Obama also offers details of the radical student:

To avoid being mistaken for a sellout, I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets ... we discussed neo-colonialism, Franz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. When we ground out our cigarettes in the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting society's stifling constraints.

Obama moves on to document his near-monastic life in New York while at Columbia University, and immediately afterwards: fasting on Sundays, attending socialist conferences and African cultural fairs, and reading voraciously. One adviser recently claimed that this period in New York helped Obama think deeply about crucial issues in a way that most busy politicians never have time to do. According

to some accounts, Bill Clinton read a book a day while he was at Oxford; he also seems to have known most of the interesting men and *all* of the interesting women on campus. In comparison, Obama's early adult years seem much more internally focused. Obama loved playing basketball and was not without companions, but building networks or being popular did not seem part of his story in the way that it was for Clinton or for both of the Bush presidents. Obama does recognise, from a young age, the thrill he derives from delivering a speech. *Dreams from My Father* reveals that he is a good listener and strategist. But he does not seem the most obvious candidate for a future political career.

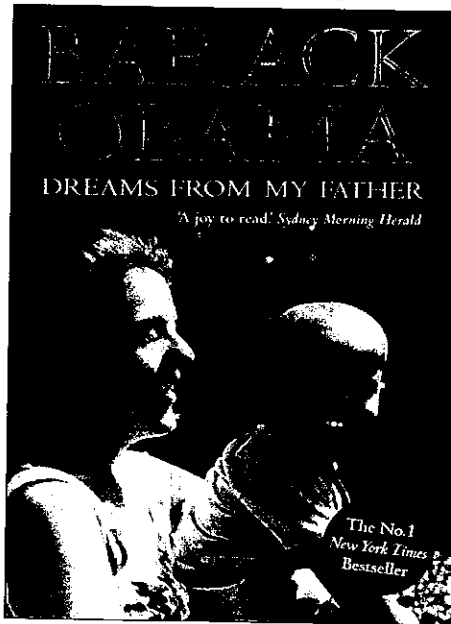
For me, the most appealing part of Obama's journey in *Dreams from My Father* is his time as a community organiser in the Altgeld Gardens public housing project in Chicago. Obama biographer David Mendell describes Altgeld thus: 'the sprawling apartment complex inhabited by two thousand residents, nearly all of them black ... sits in relative physical isolation amid a huge garbage dump, a noxious-smelling sewage plant, a paint factory and the heavily polluted Calumet River. Altgeld is in a constant state of disrepair.' Instead of taking a lucrative corporate job in New York, Obama chose to work in Altgeld for a number of years. This experience makes Obama far more personally familiar with African-American poverty and despair than any previous American president.

Although *Dreams from My Father* reflects constantly on the impact his absent Kenyan father had on his life, it is Obama's mother and her values that emerge as far more important in shaping his personality and concerns. He has written 'that what is best in me I owe to her', and he is fond of using her words 'our common humanity' in his speeches. This phrase, which featured in his inaugural address, encompasses her empathy and secular humanist belief in the worth of every person's life. In the most inspiring passages of *Dreams from My Father*, Obama recalls the struggles of ordinary individuals and families in Altgeld and how he tries to understand these people, empathise with them and make a concrete difference in their lives.

Dreams from My Father ends with a long description of Obama's odyssey to Kenya, where he finally puts to rest many of his personal anxieties about identity and lack of belonging. This journey to Africa seems crucial in releasing the legend of his dead father from his mind. What impact Obama's experience in Kenya and his childhood memories of poverty in Indonesia will have on how he deals with the Third World remains to be seen.

Obama's autobiography is a far more reflective, open and indeed melancholy book than many would expect from

the pen of a politician, and provides hope that Obama is indeed different. However, after what he has been through since its publication fourteen years ago, it might also turn out to be the words of another man from another time.



Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, derives its title from the sermon delivered by Reverend Wright at his Trinity church on Obama's first visit there. Wright was Obama's long-time pastor before Obama terminated their relationship during the 2008 campaign when video tapes emerged showing Wright declaring, after 9/11, 'Not God bless America, God damn America.' *The Audacity of Hope*, a far more traditional pre-campaign book, combines biography with long sections of political analysis and a few policy proposals. Obama asserts his difference by presenting the case for a new post-partisan politics that is unashamedly progressive, but he avoids demonising Republicans. Civility, empathy and fairness are his guiding values throughout the book. Like Obama's speeches, the book reads crisply and he is mighty convincing,

but what it all means in practical policy terms is not exactly clear. On one level, Obama seems full of new answers to intractable political stalemates; however, given his gift with words, maybe all he is really offering is platitudes rather than hard choices. Or, as Mendell puts it: 'While talking or writing about deeply controversial subjects, he considers all points of view before cautiously giving his often risk-averse assessment, an opinion that often appears so universal that people of various viewpoints would consider it their own.' Now that he is president, this tension between the risk-averse and pragmatic side of Obama's political temperament and his promise of real change will be more starkly on display, with the potential for disappointing many star-struck supporters.

The best biography written to date on Obama is *Obama: From Promise to Power* (2007), by David Mendell, who has followed Obama for years as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. The biography provides good coverage of Obama's early political races and career, highlighting how luck, tenacity and cunning aided his rapid progression through the tricky world of Illinois politics. Obama's first political victory was his election to the Illinois state Senate in 1996. As a newcomer to Chicago, he was not a favourite to win. However, his campaign succeeded in having all of his opponents disqualified from the ballot through legal technicalities. His next and more crucial victory was his election to the US Senate in 2004. This time his main rivals all ruled themselves out of the contest through retirement, late withdrawal or public scandal. Specifically, Obama's two main rivals had extremely embarrassing information

published about their divorce proceedings. These details had been doggedly pursued by the *Chicago Tribune* in court cases to make the divorce proceedings public. It has been suggested that Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, a former employee of the *Chicago Tribune*, had a hand to play in the paper's pursuit of this information.

In his more general analysis, Mendell highlights Obama's supreme confidence, egotism and driving ambition. He largely attributes this confidence (illustrated most graphically in Obama's speeches) to Obama's mother and to her constant reinforcement of her son's self-esteem. Mendell's behind-the-scenes view – the great promise of any well-researched biography – points to the negative side of this immense self-assurance: 'What the public has yet to see clearly is his hidden side: his imperious, mercurial, self-righteous and sometimes prickly nature, each quality exacerbated by the enormous career pressures that he inflicted upon himself.' Mendell also has much praise for Obama's intellect and his ability to inspire (particularly women); he also suggests that Obama's Hawaiian upbringing accounts for his being much more laid-back in appearance and cooler under pressure than most politicians. It seems to me that this grace under pressure, particularly in the debates with John McCain and during the financial crisis at the end of the 2008 campaign, was crucial in reassuring many Americans as they considered voting for a black presidential candidate.

On the question of race, these books provide plenty of evidence to suggest that, in his personal life, Obama has strongly emphasised his black heritage and identity. Although Obama's father was an almost entirely absent physical presence from his life, his legend (and skin colour) cast a significant hold on Obama's life. At school and university, Obama identified with African-Americans more so than with whites, despite being raised by his white mother and grandparents. Describing his upbringing, he has said he saw himself as 'like an orphan' who was 'trying to raise myself to be a black man in America'. After finishing his studies, he was drawn – when he chose a calling (more than a career) – towards community organising in the nearly entirely black public housing projects. When he chose a church it was the black congregation of Reverend Wright. When he chose a wife, it was a black woman (race had been an issue in the breakup of at least one relationship with a white girlfriend).

Obama's personal life story is one of seeking out an African-American identity. Politically, race plays a more nuanced and subtle role. Obama is clearly proud to be a successful black leader and is mindful of the legacy he has inherited; nonetheless, he emphasises racial inequalities and lingering racism far less than other prominent black leaders such as Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. Obama's emphasis of his racially mixed background even led to some commentators referring to him as a 'post-racial leader'. Looking at the statistics, however, I would claim that those who suggest that Obama's election signifies the end of racism in America are being overly optimistic. The United States currently only has one elected black governor and no elected black sena-

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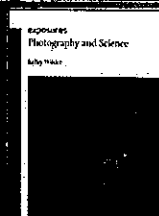
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Hbk 224pp 9780801884658 A\$101 NZ\$127 2008.09
Johns Hopkins University Press

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Hervé This

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Columbia University Press

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John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff

In the fall of 2008, the United States was plunged into a financial crisis more severe than any since the Great Depression. As banks collapsed and the state scrambled to organise one of the largest transfers of wealth in history, many - including economists and financial experts - were shocked by the speed at which events unfolded. In this new book, John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff offer a bold analysis of the financial meltdown, how it developed, and the implications for the future.

Hbk 144pp 9781583671849 A\$27.95 NZ\$34.95 2009.02
New York University Press

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tors. According to exit polls, only ten per cent of the white population of Alabama and eleven per cent in Mississippi voted for Obama.

The entire world now waits to see if Obama's authenticity can be maintained and what he will actually deliver. As Peter Bienart has recently stated, there are two ways of predicting what lies ahead. The first is to look at the man and his biography; the second is to look at the world he inherits. The problem with the first is that, despite the detailed accounts of Obama's personal life and the massive worldwide coverage he has enjoyed over the past year, Obama's policy preferences and leadership instincts remain somewhat of a mystery. This is because of his relatively short career as a legislator and his non-existent career as a political executive. Thus it is difficult to judge what policies he will prioritise, let alone if he will be bold or pragmatic in his vision. Further, if history is our guide, the promises made by candidates on the campaign trail can change dramatically once they are elected. This all suggests more attention needs to be placed on examining how the world that Obama inherits will determine the course of his presidency.

This brings us to one of the problems with biographies: they often help perpetuate the view of politics, commonly presented in the popular media, where leaders are seen as being akin to a queen bee at the centre of the action, directing a large team of assistants. Another view often favoured by academics is that a leader is more like a large bumblebee caught in a spider's web, making enormous noise and getting a lot of attention but ultimately being restrained by the circumstances and systems they operate within. Both interpretations have their strengths: to forget about structures of power and the global challenges that leaders inherit, and to see them as entirely the masters of their own destinies, is terribly naïve. However, to ignore how individual leaders shape perceptions and debates is to dehumanise politics. Obama has certainly humanised American politics with his unusual biography and his engaging personal style. He has inspired a generation of young Americans and African-Americans, and has significantly improved America's image abroad. Future biographers may well tell us that people saw in him what they wanted to see and missed his weaknesses, or that he was simply overwhelmed by the tumult of the times. More remarkably, they may say that he remained an authentic and effective political leader. Only time will tell.

Main books considered in this article

David Mendell

Obama: From Promise to Power

HarperCollins, \$27.99 pb, 407 pp, 9780060858216

Barack Obama

The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream

Text, \$24.95 pb, 448 pp, 9781921351365

Barack Obama

Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance

Text, \$24.95 pb, 457 pp, 9781921351433

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