

# Biography Resource Center

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## Barack Obama

**Also known as:** Barack Hussein Obama, Jr.

**Birth:** August 4, 1961 in Hawaii, United States

**Nationality:** American

**Ethnicity:** African American

**Occupation:** politician, Lawyer

**Source:** *Biography Resource Center Online*. Gale, 2004.

**Updated:** 04/13/2009

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## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Barack Obama was a state senator from Illinois when he won the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate in March of 2004. When he won the seat, the charismatic politician became only the third African American to serve in the Senate since Reconstruction. His selection as the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention that July confirmed his status as a rising star. After only two years in the Senate, Obama announced he was running for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. He upset fellow senator Hillary Clinton to win the long, dramatic race for the nomination and become the first black presidential candidate nominated by a major party. Obama then went on to win the United States presidential election in November 2008.

## Had International Upbringing

Obama was born in Hawaii. His father was a black man from Kenya, his mother a white woman from Kansas who had moved to Honolulu with her parents. Obama's father left the family to attend Harvard and eventually returned to Kenya, where he worked as a government economist. His mother's second husband was an Indonesian oil manager, and Obama lived in that country from the ages of six to ten. Afterward, he went back to Hawaii to live with his grandparents.

Although Obama's father only visited him once after he left, the son grew up with stories of his father's brilliant mind. Obama honed his own mind at Hawaii's top prep academy, Punahou School. From there, Obama went to Columbia University, where he became interested in community activism. After graduating in 1983, he moved to Chicago to spend three years as a community organizer on the city's poverty-stricken South Side.

Obama's intellect, drive, and social conscience led to his decision to become a lawyer. He went to Harvard Law School, where he became the first African-American president of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review*. Upon his graduation (magna cum laude) in 1991, Obama shunned offers of prominent law firms and impressive clerkships in order to practice civil rights law in Chicago. He also took a position teaching constitutional law at

the University of Chicago Law School. Soon the idealistic young attorney became involved in politics.

## Encouraged the Politics of Unity

Obama was elected to the Illinois Senate in 1996, representing the 13th District as a Democrat. His work there included writing landmark legislation to stop racial profiling and sponsoring a bill to expand medical coverage for uninsured children. He also developed a reputation for an inclusive style that eschewed mud-slinging and gained the admiration of his opponents. Republican state Senator Kirk Dillard told William Finnegan of the *New Yorker*, "Obama is an extraordinary man. His intellect, his charisma. He's to the left of me on gun control, abortion. But he can really work with Republicans."

In March of 2004, Obama took his efforts to connect with all kinds of people to the Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate. His message apparently resounded with voters, as he won a surprising 53 percent of the vote--including support from white blue-collar workers. Obama explained his appeal across demographic lines to Bob Herbert of the *New York Times*. While admitting there are differences among people, Obama said there is also "a set of core values that bind us together as Americans." His message continued to resonate with voters, and Obama easily won the general election, becoming only the third African-American U.S. Senator since Reconstruction.

The Democratic Party also noted Obama's ideas and success, and invited him to be the keynote speaker at its national convention in July 2004. Despite his intelligence, ambition, and broad appeal, simple civility distinguished Obama from many of his political peers. He told Herbert of *New York Times*, "There's a certain tone in politics that I aspire to that allows me to disagree with people without being disagreeable."

## Distinguished Senator, Presidential Candidate

Obama continued to attract attention while serving in the Senate due to his charisma, drive, and desire to find common ground with political opposites. From nearly the moment he entered the office, he was asked if he would run for president in 2008. Obama did not commit right away, but served his constituents and described himself and his philosophy in his memoir *Dreams from My Father* (originally published in 1995, but re-published in 2004) and his 2006 best-seller *The Audacity of Hope*.

In February of 2007, Obama announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president. Obama immediately began campaigning in Iowa. Though he was still relatively unknown compared to opponents Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, Obama made inroads and his campaign gained momentum throughout the year and into primary and caucus season. Obama won the Iowa caucuses, and though he lost in New Hampshire, he made steady gains throughout January 2008.

By February 2008, Edwards had dropped out of the race, and Obama continued to win key primaries and caucuses over Clinton. He did well on Super Tuesday, then won at least ten straight primaries and caucuses held after that date. Obama succeeded on the fundraising front as well, averaging one million dollars in donations per day. Obama emerged as the frontrunner, leading Clinton in the delegate count, after February 19 primaries in Wisconsin and Hawaii.

When asked about the outcome of his candidacy, Obama was happy he ran on his terms. He told Richard Wolffe of *Newsweek*, "I feel calm. ... Because this is the campaign I always wanted to run. If it doesn't work, it's not because of the organization we built or the respectful tone we set."

Obama's battle with Clinton lasted until the final primaries on June 3, when he secured the necessary delegates to clinch the Democratic nomination. The marathon campaign had set new records in the number of voters participating and in fundraising totals. But its greatest historical importance was the smashing of a racial barrier. Obama's victory made him the first African-American nominated for president by a major party. Obama selected Joseph Biden--a seasoned senator from Delaware who had campaigned for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination himself--as his vice-presidential running mate.

At the August 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado, Hillary Clinton urged her supporters

to shift their loyalty to Obama. Supportive speeches from other prominent Democrats, including an ailing but triumphant Ted Kennedy, and a jubilant Bill Clinton, provided the convention with energy and a singular purpose. On August 28, 2008, Obama accepted the nomination as his party's candidate for president. His speech, given 45 years to the day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C., was a personal and historic triumph, watched with interest by America and the world.

Rallied by his campaign slogan, "The Change We Need," Obama took the lead in polls in late September and early October as the Wall Street economic crisis dominated the news. Though both Obama and his Republican opponent, U.S. Senator John McCain, expressed qualified support for the Bush Administration's proposed \$700 billion plan to aid the financial system, polls showed voters tended to prefer Obama's economic judgment and response to the crisis. "This is a final verdict on eight years of failed economic policies promoted by George Bush, supported by Senator McCain --the theory that basically says that we can shred regulations and consumer protections and give more and more to the most and somehow prosperity will trickle down," Obama said in his first debate with McCain on September 26 (as quoted by Michael Cooper and Elisabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times*). During the debate, the candidates also clashed over spending and foreign policy, with McCain accusing Obama of supporting pork-barrel spending and both candidates questioning each other's judgment over the Iraq war, which McCain supported and Obama opposed.

On November 3, 2008, it was reported by CNN.com and other media outlets that Obama's grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, died after a battle with cancer at age 86. The news was timely, with the election only hours away. The woman who was a "cornerstone" of the family did have the chance to see Obama rise up through the political ranks and embark on his historic battle for the White House. She would not live to see the outcome of the election, but she surely took pride in the energetic politician she raised.

Obama prevailed as election results were tallied; as the electoral votes were announced on the evening of November 4, 2008, it was clear that the Illinois senator would become the next president. Obama delivered his victory speech just before midnight to thousands of supporters in Chicago's Grant Park; there, he thanked his supporters around the country--Americans of all backgrounds, races, and religions--and declared that he would help the country face its present and future challenges. By December 2008, President-elect Obama had selected many members of his administration and was at work on important national issues well ahead of his inauguration on January 20, 2009. Once the festivities of his swearing-in had concluded, Obama turned his attention to the urgent matters facing the country; the new leader began to address a host of issues including the economic downturn, the health care crisis, and a nation still at war.

## UPDATES

**January 20, 2009:** Obama was sworn in as President of the United States on the steps of the U.S. Capitol by Chief Justice John Roberts. **Source:** *USA Today*, <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-01-19-Justice-Roberts\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-01-19-Justice-Roberts_N.htm)>, January 20, 2009.

**January 22, 2009:** Obama signed a presidential directive and three executive orders, including one that calls for the closure of the controversial prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, within a year. **Source:** MSNBC.com, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28788175/>>, January 22, 2009.

**January 29, 2009:** Obama signed his first bill, the equal-pay oriented Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. **Source:** *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/30/us/politics/30ledbetter-web.html?em>>, January 29, 2009.

**February 4, 2009:** Obama signed a bill extending health insurance benefits to low-income children. **Source:** *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/05/us/politics/05health.html?hp>>, February 4, 2009.

**February 4, 2009:** Obama announced a \$500,000 salary limit on top executives from companies that have requested federal bailouts. **Source:** Associated Press, <<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iYX--wRrv7CQhxb9FFjidslvjLQD9653GGO0>>, February 4, 2009.

**February 9, 2009:** Obama, in his first prime-time press conference, promoted his economic stimulus plan.

**Source:** CNN.com, <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/09/obama.news.conference/index.html?iref=newssearch>>, February 10, 2009.

**February 12, 2009:** Obama's nomination for commerce secretary, Judd Gregg, withdrew over conflicts with the administration over the stimulus bill and the 2010 census. **Source:** CNN.com, <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/12/gregg.nomination/index.html?iref=newssearch>>, February 12, 2009.

**February 17, 2009:** Obama signed a \$787-billion spending plan intended to stimulate the U.S. economy. **Source:** *Washington Post*, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/17/AR2009021702878.html>>, February 18, 2009.

**February 18, 2009:** Obama introduced a \$75-billion plan that he said would help as many as nine million Americans with mortgage problems. **Source:** *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/19/business/19housing.html?em>>, February 18, 2009.

**February 24, 2009:** Obama, in his first speech to a joint session of Congress, called for initiatives in energy, healthcare, and education. **Source:** *New York Times*, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/us/politics/25obama.html?\\_r=1=2=Obama=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/us/politics/25obama.html?_r=1=2=Obama=cse)>, February 24, 2009.

**February 25, 2009:** Obama nominated former Washington Governor Gary Locke for commerce secretary. **Source:** CNN.com, <<http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/02/25/obama.commerce/index.html?iref=newssearch>>, February 25, 2009.

**March 2, 2009:** Obama named Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius to oversee the Department of Health and Human Services, and Nancy-Ann DeParle to run the White House Office of Health Reform. **Source:** *USA Today*, <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-03-02-healthcare\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-03-02-healthcare_N.htm)>, March 2, 2009.

**March 18, 2009:** Obama appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. **Source:** Associated Press <[http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hEx3tiPJhZQLVqjNmHR\\_oP6FZMuwD970NTG00](http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hEx3tiPJhZQLVqjNmHR_oP6FZMuwD970NTG00)>, March 19, 2009.

**April 2, 2009:** Obama, speaking in Strasbourg, France, on the 60th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, praised NATO allies for their anti-terror strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. **Source:** Associated Press, <<http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/world/ny-usobam0405,0,42788.story>>, April 4, 2009.

**April 2, 2009:** Obama reached an agreement at the Group of 20 meeting in London, England, in several initiatives to improve the world economy. **Source:** ABCNews, <<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Business/story?id=7236942=1>>, April 2, 2009.

**April 4, 2009:** Obama's book *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* won the Biography of the Year prize at the Galaxy British Book Awards. **Source:** CBC.ca, <<http://www.cbc.ca>>, April 6, 2009.

**March 4, 2009:** Obama appointed Vivek Kundra as the first federal chief information officer at the White House; Kundra will oversee federal information technology investments. **Source:** *Times of India*, <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/World/Obama-names-Kundra-for-top-tech-job/articleshow/4231836.cms>>, March 6, 2009.

**March 17, 2009:** Obama made his first judicial appointment, nominating U.S. District Judge David F. Hamilton to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit. **Source:** *Washington Post*, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/17/AR2009031703031.html>>, March 18, 2009.

**March 26, 2009:** Obama declared a state of emergency for flood-ravaged North Dakota. **Source:** Sky News, <<http://news.sky.com>>, March 29, 2009.

**March 30, 2009:** Obama forced the resignation of General Motors chief executive Rick Wagoner as part of the

federal government's auto bailout. **Source:** *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/31/business/31auto.html?hp>, March 30, 2009.

## AWARDS

"40 under 40" award, *Crain's Chicago Business*, 1993.

## FURTHER READINGS

### Periodicals

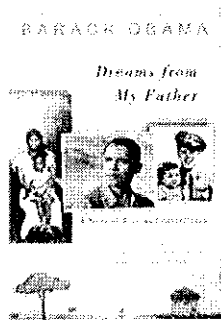
- *Economist*, February 16, 2008.
- *Grand Rapids Press*, July 15, 2004.
- *Jet*, March 15, 2004.
- *Newsweek*, July 5, 2004; January 14, 2008.
- *New York Times*, June 4, 2004; April 8, 2007; June 4, 2008; September 26, 2008; September 27, 2008; October 2, 2008.
- *Time*, October 23, 2006.

### Online

- "The Candidate," *New Yorker*, May 31, 2004, <[http://www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/040531fa\\_fact1](http://www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/040531fa_fact1)> (July 18, 2004).
- "Obama Extends Streak to 10, Makes Inroads Among Women," *New York Times*, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/20/us/politics/20cnd-campaign.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1&ref=politics](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/20/us/politics/20cnd-campaign.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=politics)> (February 20, 2008).
- "Senator Barack Obama," Illinois General Assembly, <<http://www.legis.state.il.us/Senate/Senator.asp?MemberID=747>> (July 18, 2004).
- "Transcript: 'This is your victory,' says Obama," *CNN.com*, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/04/obama.transcript/>> (November 5, 2008).

## SOURCE CITATION

"Barack Obama." *Biography Resource Center Online*. Gale, 2004.  
 Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2009.  
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>



## ONE BOOK, ONE TRUMAN SELECTION FOR 2006

# Barack Obama *Dreams from My Father*

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

#### **PART ONE: ORIGINS**

1. What impact does his father's absence have on Obama's life? How does he cope with this, or fail to? When his father finally visits him, how does the real man compare to the figure of his imagination? Why do you think that Obama opens the book with the news of his father's death?
2. Describe Obama's relationship with his mother, grandmother, and grandfather. What positive or negative qualities does each bring into his life?
3. How does Lolo play the role of father to Obama? What life lessons does he teach him? Do you think that Obama's time in Indonesia affects his worldview?
4. How does Obama become aware of the existence of racism? What incidents in cultural and/or family life reveal it to him? Why is he unable to discuss this with his white family?
5. Obama speaks of learning to "slip back and forth between my black and white worlds." Describe how he does this. Is he successful? What are the stresses and benefits of living in two worlds?

#### **PART TWO: CHICAGO**

1. After college, Obama's black and white friends go to graduate school, but he becomes a community organizer. How does he explain this decision? Why do you think that he chooses a different path?
2. What problems does Obama face when he tries organizing Altgeld Gardens? How much of this is due to: a) his inexperience; b) community attitudes; and c) the nature of Chicago politics?
3. What is Obama's greatest success as a community organizer? What does he learn along the way that makes this achievement possible?
4. At Trinity Church, Obama receives a brochure that condones "middleincomeness" but condemns "middleclassness." What is meant by each of these terms? Why do you think Obama mentions this?
5. Why does Obama decide to go to Harvard law school? Why does he feel defensive about this decision and how does he justify it? If he had not planned to return to Roseland, would his decision still be okay?

### **PART THREE: KENYA**

1. When Obama goes to Kenya, what does he learn about his father, grandfather, and family? Does this fulfill his expectations? How is he affected by what he learns?
2. Compare Obama's relationships with his African and American families. What is different and what is the same?
3. What evidence of colonialism does Obama observe in Kenyan society? How did colonialism affect his African family? How did this in turn affect Obama's life?
4. Obama recalls weeping at the graves of his father and grandfather, and says, "When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. I felt the circle finally close." What does he mean by this? What in him has changed at this point?
5. How does Obama's visit to Kenya affect his sense of identity? How does it compare to or complete the picture of himself that he relates in Parts One and Two?

### **Other**

1. Why do you think that Obama called his memoir *Dreams from My Father*? What dreams does the title refer to?
2. In the Preface to the 2004 Edition, Obama says that he wouldn't "tell the story much differently today," with one exception: he might honor more fully the influence of his mother, saying "what is best in me I owe to her." From what he does tell us about his mother, what qualities and influences might he celebrate?
3. Recently there has been controversy over authors who use manufactured incidents in biographies and memoirs, as James Frey did in *A Million Little Pieces*. Obama frequently relates entire dialogues that he probably cannot recall to the degree presented, as well as the thoughts of other people (such as his mother) that he can only have imagined. In the Introduction, Obama states, "Although much of this book is based on contemporaneous journals or the oral histories of my family, the dialogue is necessarily an approximation of what was actually said or relayed to me." What do you think of this explanation? Is this a legitimate technique to use in an autobiography? Is this book still a work of nonfiction?
4. Obama's technique as a writer is to advance his story by a series of anecdotes involving other people and his relation to them, rather than by using a traditional narrative structure. What does he gain or lose by this strategy?
5. Obama's Keynote Address to the 2004 Democratic Convention brought him national prominence as a rising politician. (See the back of the book for the text.) How do the themes of this speech relate to those of the book? What, if anything, does Obama simplify or omit in presenting his family's diversity? Why do you think this speech has been so well received by the public?
6. Obama's visit to Kenya was a transforming experience for him. Have you been similarly affected by learning about or visiting family members, or by traveling to another country?
7. What are the book's most important themes? Are any of these meaningful to you personally?


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### ***Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance***

Barak Obama, 1995

480 pp.

#### **In Brief**

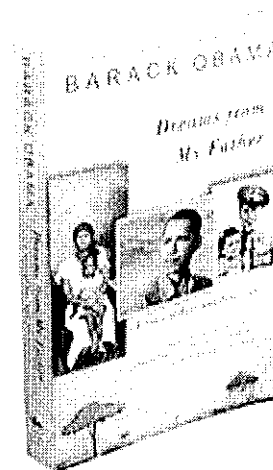
Nine years before the Senate campaign that made him one of the most influential and compelling voices in American politics, Barack Obama published this powerfully affecting memoir, which became a #1 New York Times bestseller when it was reissued in 2004. *Dreams from My Father* tells the story of Obama's 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, and



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will play, an increasingly prominent role in healing a fractious and fragmented nation, (*From the publisher.*)

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### About the Author

- Birth—August 4, 1961
- Where—Honolulu, Hawaii, USA
- Education—B.A., Columbia University; J.D., Harvard University
- Currently—Chicago, Illinois, and Washington, DC

Prior to his as Democratic nomination 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.

Senator 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.

Senator Obama has lived with his wife Michelle and two daughters on Chicago's South Side. (*From author's senatorial website.*)

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### Critics Say . . .

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**

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**Book Club Discussion Questions**

Sorry—the publisher has not made any questions available for this book.

But don't despair. Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- Generic Discussion Questions
- Read-Think-Talk About a Book

Also, consider these LitLovers discussion pointers to help get you started:

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 their 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?
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