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From one of our preeminent journalists and modern historians comes the epic story of Barack Obama and the world that created him.

In *Barack Obama: The Story*, David Maraniss has written a deeply reported generational biography teeming with fresh insights and revealing information, a masterly narrative drawn from hundreds of interviews, including with President Obama in the Oval Office, and a trove of letters, journals, diaries, and other documents.

The book unfolds in the small towns of Kansas and the remote villages of western Kenya, following the personal struggles of Obama's white and black ancestors through the swirl of the twentieth century. It is a roots story on a global scale, a saga of constant movement, frustration and accomplishment, strong women and weak men, hopes lost and deferred, people leaving and being left. Disparate family threads converge in the climactic chapters as Obama reaches adulthood and travels from Honolulu to Los Angeles to New York to Chicago, trying to make sense of his past, establish his own identity, and prepare for his political future.

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Editorial Review

Review

“...this is a revelatory book, which anyone interested in modern politics will want to read, and which will certainly shape our understanding of President Obama’s strengths, weaknesses and inscrutabilities. Every few pages Maraniss offers a factual nugget that changes or enlarges the prevailing lore....a richer view of the man we have become familiar with, without really knowing.... after this book we know one public figure much better.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Maraniss delivers....The power of Maraniss’s reporting becomes apparent in his treatment of the future President’s ‘dark years’.... Maraniss captures Obama’s search for purpose and the kindling of his ambition with an intimacy unlike that of other biographers—including Obama....[The book] offers the rawest account of his early life and a deeper understanding of his origins. Three and a half years and countless publications after Obama’s Inauguration, that is a remarkable feat.” —*TIME*

“Book is full of riveting stories, shrewd observations, and fascinating details. It’s like reading Michener....There is something quite searching and wonderful about seeing much of history as a chaos of chance.” — *The New Yorker*

“‘Barack Obama’ is a biography at its best. A prodigiously researched and exquisitely written multigenerational account....Almost without exception, Maraniss’ assessments are judicious and persuasive....With subtlety and sophistication, Maraniss captures and conveys Obama’s sensibilities and sensitivities.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“This biography possesses a richness and scope that cannot be captured in short-form journalism, magazine excerpts or a mere review. Maraniss has written a global, multigenerational saga that culminates in the emergence of a young man who is knowable, recognizable and real....Maraniss approaches the task with deep research, crisp, clean writing and judicious reflection that never seems intrusive. He not only succeeds, he makes it look easy.” —*The Washington Post*

"It's not often that a book has the potential to change the course of political history, which is why this one is probably the most eagerly anticipated American book of the year." —*NPR.org*

“By showing us the young Barack Obama—breathing, moving across the world, traversing the bloodknot of race in America alongside family, relationships, and the hurly-burly of Chicago—David Maraniss has shown us a human soul growing almost inch by inch. This is a work of literature, and it possesses the kind of brilliance and verve that would have made James Baldwin himself proud.”

—**Wil Haygood, author of *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.***

“The books of David Maraniss are like majestic rivers rolling to the sea, gathering in all the other confluences as they go, gaining their incredible subsurface force. But here, in a multigenerational portrait of a young man owning the most improbable history, Maraniss has outdone himself. Finally, you can understand the man who became the 44th president.”

—**Paul Hendrickson, author of *Hemingway’s Boat: Everything He Loved, and Lost, 1934-1961***

“Maraniss offers not just a beautifully written book, but a real insight into what goes on behind the veil.”

—*The Hill*

“This is a highly textured and intimate look at the family stories behind Obama ...A thoroughly fascinating, multigenerational biography that explores broader social and political changes even as it highlights the elements that shaped one man’s life.”—*Booklist*, **starred review**

“Another in the author’s line of authoritative biographies...Maraniss’ portrayal...is masterful and moving.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author

David Maraniss, an associate editor at *The Washington Post*, is the author of critically acclaimed bestselling books on Bill Clinton, Vince Lombardi, Vietnam and the sixties, Roberto Clemente, and the 1960 Rome Olympics. He won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Clinton, was part of a *Post* team that won the 2007 Pulitzer for coverage of the Virginia Tech tragedy, and has been a Pulitzer finalist three other times, including in the nonfiction history category for *They Marched Into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967*. He lives in Washington, D.C., and Madison, Wisconsin.

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INTRODUCTION

It’s Not Even Past

This volume is not a traditional biography. It begins long before Obama was born and ends before he entered politics. He is inevitably the principal subject, and I would not have undertaken the book if not for his history-making rise, but he does not appear until the seventh chapter and even after that at times gives way to other relatives. He came out of an uncommon family, brilliantly scattered and broken, and although the parts could never be fitted neatly together again, my goal was to examine them as a whole and see the story in all its jagged and kaleidoscopic fullness. We are all random creatures, in one sense, our existence resulting from a particular series of random events, but Barack Obama’s life seems more improbable than most, and I saw in the story of his family a chance to write about many of the themes of the modern world. And then, given the circumstances into which he was born, how did he figure it out? How did he create a life that made it possible for his political rise? Those are the twin obsessions that drove me as I researched this book—the world that created him and how he created himself. Four years ago, I set off in search of answers.

On a whitewashed ledge at Punahou School bathed in Honolulu sunshine, Alan Lum and I sat and talked about the past, revisiting the days when Lum and his friend Barry were teammates on Hawaii’s state championship basketball team. Then we got up and took a short walk. We left the athletic center and strolled past the prep school’s outdoor pool, constructed since their days there in the late 1970s, and along the edge of a vast green playing field, before climbing the broad steps leading up to the Dole Center, the student cafeteria. Lum turned left on the lanai and cast his eyes downward, examining the concrete sidewalk. Where was it, again? He walked farther toward a set of outdoor benches, then stopped and brushed the pavement with his shoe, cleaning away the daily soot. There it was, etched in block letters decades ago by a stick or index finger before the concrete had set. OBAMA.

No historical marker designated the site. Generations of students had walked over and around it without taking notice of the name below their feet. For the first twenty-five years or so after it was written, the name would have provoked little interest in any case. Just one name among multitudes, and locals might have assumed Obama was Asian American; the syllables had a familiar Japanese cadence. The testament of a teenage boy, and he didn’t even write it himself. The story goes that one of his buddies scratched his name there to get him in trouble. But it had the same meaning nonetheless. A name etched in concrete, like Kilroy

was here carved into rock, is an expression of time and history and fleeting existence. Looking down, I could only think: That could have been the lone mark he left.

One April morning in Topeka, the capital of Kansas, my wife and I went searching for an address in the eleven-hundred block of Sixth Avenue. Long ago there had been an auto garage there—the Palace, it was called—and a drugstore next door. In the intervening decades, as often happens, addresses had changed and seemed two or four off from what they had been in the 1920s. The drugstore had vanished. A wide driveway now opened from the avenue into a few parking spaces in front of a nondescript building. A sign said it was an auto repair shop, an unwitting reiteration of what once had been. In front, a single-room office had gone up in recent decades, sparsely furnished with desk, telephone, and shelves of manuals, but farther into the interior was the old garage, with a high-ceilinged work area where one could envision the scene from more than eighty years earlier: a mechanic in overalls sweating under the hood of a Studebaker Big Six. Windows had been bricked up, and most of the old tin ceiling had been covered, but the place seemed to trap the dust and suffocating air of the past.

The shop manager was obliging, and let us look around. As we stood in the dingy garage, staring up at the ceiling, I asked whether he knew the building's history. It had undergone many transformations over the years, he said. There had been a pharmacy attached to it once, and next to the pharmacy was an apartment building. According to legend, the landlord had built a secret passageway from the shop to the back door of one of the apartments, where his mistress awaited for illicit trysts. Quite a story, but there was another bit of history about which the present-day tenants knew nothing. It was in that very garage that Obama's great-grandmother Ruth Armour Dunham took her own life on a chilly Thanksgiving night, setting off a chain of events that changed the course of American history.

Out in the western reaches of Kenya, a harrowing seven-hour drive from the capital city of Nairobi, in the region hugging the uppermost gulf of Lake Victoria, I encountered a tale of two villages. The first village was Nyang'oma Kogelo, up in the brushland northwest of the major city out there, Kisumu. That is where a woman known as Mama Sarah lived. She had become a celebrity in Kenya as the step-grandmother of Obama and a figure in his best-selling memoir. A trip to her compound now was like visiting royalty. The entrance was gated. Vendors sold tourist trinkets at tables just inside the grounds. She was connected to the outside world by giant satellite dishes, and protected by armed guards. There were lists to be checked, names to be vetted, rules to be imposed, factotums to accommodate. "Mr. David . . . [pause] . . . David," said one young relative during his inquisition in the shade of a mango tree, stopping to assess my name and worthiness. "Is that Christian or Jew?" "Both," I responded. All to see a woman who had no blood relationship to the famous American, and was, as one Kenyan put it, nothing more than a historical accident.

The second village was Oyugis. It was around the gulf, down and to the east, a bumpy journey into the hills of south Nyanza. An old toothless woman named Auma Magak lived there with several relatives, including her son, Razik. In her seventies, Auma was a recovering alcoholic who scratched out a living by selling charcoal from a shack by the side of the road. It was Auma, in her isolation and anonymity, who had the strongest link to the Kenya side of the Obama story. She was the younger sister of Barack Hussein Obama Sr.—the president's father—and in a tribal culture where polygamy was routine, her bloodlines were the most direct in that she and Obama Sr. had both the same mother and father. Her compound was not on the tourist maps. It was surrounded by high euphorbia bushes, but no guards checked visitor lists and there were no vendors selling trinkets. Yet step inside her hut, into the darkened stillness, and there were the testaments on her mud walls: four framed photographs of President Obama with his wife and two daughters, along with two posters and a calendar from his most recent visit as a U.S. senator. And she and Razik had stories. She talked about how her mother ran away from a brutal husband and how the little children, including Obama Sr., ran after her. Razik recalled the time in the late 1980s when his American cousin came to visit and they

went fishing for Nile perch in the great lake and drank chang'aa, a potent gin distilled from fermented corn, and smoked weed together.

In Jakarta, in the midmorning humidity of early September, our taksi driver wended through the traffic-clogged roadways of Indonesia's booming capital city until we came to the corner of Dr. Supomo and Haji Ramli streets, where he turned left and let us out at the entrance to the Menteng Dalam neighborhood, or kampung. To the right, we looked down at a swampy urban culvert strewn with trash. Straight ahead, up a gentle slope, ran the opening stretch of Haji Ramli, a row of storefronts at first, then zigging and zagging left-right-left up to the small whitewashed house on a corner where Obama lived forty-plus years earlier when he was six, seven, and eight years old. He was Barry Soetoro then, taking the family name of his stepfather, Lolo Soetoro, his mother's second husband. Some things had changed in the ensuing decades. Then the neighborhood was on the edge of a city of about three million residents; now it is surrounded by an urban sprawl that goes on for several more miles, skyscrapers sprouting in every direction as Jakarta's metropolitan population has swelled to nearly twenty million. Then Haji Ramli was unpaved, nothing but dirt that turned to mud in the rainy season, and a small playing field and forest were within an easy walk of the Soetoro house. The street is paved now and the green space long gone; houses and people are everywhere. But the sensibility of the neighborhood remains much the same: the narrow pathways and alleyways; the street carts with pungent offerings of nasi goreng and rendang; fried rice and spicy beef; the symphony of neighborhood rhythms and sounds and a daily song of the kampung—the low undulating buzz of a call to prayer at the nearby mosque; the beseeching voice of the bread seller; the hollow bock-bock-bock-click of a meatball vendor knocking his bamboo kentongan; and the shrieks and laughs of children down on the playground at the neighborhood school, SD Asisi.

There are no markings outside the gate at No. 16 Haji Ramli to designate that Barack Obama once lived there, nor are there any official designations of his presence at the nearby school. The first section of SD Asisi was built in 1966, one year before Barry arrived. It was long and narrow, one story, with the look of an army barracks. That structure still stands, but is enfolded into a handsome complex of buildings that now hold classes for more than five hundred students in kindergarten through grade 12. Then and now, the fact that the school happened to be Catholic in a predominantly Muslim community seemed to make little difference to the residents, reflecting both the moderate form of Islam that prevails in Jakarta and the common appreciation of a good school no matter its denomination. Barry was just another neighborhood kid here. He learned Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, so well that by the end of his first year his classmates assumed he was Indonesian, a little darker than the rest, probably from one of the easternmost islands. Just another kid playing kasti, a form of softball, under the shade of the commodious mangosteen tree. No one special. But now there is one telltale sign, something inside Kelas III, the third-grade classroom, on the wall above one of the tiny wood-on-metal chairs where he once sat. It is a color poster showing the president and First Lady smiling on the night he accepted the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. Seeing that classroom and strolling up and down Haji Ramli street in the morning and at sundown, I could not help but be overwhelmed by how utterly improbable it was that Barry Soetoro, the boy from Menteng Dalam, had made his way to the scene depicted in that poster.

One glistening afternoon in Chicago, I sat across from the Reverend Alvin Love as he peered out the window of his second-floor office in the rectory of Lilydale First Baptist Church on 113th Street on the city's sprawling South Side. A young man stood down below on the sidewalk, gesturing up, trying to catch the minister's attention, a pantomime plea for some kind of handout. It was through that same window, a quarter century earlier, that Love watched a tall and slender stranger wearing khaki pants and a short-sleeve shirt stroll down the sidewalk, stop at the front entrance, and ring the doorbell. He thought it was another unexpected visitor needing some kind of help. It was, in fact, Barack Obama, community organizer, who was asking not for assistance, but for fifteen minutes of the pastor's time. This happened in 1985, not long after

Obama had left New York to start a new life in Chicago. He and “Rev,” as he would come to call Love, ended up talking much longer than fifteen minutes. From that initial meeting they developed a relationship that carried through the years. Love was Obama’s first guide through the subculture of African American churches in Chicago, and later helped connect him to a larger network of Baptist ministers throughout the state of Illinois. He came to his aid when Obama’s relationship with another Chicago preacher, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, jeopardized his political career just as it reached sight of the promised land of the White House. Love had watched Obama rise from an unseasoned young man trying to organize a troubled neighborhood to president of the United States trying to organize a divided country.

Now, as we sat in the same office where they first talked, Love took me back into the past, recalling that visit and their subsequent struggles to force political change in places where people were poor and powerless. He spoke of preachers who were supportive and preachers who were not, of how young Barack helped him and his church as much as he helped Barack, and he closed with the story of how President Obama, hours after taking the oath of office, paid a private visit to a gathering of old friends who had traveled to Washington for the inauguration, shaking hands with fifty of them one by one in a hotel conference room, until he came to Love and said, “Rev, you gotta keep me in prayer. This is something else,” and minutes later, as he left the room, turned back one more time, his eyes fixing on Love in the crowd, and said, “Rev, I wasn’t playing. Don’t forget me.”

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*. They are words that Barack Obama himself has paraphrased more than once in his writings and speeches, and for a biographer and historian, their meaning seems self-evident. That is why I went looking for that name in the concrete in Hawaii, and stepped inside the auto garage in Kansas, and visited those villages in western Kenya, and walked the alleyways of Menteng Dalam in south Jakarta, and roamed the South Side of Chicago, and made many other ventures from the present into the past during four years of travel researching the world that created Obama. The past is where many of the most revealing clues to the present and future are found, clues to the shaping of individuals and of cultures and societies.

To write a book that leaves its protagonist before his days of notable accomplishment requires an implicit belief that the past is never dead. But when it comes to this book, to the particulars of the Obama story, there are some crosscurrents and countervailing notions to consider.

Obama grew up without his father, with his mother often gone, and in a sense raised himself, working his way alone through many confounding issues life threw his way. If he emerged in adulthood as a self-creation, one argument goes, how relevant are the genealogy and geography of his family, and his own early life, in decoding what he later made of himself? Valid question. My answer: they are certainly not everything, but they are crucial. The supposition of Obama being a self-creation is inadequate. One can see the imprint of his mother and maternal grandmother in almost every aspect of his character. That is nurture. The effects of his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia are also readily evident in the adult Obama, his uncommon combination of cool remove and adaptability. That is environment. As for nature, there are parts of his appearance and personality—his voice and self-confidence, for starters, each of which should not be underestimated as factors in his political ascent—that can be traced clearly to his absent father. He has his white grandfather’s long face and his motions and gestures. And, all in all, the past might be even more essential in figuring out someone who has re-created himself. People are shaped equally by action and reaction, by what they accept and what they reject from their own inheritance. Obama is best understood with that in mind, not only by how his family and environment molded him but how he reshaped himself in reaction to them.

Then there is the aspect of his past that tends to overwhelm everything else, the fact that he was the product

of different continents and different races, an American made from the multifarious world of color and culture. He was reared by white relatives and grew up mostly in a place, Hawaii, where being hapa—half and half—was almost the norm, though the multihued combinations involved mostly Asians and very few blacks. He came from all sides and no sides, a fact equally relevant to his past, present, and future. When he first arose to political prominence, there was a familiar lament when white people talked about Obama. He is black and white, some would say, so why is he called only black? Most of the answer comes from the history of this country. That is how society categorized him before he could choose. But he also did make that subjective choice. The arc of his life, emotionally and geographically, traced a route toward blackness and home, which he found in Chicago. From the other side, less frequent but still noticeable, came the question of whether he was black enough. He had no slaves in his heritage and had never fully experienced the African American condition until well into adulthood, some blacks argued, so what did he know?

His memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, confronts those and other questions about race. It is much more about race than about his father, a man he barely knew. I consider it an unusually insightful work in many respects, especially as an examination of his internal struggle. In that sense it is quite unlike the average book by a politician, or future politician, which is more likely to avoid self-analysis. But it is important to say that it falls into the realm of literature and memoir, not history and autobiography, and should not be read as a rigorously factual account. In his introduction, Obama states that “for the sake of compression, some of the characters that appear are composites of people I’ve known, and some events appear out of precise chronology.” There is more to it than that. The character creations and rearrangements of the book are not merely a matter of style; they are devices of compression but also of substance. The themes of the book control character and chronology. Time and again, the narrative accentuates characters drawn from black acquaintances who played lesser roles in his real life but could be used to advance a line of thought, while leaving out or distorting the actions of friends who happened to be white. Sometimes the composites are even more complex; there are a few instances where black figures in the book have characteristics and histories that Obama took from white friends. The racial scene in his family history that is most familiar to the public, the time when he overheard his grandparents in Hawaii argue because his grandmother was afraid of a black man down at the bus stop, also happens to be among those he pulled out of its real chronology and fitted into a place where it might have more literary resonance. Like many other riffs in the book, it explored the parameters and frustrations of his blackness.

Without dismissing the anger and confusion that he surely felt as he tried to sort out his identity, I would argue that to view him primarily through a racial lens can lead to a misinterpretation of the root causes of his feelings of outsidership and a misunderstanding of his responses to it. In any case, the point of my book is not to keep a scorecard recording the differences between the memoir and the way things were remembered by others; that would distort the meaning and intent of his book, and of mine. But I do not hesitate to explain those discrepancies when they occur.

Throughout the first four years of his presidency, and as he prepared to be sworn in for a second term, some people considered Obama as much of a mystery as when he first took office. This seemed especially true for those who supported him and wanted him to succeed but were frustrated by his performance at various points. It is always dangerous for a biographer to deal in the present. The present is transitory and mutable. What could seem relevant today fades into irrelevance tomorrow. But there are certain tendencies and recurring themes from Obama’s history that help explain his presidency. When I wrote a biography of Bill Clinton, one central theme that emerged from my study of his past was a repetitive cycle of loss and recovery. Whenever Clinton was on top, one could see the seeds of his own undoing, and whenever he was down, one could see that he would find a way to recover. Again and again, here was a pattern in his life that played out in his presidency. With Obama, a comparable recurring theme has to do with his determination to avoid life’s traps. First he escaped the trap of his unusual family biography, with the challenges it presented

in terms of stability and psychology. Then the trap of geography, being born and spending most of his childhood in Hawaii, farther from any continental landmass than anywhere in the world except Easter Island, along with four formative years on the other side of the world, in Indonesia. And finally the trap of race in America, with its likelihood of rejection and cynicism.

The totality of the effort it took to get around these traps shaped his personality. It helped explain his caution, his tendency to hold back and survey life like a chessboard, looking for where he could get checkmated, analyzing the moves two and three steps ahead. There were times when this approach made him appear distant, slow, reluctant to decide, and out of the zeitgeist. Sometimes that perception was accurate, sometimes not. He could be behind the curve, or ahead of the curve, but with the notable exception of his two presidential campaigns, rarely right at the curve. But wherever he was, it helps to keep in mind the patterns of his caution and the reasons for it. As he worked his way through the traumas and troubles of his young life, he developed what one close friend called “a perfectionist’s drive for unity”—within self and within community. It burned inside, underneath his cool exterior, and was another reason why he would have so much trouble with confrontation. To confront was to acknowledge division, rupturing, imperfection, the traps of life he so wanted to transcend. One of the ideas he became obsessed with as he reached adulthood was the notion of choice—how much choice he really had in determining his own future and how much was already shaped for him by his history and family. He worried about the narrow choices being made all around him, and concluded that the only path he could follow, the only choice he had, was to “embrace it all”—meaning a philosophy that was large enough to take in life in all of its colors and contradictions. That is not to say that he disparaged the role and meaning of struggle—his entire early life was a struggle, inside and out—but that he was always trying to look past that, to resolution.

It is instructive here to compare his rise with the ascent of Bill Clinton, another president I have studied. They both came out of remote places far from the centers of power (Hawaii and southwest Arkansas); they both grew up without fathers and with alcoholism and other dysfunction in their family; and they dealt with these factors in diametrically different ways.

Clinton’s method was to plow forward no matter what, to wake up every morning and forgive himself and the world. He did not address and resolve the broken parts of his life, but rushed past them. He reinvented himself when he needed to and developed a preternatural ability to survive. These skills got him to the White House and got him in trouble in the White House—and out of trouble in the White House. Obama, on the other hand, spent nine years of his early adulthood, from the time he left Honolulu for college to the time he left Chicago for the first time to attend Harvard Law School, intensely trying to resolve the contradictions life threw his way—racially, culturally, sociologically, professionally—and came out of that introspective process with what could be called an “integrated” personality. That quality helped direct him to the White House, then in its own way caused him trouble in the White House. He was not naive so much as overconfident and not fully prepared for the level of polarization he would confront. If he could resolve the contradictions of his own life, why couldn’t the rest of the world? Why couldn’t Congress?

There is a chapter in this book about his college years that I titled “The Moviegoer,” a notion drawn from the Walker Percy novel of that name in which the main character is one step removed from his life and unable to live in the moment. That was young Obama, through and through. He was the son of an anthropologist, with an anthropologist’s mind-set as a participant observer, sitting on the edge of a culture and learning it well enough to understand it from the inside, yet never feeling fully part of it. He was at the same time a double outsider, both as a biracial kid and a cross-cultural kid, living in a foreign country, often on the move, tending toward contradictory feelings of inclusiveness and rootlessness. If he had not gone into politics, he would have been a writer, and he still holds onto much of that sensibility. He stands not alone but apart, with the self-awareness of a skeptical witness to everything around him, including his own career. These are

unlikely characteristics for a successful politician, the seeming antithesis of what it takes to rise in a world of emotion and visceral power, yet Obama holds that contradiction in subtle balance with his uncommon will and overriding sense of purpose.

When examining a subject's ancestry and early life it is important to draw a distinction between revelation and responsibility. No one wants to be judged or held responsible as an adult for how they behaved in their youth, or for how their relatives behaved. That should be neither the function nor the intention of a biographer. But there is an important difference between laying blame and searching for clues to a life, and many important clues come in the early years. The point in any case is to explore that territory in search of understanding, not retroactive condemnation. It seems obvious, but it demands explanation in the modern American political culture, where facts are so easily twisted for political purposes and where strange armies of ideological pseudo-historians—predominantly, these days, on the irrational flank of the political right—roam the biographical fields in search of stray ammunition.

My perspective in researching and writing this book, and my broader philosophy, is shaped by a contradiction that I cannot resolve and never intend to resolve. I believe that life is chaotic, a jumble of accidents, ambitions, social forces, geography, misconceptions, bold intentions, lazy happenstances, and unintended consequences, yet I also believe that there are connections that illuminate our world, revealing its endless mystery and wonder. I find these connections in story, in history, threading together individual lives as well as disparate societies—and they were everywhere I looked in the story of Barack Obama. In that sense, I reject the idea that every detail in a book must provide a direct and obvious lesson or revelation to be praised or damned. The human condition is more ineffable than that, and it is by following the connections wherever they lead, I believe, that the story of a life takes shape and meaning.

As the paperback edition of this book went to press, Barack Obama was preparing for his second term, a period historically fraught with dangers and possibilities. Second terms often bring a new set of unexpected frustrations, and the job only becomes more difficult as the end of power draws closer and the laws of diminishing returns take hold. But history also reinforces the notion that it requires a second term to create presidential greatness, or to ratify it—and Barack Obama in that sense is not ambivalent about his ambitions. Since he first thought about being president—a notion that came relatively late to him compared with most politicians—he has wanted to be a great one.

His reelection solidified his past and opened his future. A defeat after one term would have forever changed the meaning of his being the first African American president. Regarding the integration of major league baseball, the argument used to go that Frank Robinson's firing as the first black manager was a step toward equality as important as his hiring as the first black manager. An interesting notion, but not easily applied to the presidency, where the stakes are so much higher and the historical resonance so much deeper. Obama's defeat would have brought more comparisons, fair or not, to the racial backsliding of Reconstruction than to professional sports. But that is separate from the way Obama himself viewed his situation. The fact that his reelection affirmed his first-term accomplishments, and especially assured the survival of his health care initiative, seemed more important to him than any racial ramifications of victory or defeat.

On November 6, 2012, election night in Chicago, a colleague came up to me in the press workspace at McCormick Place, where Obama's supporters were gathering for the victory celebration, and asked if he could pose a sensitive question: Was I at some deep level feeling a sense of pride in what the subject of my biography had accomplished? I said that it was not a personal matter. I have no personal relationship with the president. I did not fly around with him on Air Force One and play basketball with him and ask him what the tricks were to being president. I just studied his life and tried to figure him out, for better or worse. And in that sense, I felt a sense of pride for him. I could see the uncommon arc of his life, the distance he had

traveled, all the contradictions he had tried to resolve, what had burned inside him, and how far he had come.

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