



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?