

# Dreams From My Father: Adapted for Young Adults

## BARACK OBAMA

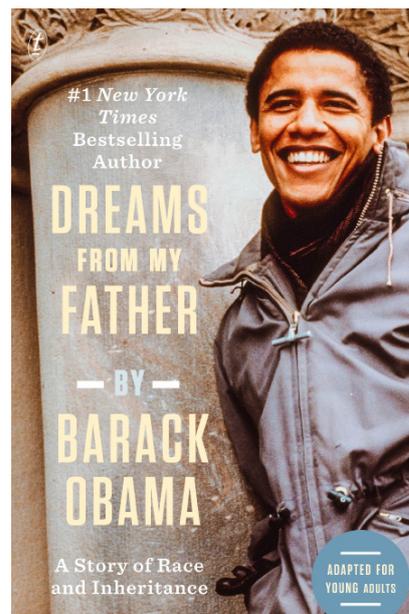
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Memoir

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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### SYNOPSIS

The compelling journey of the 44th president of the United States as a young man, now adapted for teen readers.

Barack Obama's #1 *New York Times* bestselling memoir, an odyssey through family, race, and identity, is now adapted for young adults. This is a revealing portrait of a young Black man asking questions about self-discovery and belonging—long before he became one of the most important voices in America.

The son of a white American mother and a Black Kenyan father, Obama was born in Hawaii, where he lived until he was six years old, when he moved with his mother and stepfather to Indonesia. At twelve, he returned to Hawaii to live with his grandparents. Obama brings readers along while facing the challenges of high school and college, living in New York, becoming a community organiser in Chicago, and travelling to Kenya. Through these experiences, he forms an enduring commitment to leadership and justice. Via the lens of his relationships with his family—the mother and grandparents who raised him, the father he knows more as a myth than as a man, and the extended family in Kenya he meets for the first time—Obama examines the complicated truth of his father's life and legacy and comes to embrace his own divided heritage.

On his journey to adulthood from a humble background, he forges his own path by trial and error while staying connected to his roots. Barack Obama is determined to lead a life of purpose, service, and authenticity. This powerful memoir will inspire readers to reflect on both where they come from and where they are capable of going.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barack Obama was the 44th president of the United States, elected in November 2008 and holding office for two terms. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Dreams from My Father*, *The Audacity of Hope*, and *A Promised Land* and is the recipient of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. He lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Michelle. They have two daughters, Malia and Sasha.

### CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### INTRODUCTION

1. How does the introduction show a Barack Obama different from the one the public and media have come to know? Compare and contrast the boy and young man he was with the world leader he has become.

#### PART I

1. What sorts of stories did Gramps tell the young Obama, and what was the purpose of such stories?
2. How does Barack Obama Sr.'s life foreshadow many of the achievements his son would later attain?
3. Compare and contrast Toot's family with what you have learned about Barack Obama Sr.'s family. What does the story teach about respectability?
4. What social pressures keep communities racially segregated? Is your community segregated? If so, why do you suppose that is? If your answer is no, consider whether segregation exists in physical spaces like churches and schools, as well as emotional spaces like social groups and families.



5. Do you consider Hawaii to be ‘the one true “melting pot”, an experiment in racial harmony’? (p. 20) Why or why not? And, if not Hawaii, what are some other places you’d consider to be melting pots?
6. What is the impact of Gramps having had a ‘wide circle of friends’? (p. 20)
7. How are the lessons Lolo teaches President Obama different from those he learned from his own father? How are they different from those he might have learned if he had grown up solely in North America?
8. Keep track of the unique life lessons each parental figure teaches as you read. Use a graphic organiser that includes Mom, Toot, Lolo, Gramps, and Barack Obama Sr. to lay out your findings if it is helpful to you.
9. Why do you suppose Lolo treated President Obama ‘more like a man than a child’? (p. 32)
10. During his time in Indonesia, what does President Obama learn about Americans and their relationship to political and social events that happen in other nations?
11. President Obama writes, ‘In America, power was generally hidden from view. Everyone was supposed to be equal, and that’s what you believed—unless you visited an American Indian reservation or spoke to a Black person who trusted you.’ (pp. 38–39) What do you think he means by this statement? Do you believe that power distribution in American society is equal? Why or why not? How might your social class, race, or ethnicity impact your perspective?
12. Why do you think President Obama’s mother didn’t relate to many of the American people in Indonesia?
13. President Obama’s mother explained to him that ‘To be Black was to inherit a special destiny.’ (p. 44) Do you believe this to be the case? How did this contrast with what Obama learned about the way Black people are often socialised into self-doubt and even self-hatred?
14. What differences did President Obama notice when he moved from Indonesia back to Hawaii?
15. How did President Obama’s views of himself clash with those of the people around him in his Hawaiian school community?
16. What does President Obama learn about being a Black man, and who are some of the people he learns it from?
17. Explain the importance of the basketball court as a place where President Obama learned both to play the game and about the rules of life as a Black man.
18. Is President Obama’s ability to code switch a result of his multicultural family upbringing, biracial identity, or environment, or aspects of all three? See the following resources for more information on code switching: [Five Reasons Why People Code-](#)

[Switch](#) from NPR’s *Code Switch* and [The Costs of Code-Switching](#) from the *Harvard Business Review*.

19. When President Obama states ‘My road to self-respect would never allow me to cut myself off from my mother and grandparents, my white roots,’ (p. 84) he is explaining a key part of his identity formation. How do you think this self-awareness served him as he became a world leader?

## PART II

1. As a community organiser, President Obama learned that ‘You weren’t automatically a member of a community. You had to earn your membership through shared sacrifice.’ (p. 122) What communities do you belong to, and what sacrifices have been required?
2. What is one reason people get involved in community organising, according to Marty? What was President Obama’s motivation?
3. What did President Obama think would be the result of an increase in self-esteem among Black people?
4. What types of corruption and barriers to progress existed in Chicago among the community organisers?
5. Describe the differences between President Obama’s view of his father and the reality he discovered as he uncovered more about Barack Obama Sr.’s interactions and relationships with others.
6. From your perspective, should you be afraid of someone who doesn’t care about anything?
7. What were some things that needed to happen in order for the people from Altgeld to reclaim ‘a power they had had all along’? (p. 176)
8. Asante explained to President Obama that ‘half the boys don’t even know their own fathers. There’s nobody to guide them through the process of becoming a man. And that’s a recipe for disaster. Because in every society, young men are going to have violent tendencies. Either those tendencies are directed and disciplined or those tendencies destroy the young men, the society, or both.’ (pp. 182–183) In your experience, is this true? If so, who or what in your community helps young men direct and discipline their tendencies? If you do not believe the statement is true, explain why.
9. Explain what it means to live a life that gives you ‘options.’ (pp. 192–193) What typically happens to those without options?
10. How does President Obama discover pieces of himself in the siblings he encounters? What clues does he receive about the man his father might have been?
11. What circumstances led President Obama to more deeply understand ‘the audacity of hope’?



## PART III

1. What does it mean in Kenya when one is told not to get lost?
2. What is the 'wazungu price . . . the white man's price'? (p. 212) Why do you suppose President Obama was charged that price?
3. According to President Obama, how is the experience of being Black on the African continent different from the experience of being Black in the United States?
4. What is 'acting white,' according to certain social norms on the South Side of Chicago?
5. Do you agree with the statement: 'If everyone is family, no one is family'? (p. 233) What do you think it means?
6. How are President Obama and Mark similar? How are they different? What life events and other factors account for these differences?
7. How did Western minds come to see the Masai? What is problematic about the 'noble savage' stereotype?
8. What might it mean to have a nameless gravestone? Explain the symbolic significance.
9. What do you suppose is meant by the Kenyan saying, 'When two locusts fight, it is always the crow who feasts.' How might this apply to the society in which you live?
10. What is poverty consciousness? At what stage in life do you suppose people adopt a poverty consciousness? How might they overcome it?
11. What does the marriage ceremony and associated traditions communicate to readers about the role of women in Luo society?
12. What does President Obama mean when he writes about his father and grandfather, 'If only you both had not been silent. It was the silence that betrayed us'? How does he break the pattern of this silence?

## EPILOGUE

1. What do Auma and President Obama teach one another through their connection to each other and their shared past?
2. What do they learn about themselves through their shared connection to ancestral lands in Kenya?
3. Do you believe 'there is hope that what binds us together will prove stronger than what drives us apart'? (p. 293) If so, what keeps you hopeful? If not, why not?

## POSTSCRIPT

1. What surprises you about President Obama's mother? How is she like other women? How is she different?

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This guide was created by JULIA E. TORRES, a veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver public schools. As a teacher and activist committed to education as an expression of freedom, her practice is grounded in the work of empowering students to use language arts to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia was given the 2020 NCTE Colorado Affiliate Teacher of Excellence Award and elected to the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE Board of Directors. Julia facilitates workshops and professional conversations about antibias and antiracist education, social justice, and culturally sustaining pedagogies in language arts, as well as digital literacy and librarianship. Her work has been featured in several publications, including NCTE's *Council Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *School Library Journal*, and on Al Jazeera's *The Stream*, as well as on PBS Education, NPR, KQED's *MindShift*, *New York Times's* Learning Network, ASCD's *Education Update*, *Rethinking Schools*, and elsewhere.