CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Literary Candidate

Josh Kalven loved walking through Hyde Park—across the University of Chicago's campus, past his university-affiliated high school, and along the Lake Michigan shore. Those strolls guaranteed him some teenage freedom; they also got him to his part-time job at 57th Street Books, an independent bookstore that belonged to the neighborhood's Seminary Co-op.

One day in the spring of 1996, Kalven walked past a yard sign on Lake Park Avenue. It was odd that he noticed it; most teenagers tune out bids for the state senate. It was even odder that he recognized the name. Where had he seen that name, Obama? *Oh yeah*, Kalven remembered, *that guy's a member at the bookstore*.

Barack Obama first joined the Co-op in 1986, and for many years he would duck into 57th Street's basement location, wearing a leather jacket in the winter and shirtsleeves rolled up in the summer, browsing quietly while the shop echoed with the sounds of the apartment dwellers above. Obama often came at night, just before closing, circling the new releases table in the front, studying the staff selections along the back, and usually leaving with a small stack of novels and nonfiction. At the counter, he would spell his name to get the member discount—a treasured and anonymous ritual unless your name was strange enough, and your visits frequent enough, that a clerk might remember you.

Obama's anonymity ended for good in 2004, when he gave his iconic keynote at the Democratic National Convention. During his rise from state senator to US senator to president, one of the most obvious things about him was that he was literary. His two books, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, combined to sell more than 6 million copies, making them the most successful campaign books of the twenty-first century. Obama nabbed endorsements from highbrow authors like Philip Roth and Toni Morrison. The narrative of his life, told in his books and best speeches, often felt like the key to his appeal. "We're not running

against a real person," one of Hillary Clinton's staffers complained in 2008. "We are running against a story."

That was true enough, especially since Obama himself frequently appealed to the idea of stories. But it also misses something important. Obama was not just literary in the sense of crafting his policy speeches or campaign books. He was literary in the sense of reading fiction—of *needing* fiction, with its prickly characters, its poetic language, its self-conscious complexity, and its cautious pace. Obama's presidency spanned a period when American culture became less bookish. (In 1992, the year Bill Clinton was elected, 54 percent of adults claimed they'd read a work of literature in the previous twelve months; by 2015, near the end of Obama's second term, that number had fallen to 43 percent.) It spanned a period when publishing became even hungrier for blockbusters, as houses got bought by international conglomerates while Waldenbooks gave way to Barnes & Noble, Costco, and Amazon.

Barack Obama stood apart from these trends and from the presidents who came before him. Grant enjoyed novels; Wilson devoured detective stories. But Obama read more fiction than any previous president, and that reading shaped his mind, his books—even, in the end, his politics.

"THE FICTIVE IMAGINATION"

Confident and *smooth*—those were the words to describe Obama while he was running for president. Even his biography seemed confident and smooth. "My father was from Kenya," he would say in his mild midwestern accent, "which is where I got the name. . . . My mother was from Kansas, which is why I talk the way I do." Obama believed his background could point toward a less cynical, less divided future. As he put it in his keynote speech, "I stand here knowing my story is part of the larger American story." Residents of red states and blue states could work together if they opened themselves to hard work and hope—"the hope," he continued, "of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too."

This persona, however, was a creation, a character, the result of the years Obama spent writing (and failing to write) *Dreams from My Father*. "Writing a book," he later said, "forced me to be honest about myself, about where I had been. . . . It was good training for the kind of politics I try to practice now." Even when that book seemed destined to be a respectable but forgotten flop—and that was its fate for nearly a decade—

Dreams mattered as an act of self-discovery. Obama-the-writer came before Obama-the-candidate because he had to.

Barack Obama was born in 1961, in the recently formed state of Hawaii. His childhood was marked by displacement. His mother, Ann Dunham, was a bright and passionate bookworm; she met his father, a talented exchange student named Barack, in a class at the University of Hawaii. While Obama was still a baby, his father left the island; his mother moved him to Indonesia while he was still a child. At ten, Obama returned to Hawaii by himself, where he lived with his maternal grandparents while attending an elite prep school. During each of these changes, changes he rarely controlled, Obama relied on books—starting with Dr. Seuss, graduating to Spider-Man and science fiction, ending in high school with the novels of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. "I loved reading," he would later say. "The idea of having these worlds that were portable, that were yours, that you could enter into, was appealing to me."

In 1979, Obama headed to Occidental College, a liberal arts school in Los Angeles. Like many of his era's bookish undergrads, he encountered two approaches to literature: reading for empathy and reading for ideology. Another way to define this divide was reading like a novelist and reading like an English professor. Toni Morrison had offered a good example of the first approach only two years earlier, in an interview about her new novel, *Song of Solomon*, which was also her first novel to feature men as major characters. Morrison described how hard she'd worked to enter the minds of those men—"to become that intimate with a character," she said, "to try to feel what it was really like."

This act of imagination—in creating characters and, increasingly, in reading someone else's characters, in entering their minds a second time and empathizing with their point of view—had become central to the teaching of creative writing. At Occidental, Obama sought out that literary crowd. "There was a strong circle of supportive but competitive writers," recalled Tom Grauman, a classmate of Obama. "Basically, we all wanted to be in Paris between the wars." Instead they found themselves in The Cooler, the campus's cinderblock diner, where they talked earnestly about their writing and reading. Obama enrolled in a seminar where he workshopped poems; he submitted two of them to *Feast*, an ambitious campus magazine that Grauman and others had launched. The whole time, Obama continued to read on his own. The book that shaped him the most, he later said, was *Song of Solomon*.

In The Cooler, Obama, Grauman, and their friends also talked about

the intersection of literature and politics. Obama got even more of that after he transferred to Columbia University in 1981. He remained a committed student. "Hey," a roommate would ask, "what did you do today?" Obama's answers were so monotonous—reading, writing, maybe a run—that eventually the roommate quit asking. While Obama had decided to major in political science, his English electives hit similar themes: a lecture with Edward Said that analyzed fiction through a postcolonial lens, a seminar with Lennard Davis that looked at the ideologies embedded in Dickens and Defoe. This form of reading also resonated with Obama. "I recommend *Marxism and Literature* by Raymond Williams," he wrote to a friend during his senior year. "It generally has a pretty good aim at some Marxist applications of cultural study."

And yet in the end, Obama sided not with the English professors but with the novelists. Consider a passage from early in *Dreams*, where Obama chatted with two black classmates at Occidental, one of whom, Marcus, condemned the "racist tract" Obama was carrying, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

> Regina smiled and shook her head as we watched Marcus stride out the door. "Marcus is in one of his preaching moods, I see."
>
> I tossed the book into my backpack. "Actually, he's right," I said. "It is a racist book. The way Conrad sees it, Africa's the cesspool of the world, black folks are savages, and any contact with them breeds infection."
>
> Regina blew on her coffee. "So why are you reading it?"
>
> "Because it's assigned." I paused, not sure if I should go on. "And because—"
>
> "Because . . ."
>
> "And because the book teaches me things," I said. "About white people, I mean. See, the book's not really about Africa. Or black people. It's about the man who wrote it. The European. The American. A particular way of looking at the world. If you can keep your distance, it's all there, in what's said and what's left unsaid. So I read the book to help me understand just what it is that makes white people so afraid. Their demons. The way ideas get twisted around. It helps me understand how people learn to hate."

Obama's classmate, Marcus, was echoing Chinua Achebe, who a few years earlier had described Conrad and his book as "bloody racist." At

Obama joined Chicago's Seminary Co-op in 1986 and frequently shopped at its 57th Street Books location, pictured here.

first Obama seemed to agree—or, at the very least, to strain for some kind of consensus between the empathy and ideology sects. Ultimately, though, he chose to focus less on politics than on people. Obama read fiction because he wanted to experience psychological interiority—in Conrad's characters, in Conrad's readers, in Conrad himself—and because he had faith in his ability to interpret it.*

After graduation, Obama felt torn between several possible futures, including one that was vaguely literary, in which he would try to write fiction, and one that was vaguely political, in which, drawing from a different strain of his reading, on the history of civil rights, he would try to make a difference. By 1985, politics seemed to be winning. Obama applied for a job as a community organizer in Chicago, and when he interviewed

*For Obama, and for many other literary readers, interpretation never really stops. One example of his future intellectual celebrity was the excitement that greeted each title he cited in an interview or slipped on a vacation reading list; when President Obama mentioned Richard Price's *Lush Life*, the novel's sales doubled. During his second term, Obama dropped by Politics and Prose, the celebrated Washington, DC, bookstore, and purchased a large stack of books. His daughters, now teenagers themselves, went with him, and one book the family chose was the same title Obama had grappled with in college: *Heart of Darkness*.

with his prospective boss, Jerry Kellman, he emphasized his idealism and his desire to help black communities. And yet, once Obama got the job and moved to Chicago's South Side, he and Kellman had a second conversation, this one while walking along the shore of Lake Michigan. "He talked about having a deep interest in writing fiction," Kellman recalled. "He hadn't decided whether he wanted to pursue it."

Over the next few years, Obama worked hard at organizing, meeting with local residents and building support for issues like asbestos removal. He also continued to write. Sometimes he wrote journal entries that recorded overheard dialogue and vivid city scenes. Sometimes he wrote fiction, eventually finishing several stories he shared with friends from Occidental and Columbia and with his fellow organizers. "Take a look at this," he said to Kellman, a bit embarrassed, before handing him a draft about a storefront preacher. The stories showed promise, particularly in the relationships between their characters. "Write outside your own experience," Obama urged another friend in a letter, though only after he urged him to cut back on the adverbs. "Write a story about your Grandmother in Armenia, or your sister in college; I find that this works the fictive imagination harder."

In 1988 Obama enrolled at Harvard Law School. He wanted a more practical way to make a difference, though he kept writing as well. In fact, he and a classmate, Rob Fisher, began working on an academic manuscript, *Promises of Democracy: Hopeful Critiques of American Ideology*. The coauthors completed more than two hundred pages, even as Obama was winning an internship at Sidley Austin, one of Chicago's best firms; there he met and started dating a lawyer named Michelle Robinson. In 1990, the *Harvard Law Review* elected Obama as its new president, making him the first African American to hold that spot. The choice was covered by the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, among many other outlets, with each story hitting the same Obama beats: his historic first, his unusual biography, and his political ambitions. "Down the road," the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "he plans to run for public office."

When Jane Dystel saw those stories, she decided to give Obama a call. Dystel was a fiery literary agent who'd spent a year in law school herself, and she promised Obama there was a book in all this buzz. Obama admitted he'd considered writing a novel, though never nonfiction, and he came to Manhattan to discuss it further. "We both said," Dystel later recalled, "it should be a memoir."

That genre was thriving in the 1980s and early 1990s, led by new

classics like Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston applied the novelist's tools of character and empathy to her actual life. She depicted real people and real events but did so by reconstructing dialogue and rehearsing family lore—all with the aim of capturing what it felt like to be a daughter, to be confused, to be simultaneously Chinese and American. This kind of narrative, which aspired to emotional as much as documentary truth, was emerging as a vibrant presence in bookstores, literary journals, and creative writing workshops, where memoir taught as easily as minimalism. "Our usual idea of biography is of time-lines, of dates and chronological events," Kingston explained to an interviewer. "I am certainly more imaginative than that; I play with words and form."

Dystel helped Obama craft a proposal for the memoir they were calling *Journeys in Black and White*. In the proposal, Obama listed his literary models, including *The Woman Warrior*. "Such works take on the narrative force of fiction," Obama wrote, "and invite the reader to share in the hopes, dreams, disappointments and triumphs of individual characters, thereby soliciting a sense of empathy and universality that is absent in too many works on race in America."

In the fall of 1990, Dystel shopped Obama's proposal to a number of publishers before selling it at an auction to Poseidon Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, for around $125,000. Obama's contract called for an initial payment of $40,000, with another coming when he turned it in and a third when Poseidon published it; the due date was June 15, 1992.

This outcome thrilled Obama, and once he returned to Chicago, he talked excitedly about the book deal, about being done with law school and having a way to pay down some of his student loans. He was twenty-nine years old, and for the first time in a while, his literary side seemed to have a shot at winning.

The writing proved difficult, which left the author eager for distraction. He spent more and more time with Michelle Robinson. To Poseidon's irritation, he agreed to run a voter registration drive during the 1992 election—what was in many ways a campaign in miniature. "Do you want to write this memoir," someone from the drive asked, "or rescue democracy?" Obama, as usual, wanted to do both. While meeting with activists and voters, he carried a bag that held his handwritten drafts and the boxy laptop he used to type and revise them. When Obama finally submitted a long chunk of the book, it was months late. "The manuscript came in," recalled Ann Patty, then Poseidon's editorial director, "and it was not at all *Dreams from My Father*."

On October 3, 1992, Barack and Michelle were married. On October 20, Poseidon canceled the contract. Part of the blame fell on blockbuster publishing, as Simon & Schuster appeared anxious to streamline its smaller expenses. (The next year, it folded Poseidon. "It was a simple case," a Paramount executive said, "of the numbers not adding up.") Part of the blame fell on Obama, who had blown not only his deadline but the structural balance of his book. While parts of it traced his life, drawing on his rich journals and letters, in too many places it sounded like that dense manuscript he'd abandoned at Harvard. Even Fisher, his old coauthor, agreed. "The best story here," he told Obama, "is you."

That was also the hardest story. One of the things Obama loved about writing was the way it forced him to clarify what he thought and felt about something. In this case, though, that meant clarifying his fractured identity—and the anger he harbored at his white family and his absent black father. He no longer had a publisher. (It was worse than that: he now owed Simon & Schuster forty thousand dollars.) But with Dystel's encouragement, he started a second major draft. Obama tried all sorts of tricks to focus, writing late at night, escaping to a cabin in Wisconsin, spending a few weeks at a cottage in Indonesia. He tried reading for inspiration.

One of the books he studied during this period was Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, and it shows. In its final form, *Dreams* was fully a literary memoir, built out of characters, epiphanies, and cinematic scenes. Obama was tough on himself, admitting to past drug use: "Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it." He was tough on his family, using his grandparents' racial blind spots to demonstrate the realities white people often miss. Yet Obama also captured his grandparents' complexity—their struggles and sacrifices and love. In *Dreams*, their racism was only one of the things that made them human.

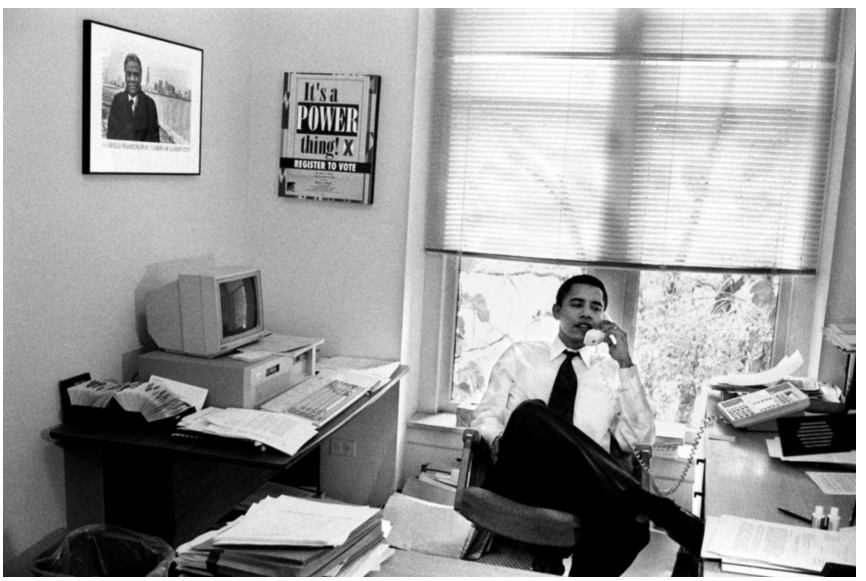
In the spring of 1993, Dystel called Henry Ferris, an editor at Times Books, an imprint of Random House. Once Ferris agreed to look at Obama's revised manuscript, it arrived by messenger service, an oversized box stuffed with hundreds of pages—and that was just the first two sections, on Hawaii and Chicago. "I was like, 'What am I taking on here?' " Ferris recalled. "But before I was at the bottom of the first page, I was convinced I had to buy the book."

Ferris went to his boss, Peter Osnos, and found him an easy sell. It helped that the book was a memoir; it helped that it was cheap. (Dystel, who'd already whiffed with other houses, asked for a flat forty thousand dollars, to pay off the Simon & Schuster debt.) Osnos wanted to meet

Obama, to determine whether he'd finish the book, and their encounter went well. "He had a clear vision for what he wanted the book to be," Osnos said.

Osnos approved the deal, which meant the same editor who signed *The Art of the Deal* also signed *Dreams from My Father*. Ferris showed Obama where to trim, and the author proved so responsive that the third, not-yet-written section, on a trip to Kenya, came in much tighter. Obama continued to collect distractions, including a full-time position at a Chicago law firm and a part-time gig at the University of Chicago. But he finished the book.

Dreams appeared in August 1995. On its publication day, Obama sent flowers to the offices of Times Books. He was proud of his book. A few weeks earlier, he'd dropped by 57th Street Books and asked if the store would host a reading. It was a bit odd, if only because such requests usually came from the publisher, but Jack Cella, the Co-op's longtime general manager, was happy to help a local author and loyal member. On the night of the reading, about thirty people showed up, most of them familiar faces from community organizing and the University of Chicago. When Obama introduced the book, he seemed slightly awkward, a little



In his office at the firm of Davis, Miner, Barnhill & Galland, Obama revised parts of *Dreams*, propping his feet on the desk and editing on his computer.

abstract. Once he started reading, though, he transformed. That night he gave a confident authorial performance, drawing out words, slipping into accents, and choosing the perfect pauses—a reminder that he mastered his style as a writer long before he mastered his style as an orator.

The memoir got good reviews, and Obama did a modest book tour beyond Chicago. Still, he sold only ten thousand or so hardcovers. Times Books failed to generate internal interest in a paperback, so it sold the rights to a smaller firm, Kodansha. Deborah Baker, then an editor at the house, asked Obama about his next project. "He mentioned he was torn between writing a novel or going into politics," Baker remembered. "I encouraged him to write a novel."

Politics won—finally, decisively—a few weeks after Obama's book tour ended, when he announced he was running for state senate. His campaign literature never cited the recently published *Dreams*, and while local journalists vetted the memoir, it mostly faded away, one more line on Obama's impressive résumé. At least it was easy to find, though that was only because Powell's Books, the independent that had started in Chicago before expanding to Portland, had purchased four thousand remaindered paperbacks.

Obama remained proud of his book. As a new state senator, he toured southern Illinois for the first time in 1997, a trip that would play a crucial role in his future ambitions since it convinced him he could connect with rural voters—with white people who reminded him of his grandparents. On that trip, Obama brought along copies of *Dreams*. "He would give one to someone he really connected with," said Dan Shomon, his aide at the time. It was an intimate gesture, not a political one.

It was an intimate book. While Obama had told many people about his desire to run for office, including the journalists who'd covered his rise at the *Harvard Law Review*, he worked far too obsessively on his manuscript and its revisions for it to be some sort of long-term political gambit. *Dreams* is not revealing because Obama wrote it before he had electoral ambitions. It's revealing because he wrote it *after* he had them—because even at that point, he couldn't help but write a book that was stubborn, poetic, confessional. Obama didn't do it for money. (As Ferris put it, "He essentially wrote *Dreams* for us for free.") He did it because books had always mattered to him and because writing this book helped him understand himself.

In that sense *Dreams* did produce a political benefit. Writing it helped Obama see that his life was itself a story—that his character could be

emphasized and adjusted, could be shaped to seem radical and angry (reading *Heart of Darkness*, seeing "demons" in white people) and yet, by the end of that same chapter, could be shaped to seem unifying and hopeful (cataloguing the lessons he'd learned, including many "from my grandparents"). *Dreams* didn't just form Obama. It formed his rhetorical style. As he put it in 1995 during one of the few interviews he did for his book, "My family is an example—and hopefully I am an example—of the possibility of arriving at some common ground."

BLOCKBUSTER II: THE SEQUEL

A few years later, in the summer of 2001, Knopf announced that it had signed Bill Clinton to write his presidential memoirs. As usual, the book industry began gossiping about how much Knopf, the house of Morrison and Hofstadter, had spent. Was it ten million dollars? Twelve? Clinton's advance, it turned out, was fifteen million dollars, a new nonfiction record. The industry pivoted quickly to critique, predicting the deal would lose millions, just like the deals of Reagan and many of his kiss-and-tell foes. "Publishing books by famous politicians is an ego trip for publishers," Roger Straus told a reporter. He spoke from experience, given how badly he'd exposed Farrar, Straus and Young while publishing Truman's *Mr. President*.

Yet something was shifting in the 1990s and 2000s. America's publishers continued to thrive, bringing in $27 billion in 2004, the year Clinton's *My Life* finally came out. It was a cheerful figure, though adjustments for inflation and population showed that the industry's revenues had remained essentially flat since the 1980s. Where things had changed, once again, was at the top. The biggest books were bigger than ever, and that included political ones. Legacy books, campaign books, even legacy books masquerading as campaign books: they could all make money now—so much money, in fact, that sometimes it seemed as if that was their only reason to exist.

Publishers continued to consolidate during these decades. Consider a brief history of Clinton's Knopf, which can also serve as a brief history of the modern book trade. In 1960, the house founded by Alfred Knopf Sr. was sold to Random House; in 1965, Random House was sold to RCA, which eventually sold it to Advance Publications; in 1998, Random House and its Knopf-sized components were sold to the German conglomerate, Bertelsmann AG, at a price of more than a billion dollars.

That last transaction contained a certain irony, a global twist for an industry that had emerged in this country with Mathew and Henry Carey taking patriotic risks on American books. Still, most publishers ended up in Knopf's spot, as small pieces at one of a handful of multinational, multibillion-dollar corporations. Computerized printing and centralized warehouses helped things move faster. Blockbuster publishing—star authors, trendy boomlets, predictable profits, ceaseless growth—intensified. In 1999, one editor watched two of his novelists win spots on Oprah Winfrey's televised book club, a fantastic bit of luck, twice. The editor felt no joy in this. "Now my bosses," he told a colleague, "are going to expect me to do better next year."

Bookselling followed a similar pattern: the same, but more. A chain like Waldenbooks yielded to a chain like Barnes & Noble and its so-called superstores, enormous, boxy buildings with wood paneling, comfy chairs, maybe a coffee shop, and ten times as many titles to choose from. At their peak, Barnes & Noble and its rival, Borders, combined for more than twelve hundred such locations.

The superstores had plenty of competition. Discount stores like Walmart and warehouse clubs like Sam's Club attempted to out-chain the chains, offering fewer titles with bigger discounts and faster turnover. While they focused on commercial fiction or celebrity memoirs, they carried the occasional serious surprise. Costco discovered a hit in David McCullough's *John Adams*, which at one point was selling ten thousand copies a week at that chain alone. "That one," said Pennie Ianniciello, Costco's book buyer, "went on and on."

Then there was Amazon, launched by Jeff Bezos in 1995. Bezos chose to devote his site to books not because he loved them but because there were so many titles to sell—and because, after centuries of frustration, the book trade had finally developed an efficient and centralized distribution system. The Sears catalogue had once claimed to be the country's "most complete book department"; now Amazon was boasting about being "Earth's biggest bookstore."

Almost immediately, Amazon began poaching sales from bookstores, especially independent bookstores, and not just the in-person variety. At Obama's beloved Seminary Co-op and 57th Street Books, two people stayed busy handling the orders and friendly questions that arrived by email. Then one Friday, one of them went to Jack Cella and said, "I think I'm going to leave early today. I don't have anything to do." Cella didn't believe it until he checked the numbers himself. The store's correspond-

Even on its early home pages, like this one from 1995, Amazon called itself "Earth's biggest bookstore."

ence had dropped dramatically, and its mail-order business, which had been closing in on $1 million per year, soon fell to half that.

The promise of Amazon, or of a Barnes & Noble that stocked 100,000 titles, was size. Soon a theory emerged—sometimes called the "long tail" or, as Bezos dubbed it in a BookExpo speech, "the hard middle"—that this surfeit of choice would help small artists and even medium artists find an audience, particularly online. The theory flopped for several reasons. One was that media companies and their partners realized it was more profitable to prioritize the most likely hits. (A superstore required a superlease, and best-seller foot traffic remained the easiest way to pay rent.) Another was that consumers seemed to prefer those hits, something one could track in iTunes charts and box office totals and *Publishers Weekly* sales figures. As Anita Elberse, a professor at Harvard Business School, put it, "Now you need to make bigger bets."

So that's what publishing did. In 1989, Tom Clancy's *Clear and Present Danger* had topped the charts with 1.6 million hardcovers; in 2004, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* sold 4.3 million hardcovers—and that was in its second year of publication, following a 5.7 million 2003. It wasn't always possible to predict a blockbuster. (Brown's first three novels had fizzled.) But once the book trade realized what it had, it responded with more speed and force than ever. With *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown's publisher, Doubleday, circulated ten thousand advance reader's editions—

more copies than any of his previous books had actually sold—and got him a dinner with key executives from Border's. The novel debuted at number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list, creating momentum that helped it excel in airports and Targets and independent bookstores.

This splashy, star-powered approach worked especially well with political titles. Colin Powell, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, got $6 million to write his memoirs. He studied the autobiographies of Iacocca and Grant and worked diligently with his ghostwriter. But the thing that supercharged his sales—and turned his book into a huge moneymaker—was the buzzy rollout. When *My American Journey* appeared in 1995, Powell did TV interviews with Jay Leno and Larry King, among many others. His publisher scheduled a book tour so aggressive that Powell had to travel by private jet; at each stop, he encountered long lines of fans, held in place by temporary metal fencing, and clusters of friendly reporters. Again and again, the reporters asked whether Powell was planning a run for president, and plenty of people in line, waving their homemade "Powell '96" signs, hoped he'd say yes.

Powell's tour was not a happy coincidence, as Reagan's had been with *Where's the Rest of Me?* It was designed to work like this—to measure his appeal, to jam his name into the news, to boost his book sales and political prospects at the same time. While Powell ultimately chose not to run, he sold more than 1.5 million hardcovers, a number that caught the attention of publishers and politicians alike. Both camps were relying less on literary agents like Mort Janklow and more on a man named Robert Barnett, a Washington lawyer who wore vintage cuff links and charged hundreds of dollars per hour; he was also, in the words of Bob Woodward, "the last bargain in Washington." Barnett seemed to know everyone in politics, publishing, and the media, and he could help politicians auction their books, then coach and choreograph their publicity, often by reaching out to TV anchors he also represented. The best part, strangely enough, was that opulent hourly rate—a bargain only when compared to a literary agent's 15 percent cut of a multimillion-dollar deal.

Barnett sold legacy books and campaign books, Republican books and Democratic books, Dan Quayle's autobiography and Hillary Clinton's too. Another client was Bill Clinton. "When I was a young man," the ex-president once said, "one of the goals I had in life was to write a great book." He began planning his memoirs at the start of his first term, asking Taylor Branch, a Pulitzer-winning historian and personal friend, to visit the White House and interview him in secret. The two talked seventy-

nine times over eight years, and once he left Washington, Clinton organized similar interviews with another historian, Edward Widmer, to dig into his early life.

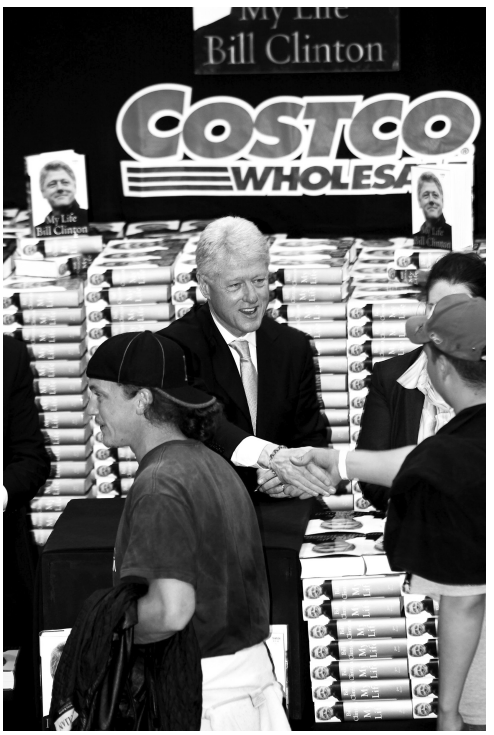
Those transcripts formed the foundation of *My Life*, which Clinton wrote in longhand, filling more than twenty notebooks. Unfortunately, Clinton was doing many other things at the same time—giving so many paid speeches, for instance, that he made more than $25 million in fees between 2001 and 2003. When he did have time to write, Clinton cluttered his prose with the names and stories of everyone he wanted to mention. "You're not running for anything," teased his editor, Robert Gottlieb. But Gottlieb eventually saw that Clinton, like Johnson and Reagan and so many other ex-presidents, would be running for something until the day he died.

A few weeks before his deadline, Clinton asked Branch to review what he'd written. The historian could hardly believe it—even at this late stage, even with all those notebooks, the author was only now starting the chapters on his presidency. Clinton scrambled to finish his legacy book. To keep him focused, Gottlieb spent multiple nights on his author's couch. On May 24, 2004, they submitted the final text file. It topped a thousand pages, but thanks to the technology and scale of twenty-first-century publishing, *My Life* still hit its pub date of June 22.

That same month, Clinton addressed a large and elated crowd at BookExpo. The ex-president made a familiar promise: his would be a "personal" book. It wasn't. *My Life* was rushed and unruly—less a first draft of history than the free writing of it. But Knopf and Clinton knew how to promote it, hopping from Oprah to *Good Morning America*, from a book signing at an Arkansas Walmart to one at an iconic independent like Seattle's Elliott Bay Book Company. On June 22, a few stores opened at midnight, the way they did for a *Harry Potter* release, and by the end of the year, *My Life* had sold more than 2 million hardcovers, trailing only *The South Beach Diet* and *The Purpose-Driven Life* as 2004's best-selling nonfiction title.

Clinton's memoir turned a hefty profit, an outcome that in recent years many political books have matched, even if their authors can't equal the raw fame and raw sales of a president. Barnett got Sarah Palin and Ted Kennedy advances of around $8 million; both books were hits. Blockbuster publishing appears to be working well for publishers. Even the busts—Barnett securing Andrew Cuomo a rumored $1 million, for instance, only to see the volume sell at an early Dan Brown clip—can be understood as bets that someone's profile might rise.

Blockbuster publishing also works for big-time authors. During their



In 2004, Clinton held a number of signings for *My Life*—including this one at a Costco in Washington State, where fans began lining up a full day before he arrived.

book tours, politicians gauge their support. They gain unfiltered access to voters who buy the book—and low-risk access to those who don't through television interviews that arrive with an easy setup and a sturdy escape hatch: *Well, I cover that in the book*. Most of all, they make money. During the 2012 campaign, Herman Cain was accused of running for president to boost his book sales. "If you know Herman Cain, you know nothing is further from the truth," he replied. "And if you don't believe me, I invite you to get a copy of my new book, *This Is Herman Cain!* If you can find one, because they are selling like hotcakes." It was a shameless line, but it was also a true one: that same month, Cain's book debuted in fourth place on the *New York Times* best-seller list.*

It's less clear that blockbuster publishing works for readers. One might

*Some candidates give themselves a further lift by purchasing their own books at a discounted rate—or by letting super PACs do it, which allows them to collect the full royalties. In 2016 Donald Trump and his allies funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to this practice, bulk-buying copies of *The Art of the Deal* and his latest volume, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again*.

counter that these books aren't really intended for readers—that in Washington, they exist for index checks, to see if you got mentioned, and that in the rest of the country, they exist as souvenirs for a candidate's keenest fans. If anything, this goes too easy on the nation's capital, a city that specializes in treating books in the least bookish way possible, in extracting a few amazing details and then moving on to the next one.

Americans elsewhere deserve better. For more than two centuries, they've cared about history, democracy, and books. (And, yes, about celebrity, though a reader motivated by celebrity is a reader all the same.) Modern political books prey on this tradition. For each thoughtful volume—Colin Powell's is one example; John McCain's *Faith of My Fathers* is another—there are dozens that cynically exploit the author-reader relationship. The content of these books scarcely matters, something made clear by Rand Paul's *Government Bullies*, a book that lazily plagiarized five consecutive pages from a think tank—and Paul is hardly the only politician-author who's seen this happen.

Only a few thousand people bought *Government Bullies*, a publishing bet that didn't pay off. But they still paid money, and some of them still read it, and most of them expected a decent book. Decent books are at best a by-product of blockbuster publishing, but because the system benefits everyone who's not a reader it seems likely to continue. Even its critics eventually submit. David Plouffe, who ran Obama's campaign in 2008, liked to grumble in private that Robert Barnett was an unctuous insider. And yet when Plouffe decided to write a memoir, there was no question whom he would call. Barnett arranged an auction with more than a dozen bidders, and Plouffe's book ultimately won an advance of around $2 million.

There is one upside to blockbuster publishing. It might not cultivate decent books, but if a decent book somehow materializes, blockbuster publishing can circulate it—print it quickly, place it in all sorts of retailers, help it reach every possible reader. While Barnett was working with Plouffe, he set up meetings with the potential publishers, and one of them employed Henry Ferris, the editor who'd taken a second chance on Obama and *Dreams*. Plouffe sat down with Ferris and five or six others, including folks from editorial, publicity, and marketing, and they began by going around the conference table to do introductions.

"I'm Henry Ferris," the editor said, "and I was the editor of *Dreams from My Father*."

Before the next person could speak, Plouffe jumped in. "That book," he said, "got Obama elected."

THE LITERARY PRESIDENT

On January 4, 2007, Neva Durand logged on to Amazon and ordered two books: John McCain's *Faith of My Fathers* and Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. Despite growing up in Washington, DC, Durand had never been a fan of political titles. "I'm always reading," she said. "I just can't read politicians' books." Durand preferred novels for their language and characters; she usually got her political news from the *New Yorker*. But the upcoming election, and its potential candidates like McCain, Obama, and Hillary Clinton, felt different. "I wanted to read more about them," Durand said. "I was very engaged."

By that point, Durand had moved to Washington State, where she was finishing a graduate program in computer science. She adored independent bookstores, and a few times a year, she went to Seattle to browse at Elliott Bay. She also bought a lot of books from Amazon, for the convenience, rating the ones she finished on a website called Goodreads. Durand's account shows that during her electoral regimen, she was also reading John Fowles's *The Magus*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (three stars; "Not Jane Austen's best book").

Durand didn't finish McCain's *Faith*; she didn't vote for him either. *Dreams* and its author won her over. "This is a fantastic memoir," she wrote on Goodreads, "paced like a novel." To Durand, Obama's style revealed something about his mind. "I liked his book," she said, "liked his temperament, liked that he saw things in shades of gray. What came through to me really strongly in the book is that he has a nuanced view of the world."

Dreams and its follow-up, *The Audacity of Hope*, helped Obama reach a shocking number of readers and voters during the 2008 election. In fact, their success shocked Obama himself.

The author hadn't forgotten his book. In 2001, for instance, he gave a talk about it at a brown-bag lunch in Springfield, Illinois, where he was still serving as a state senator. Sitting in front of a small library crowd, his hair still black, his smile still boyish and wide, Obama reflected on *Dreams*. "This book's been out for five years now," he said, before correcting himself: "six—I'm getting older." He admitted that the memoir had flopped, that he sometimes wondered whether it had been worth the work. ("Stephen King," he joked, "isn't losing any sleep.") But Obama explained that

writing it had helped him sort through his jumbled identity. "The thing I'm happiest about," he added, "is having this for my children."

Soon after that talk, Obama began sketching out his bid for the US Senate. *Dreams* never factored in the planning for the 2004 campaign. When he learned that Powell's was ready to toss its last few hundred remaindered copies, Obama bought them for a buck apiece and stashed them in a closet at his campaign headquarters. But no one considered them an asset for outreach. Obama never mentioned the book in his ads on TV. "It had nothing to do with anything in the campaign," remembered Jim Cauley, the campaign manager. The only time *Dreams* came up was when Cauley and his candidate got into one of their good-natured spats. Whenever Obama tried to blame something on Cauley—telling Michelle, for instance, that the aide was why he'd missed a parent-teacher conference—Cauley responded by looking at his boss and reciting the memoir's most embarrassing passage: "Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it."

On March 16, 2004, Obama won a five-way Democratic primary. It looked like he would face a tough general election, until the Republican was felled by a sex scandal. Suddenly Obama had plenty of time, and he started drafting a second, more political book. ("He was writing that book all summer," Cauley said.) In early July, Bill Clinton came through Chicago on his big *My Life* book tour; while in town, he also held a fundraiser for Obama and praised his political future.

"My life would probably be a lot better if I was just finishing up this book tour," Obama replied.

"I'd trade places with you any day of the week," Clinton said.

There was movement in Obama's own literary career soon enough, though he wasn't the one to spark it. After reading about his primary win, Rachel Klayman, an editor at Crown, remembered hearing something years ago about an Obama book. She went on Amazon and discovered a listing for the out-of-print *Dreams*. Klayman tried buying a copy everywhere before asking Obama's agent, Jane Dystel. Dystel didn't have a copy either, but Obama was happy to send one of his remainders. Klayman loved the book and decided to reissue it as a trade paperback, a plan that proved fairly simple since, due to one of publishing's never-ending mergers, Crown's parent company Random House now owned the book's rights.

On July 14, John Kerry announced that Obama would deliver the keynote at the Democratic Convention. When interest surged in the candidate and his soon-to-be-reissued book, blockbuster publishing was

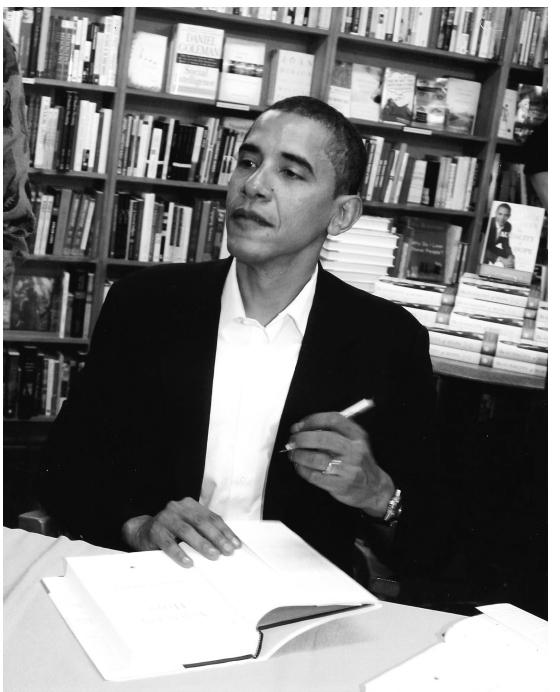
ready. Crown sped up the release date; Barnes & Noble bumped its initial order to twenty thousand copies. Then came the speech itself, an event whose impact can be measured in many ways, including in the affection of America's publishers. Almost instantly, there were rumors of a second book and a seven-figure advance. "We're already talking about it," Dystel told a reporter, "and this one should make some money."

First was the *Dreams* reissue, which hit the *Times* best-seller list on August 29 and stayed there for years. Its impact surprised everyone. While Obama and his staff clearly had big plans, they'd never expected that a nine-year-old book would help achieve them. Now it was, and Obama continued to promote *Dreams* on television: Letterman, *The View*, even Oprah. On her show, Obama read the passage on drug use—Oprah directed him right to it: "Page 93"—and talked about how he'd grown from the experience. "He is really more than a politician," Oprah told her viewers. "He's the real deal, and I wanted him here because his personal story is so remarkable. I wanted everybody to hear it."

Once the 2004 election ended—not even forty-eight hours after it ended, actually—Obama replaced Dystel with Robert Barnett. It was a ruthless move, but Barnett secured a $1.9 million deal for Obama's next three books. During 2005, Obama lowered his profile, as sure a sign of his ambitions as linking up with Barnett. The new senator turned down the Sunday morning shows to focus on town halls in southern Illinois; he wanted to add substance to his celebrity, something his second book could help with. Obama decided to title it *The Audacity of Hope*, and he wrote it the same way he'd written *Dreams*: working late at night, writing in longhand, revising while typing, filling it with dialogue and scenes. He returned to his themes of imagination and empathy. "I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush's eyes," Obama wrote, "no matter how much I may disagree with him."

In truth, *Audacity* was a book in search of agreement—incremental, even-handed, a bit dry. It was a well-executed campaign book, in other words, as shaped by its genre as *Dreams* was by the literary memoir. Once the author finished, his staff and his publisher planned a flashy tour to promote it, though Obama requested that the first event occur at 57th Street Books. On the morning of October 17, 2006, fans were lining up by 5:00 a.m. "I have to be loyal to my bookstore," Obama said when he arrived, and after signing close to five hundred books, he headed to a second Chicago event at a Borders on Michigan Avenue.

That fall Obama toured the country, and thousands turned out for



Obama asked that the first event for his *Audacity* tour take place at 57th Street Books.

each event, chanting "2008" and buying so many copies of *Audacity* that they pushed it to the top of the *Times* best-seller list, above new titles from John Grisham and Bill O'Reilly. Back in 1995, during his brief tour for *Dreams*, Obama happened to have a library event in Boston on the same day Colin Powell hit the city for one of his *American Journey* jamborees. Obama opened his reading with a joke: "We were going to coordinate our tours. He was a little worried that I'd siphon off the crowd, but it looks like he did okay." Now, eleven years later, Obama and *Audacity* were drawing bigger crowds than Powell ever had.

It was the best example yet of a star politician, a decent book, and blockbuster publishing all working together. Based on the book tour, Slate declared, "Obama, not Hillary, will be the de facto Democratic front-runner the day he declares."

That day came on February 10, 2007, and during his presidential run Obama finally embraced his literary candidacy. He remained a reader. While campaigning in Iowa, for instance, he carried a copy of *Gilead*, a novel by one of his favorite authors, Marilynne Robinson; Obama would read about her small and fictional Iowa town while traveling between the

state's small and real ones. "I saw those people every day," he later said. "The interior life she was describing that connected them—the people I was shaking hands with and making speeches to—it connected them with my grandparents."

For the first time in his political career, though, Obama decided to run as a writer. Each night, when he was done with his events, he would sign fifty or a hundred books for the campaign to distribute. *Dreams* and *Audacity* guided his message. "There were speeches," recalled Adam Frankel, one of Obama's speechwriters, "where whole sections were adapted from those books." Newly hired staffers listened to the audiobooks as they drove toward the campaign's Chicago headquarters. In New Hampshire, aides organized official Obama book clubs. The first assignment: *Dreams from My Father*.

Obama's books, and Obama's story, helped him beat Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary, then John McCain in the general. The books caused him some trouble on the trail, much of it misleading. There were email forwards with fabricated quotes. (Nowhere in *Audacity* did he write, "I will stand with the Muslims.") There were coordinated partisan attacks. Conservative bloggers tried to prove that a radical figure named Bill Ayers was *Dreams*' real author. A top editor at Fox News sent an internal memo listing "Obama's references to socialism, liberalism, Marxism and Marxists in his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*." Not even ninety minutes later, those references were being debated on air.*

And yet, once Obama got to the White House, his reading mattered more than his writing. That Fox News memo had highlighted *Dreams*' description of college, of Obama listening to "Marxist professors and structural feminists." But that got Obama wrong. His literary reading had always meant more than any other influence. Beginning with empathy, considering each side of a question, pushing past stereotypes (red state, blue state): those traits didn't originate in college or at Harvard Law

*The silliest scandal waited until 2012, when Obama was running for reelection. It started when a biographer showed that several characters in *Dreams*—including Regina, the girl with whom he discussed *Heart of Darkness*—were composites. Someone at Politico tried to turn this into a microscoop about Obama and scandalous cover-ups. It seemed unlikely that this reporter had ever read a literary memoir like Maxine Hong Kingston's; in fact, he'd never even read Obama's book, in which the author clearly explained his reliance on "composites of people I've known." Politico's much-corrected story still pinged around right-wing media, from the Drudge Report to Rush Limbaugh. The whole affair revealed something about the conservative loathing of Obama—and also about Washington's inability to appreciate books.

School. They developed while Obama was reading Morrison and Conrad, and they were reinforced every time he walked into a place like 57th Street Books. Near the end of his presidency, Obama sat in the Oval Office and talked with Michiko Kakutani, a book critic for the *New York Times*. The president reflected on how novels had helped him: "I found myself better able to imagine what's going on in the lives of people throughout my presidency because of . . . reading fiction. It exercises those muscles."

It was the same idea Obama had expressed in a private letter, decades before: *it works the fictive imagination*. But this time he was saying it after eight years of Republican obstruction. He was saying it in a nation more divided than at any point in its recent history, which is to say a nation more stereotyped—the gun owner more likely than ever before to vote conservative, the immigration supporter more likely than ever to vote liberal. After two terms in the White House, terms his supporters had often experienced with frustration, Obama still held on to his commitment to complexity and interiority. It was less clear that this commitment made one an effective president in a partisan age.

Or in any age. In his 1890 lecture on men who write and men who act, Woodrow Wilson had considered this very issue. Wilson decided that literary empathy—what he called, in the language of an earlier era, the "subtle power of sympathy"—created a real obstacle for elected officials. They didn't need to imagine "a thousand individual motives." They needed to simplify and fight.

Wilson drew his examples from the writing side of the author-reader equation. "No popular leader could write fiction," he insisted. But if Wilson was right, that presidents could not write fiction, a second question follows: Could, or should, they read it?