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THE STAR

An autobiography that, some say, is almost naive in its candour, sheds light on the older, infinitely more important man its author has become.

DREAMS FROM MY FATHER
A Story of Race and Inheritance
By Barack Obama
Publisher: Three Rivers Press, 480 pages
ISBN: 978-1400082773

Review by CHOO LI-HSIAN

Is the White House ready for a black president? That question will be answered come November when the dapper Democrat Senator Barack Obama faces the veteran Republican Senator John McCain in the US presidential polls.

Obama became the first black presidential nominee of a major US political party on June 3, after winning the long battle against a formidable opponent, Hillary Clinton, the New York Senator and former First Lady.

Before all of this, though, there was another presidential election: In 1990, Obama was elected president of the *Harvard Law Review*, the Harvard Law School's prestigious student-run law journal.

He was the first black president in the *Review's* 104-year-old history, a distinction that prompted the offer of a book contract. And, in his own words:

"I, imagining myself to have something original to say about the current state of race relations, agreed to take a year off after graduation and put my thoughts to paper."

Dreams From My Father is, as a result, a very different sort of autobiography for a politician to have on his resume. Obama wrote it in 1995, long before he was a politician. In fact, one presumes from the book's sometimes startling candour that he wrote it before he even had any presidential dreams. Hence, *Dreams* provides the sort of unguarded insights into Obama the man that not many politicians would allow.

Since taking to the national political stage in 2004, when he won the Democratic nomination for a Senate seat – which, incidentally,

The unguarded politician

prompted the re-issue of *Dreams* following the spate of publicity – Obama could have distanced himself from his maiden publication, calling it a mistake of callow youth, perhaps. But, to his credit, he has never done so.

In fact, it has been widely reported that, although he winces over a poorly chosen word or mangled sentence here and there when re-reading *Dreams* now, Obama acknowledges that, "I cannot honestly say... that the voice in this book is not mine – that I would tell the story much differently today than I did 10 years ago, even if certain passages have proven to be inconvenient politically, the grist for pundit commentary, and opposition research".

While Obama's life story is now familiar, it is still refreshing to read about it in his own words in *Dreams*.

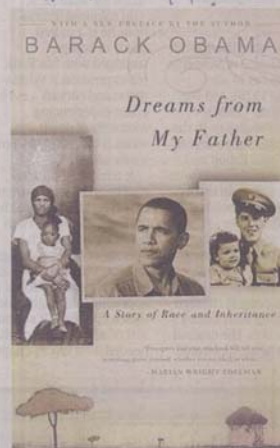
A free-spirited and socially conscious white mother from the whitebread state of Kansas, an absent black father from "exotic" Kenya (who was already married when he met Obama's mother while studying in the United States), a kind stepfather from even more distant Indonesia, and years spent growing up on two different continents surely marked him for distinction the moment he walked through the doors of the US Senate.

The book is roughly divided into three parts. The first covers his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia.

Dreams reveals that, while not unhappy, Obama's colourful youth is peppered with questions about racial identity.

He learns early in life to "slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere". This, perhaps, helps to explain his broad appeal today.

He attends college in California and later



moves to New York where, fresh off the subway, with no place to stay and not enough money for a hotel, he spends the night in an alley.

This incident, along with the experiences he gained as a community organiser in Chicago's poverty-stricken South Side that is covered in the book's second section, gives an insight into why the relatively privileged man seems comfortable with people from all walks of life now.

The third part of the book recalls his first trip to Kenya where he comes full circle after his father's death in 1982. There, he learns the bitter truth about Obama senior's less than exem-

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plary life.

Dreams shows how Obama's journey into a family maelstrom of identity, class, and race has provided him with a unique perspective through which to view the glory and the folly of American politics.

Obama's prose is graceful, elegant, and always honest – a real pleasure to read. He is a gifted writer. In fact, if he doesn't make it to the White House, he could definitely explore an alternative career as an author.

Though he wrote the book before becoming a politician, Obama is clearly already a politicised young man in *Dreams*, and his personal brand of politics shines through.

Even in those early years, the book makes it clear that, in spite of sometimes being a casualty of the divisiveness that diversity sometimes creates, he was already striving to find a kind of commonality between himself and others.

This skill may prove useful when attempting to heal racial fractures and cultural scars and when trying to understand what 300 million Americans really want, need, and are saying at any given moment.

I highly recommend this book. It illuminates not only Obama's journey across America's racial categories but also a universal desire to understand our own personal histories.

Whether you are rooting for him this November or not, Barack Obama is a significant American leader worth getting to know.