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A kaleidoscopic look at young Obama

by Arthur Jones

BARACK OBAMA: THE STORY

By David Maraniss

Published by Simon & Schuster, \$32.50

When Barack Obama clinched the presidency, the all-white populace on the eight-house country lane on which I live celebrated. Well, most of them.

That is, those who celebrated on that weekend did not take their joy and thanksgiving to the Methodist church in the next town, or to the synagogue or Catholic church 30 miles distant in the city, or to the Unitarian church in the nearby suburb.

We all went to the black Baptist church on the next block, on the far side of one neighbor's lawn.

Obama had spoken to us with a missionary zeal. We had heard his message, understood -- partially -- what he represented, and voted for him.

It was all something remarkable. As was the country lane outpouring in a rural area where the huge John McCain signs on lawns were defaced not by Obama supporters, but Ron Paul's.

Catholics know a lot about missionaries. We'd noted the zeal. What we didn't know until David Maraniss wrote his excellent, disturbing and challenging *Barack Obama: The Story* is that what we actually got in Obama was a mystic -- with missionary impulses.

Obama's story opens, as it should, with his birth in Hawaii, a *hapa*, someone who is half one race, half another. But that is in chapter seven. Obama's background is so complex, the author takes six finger-flexing chapters just to set the world scene and family background.



By this time in his presidency the bare bones of the Obama story are

known. The feckless, highly intelligent Kenyan father, his naive, restless yet admirable white mother. "She was white and Jewish; he was black and Luo." The grandmother's role. The uprooted childhood.

Obama is also, and this seems to be Maraniss' opening point, possibly the first world citizen any of us have come to know -- even if only through television and print. Obama's world is so huge -- Hawaii, Africa, Indonesia, across the mainland United States. Maraniss' initial spade work pays off.

When Obama was growing up, Americans on average moved every five years, instant resettlers. Maraniss' account gives us an Obama who doesn't settle -- he just touches down and is gone again. He leaves quite an impact, or a marker when he touches down.

Indonesia, the paper that Barry (Barack) wrote in Bu Fe's third-grade class: "My mom is my idol ... My teacher is Ibu Fer ... I have a lot of friends ... Someday I want to be president." Obama in Indonesia "was considered a stand-up boy, a leader, not just the teacher's pet who would clean the blackboard and order others into formation before class, but also as a generous teammate on the playing field. For all [his] singular characteristics," writes Maraniss, "his darker skin, his large body, his American mother, his intelligence, his desire to answer every question, his leadership skills -- he was in essence just another naughty boy among the other boys on Haji Ramli Street."

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Obama did not attend a madrassa as his circling pack of enraged enemies like to state. It was a public elementary school.

Hawaii: The high school where his name is scratched in the concrete of a walkway. His team vying for the Hawaii High School Athletic Association basketball championship for the third straight year. This is the Hawaii of his poem, "An Old Man":

I saw an old, forgotten man
On an old, forgotten road
Staggering and numb under
the glare of the
Spotlight. His eyes so dull and
grey....

It continues on until:

He pulls out a forgotten dignity
from inside his flaking coat
And walks a straight line along

the crooked world.

Pathos oils the chapters of this book, "the churning inside young Barry." Yet Maraniss is limning the politician who will one day walk a straight line -- that he sees clearly and even some of his admirers don't -- "along the crooked world."

We're at Occidental College, the Southern California liberal arts school. In photographs unearthed three decades later, photographer Lisa Jack suggests, "In one roll of film, Barry goes from innocent baby to Jimi Hendrix to a Black Panther -- from having fun to thoughtful angst."

This is a big book, 578 pages, yet it never loses its kaleidoscopic quality.

His father is one of the fractured images on the periphery.

Obama Sr. is dead. Killed for political reasons and an accident faked, claim Kenyan family members. His third wife reads about his death in the Nairobi papers. "He wasn't part of my life." His second wife, "Ann Dunham Soetoro, the one he was with most briefly, mother of his namesake, did not block him out. When she eventually heard the news in Indonesia, she wept."

We're with Barack in Manhattan, learning which subways to ride to Columbia in order to avoid being mugged. In his senior year, his mother, not yet 40, and his half sister, 12-year-old Maya, visit him. Maraniss, relying on Obama's own writings, dropped this into the imagery:

"He took digs at his mother for working for an establishment organization, the Ford Foundation, and for dragging him to a movie, *Black Orpheus*, a French-made film that translated the ancient Greek myth of the charming Orpheus trying to recover his wife from the underworld into a tale of poor black Brazilians during Carnival. Obama found it naïve and insulting, but he noticed his mother loved it. He wanted to bolt from the theater until he was struck by an epiphany about her: "I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth. I suddenly realized that the depiction of childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different." ?

Not many writers, and Obama is one, could have handled that imagery so succinctly, or with such penetrating insight.

Author Maraniss is pulling the shards closer together. Obama is coming into focus, but only as a shimmer.

Harold Washington is the black mayor of Chicago. Obama responds to the call. To the Saul Alinsky-heritage, liberal Christian, Catholic-dominated community action welling up in the city.

We're there until Washington is felled by a heart attack. And so is Obama.

The book ends.

We've been introduced to a most unusual man whose jolting shifts of place seem dictated by the restless parents who produced him. By contrast, the man we know politically had already found his anchorage: his wife, Michelle.

This is the man before Michelle. We voted for the with-Michelle Barack Obama.

Perhaps our little gang on the country lane will be back to the Baptist church this November.

Perhaps not. Either way, Maraniss has introduced us to our most remarkable president. And to borrow a passing cliché: We'll not see his likes again in the White House.

[Arthur Jones is *NCR* books editor.]

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