

*A Promised Land*, Barack Obama (2020, Crown/Random House)

You've probably heard that this first installment of Barack Obama's memoir about his political life runs to 701 pages, and you may be wondering whether it's worth your while to devote so much of your valuable time to reading what is only half of a story. If you're curious about how things happen in Washington, though, I think you won't regret the time you spend with this book.

First of all, Obama is an excellent writer, capable of vivid descriptions of people, events, and places. He begins with his choice to work as a community organizer after college, then his decision to become a lawyer, and finally his turn to politics, starting with his run for the Illinois Senate. He ends here with the killing of Osama Bin Laden in the third year of his presidency.

I found the details of campaign organizing and White House decision-making fascinating. Good judgment, chance, and frustration abound. A constant problem is the difference between Obama's reasons for his actions and the motives attributed to him by the media and his critics. Of course, Obama defends his positions while setting them forth, but he's unusually self-critical for a politician, constantly evaluating his thinking and the effects of his choices. He presents opposing arguments clearly and effectively. While some of his actions remain problematic, and while he omits or barely glances at certain disquieting issues (around ICE, for example), his fair-mindedness shines.

As Obama describes life in the White House, one sees how luxurious and yet limited it is, and how long and crowded the President's days are. Implicitly, this is a criticism of Trump, an unspoken comparison, as Obama meets with streams of advisers, reads piles of documents, chairs meetings, hosts celebrations for different groups of people, visits the wounded in veterans' hospitals, and struggles to make time for family dinners and bedtime stories. Obama does deal with Trump's birther campaign, and blames the media for its high visibility, but says little more about Trump in this book.

Throughout, considerations of race and family are always on Obama's mind, as he portrays it. He doesn't dwell on incidents of racial injustice but rather on how his own actions affect minorities and how racism enters into some of his opponents' attacks. His love for Michelle and his children and his worry over the ways his ambitions burden them come through clearly, though his family's possible suffering never actually stops him from plowing ahead.

Much of the flavor of *A Promised Land* lies in its details, and my review has given none of them. So here is just one moment, when Obama is failing to persuade the senior White House butlers, both Black, that they don't have to don tuxedos to serve the family dinner every night. One says, "We just want to make sure you're treated like every other president" and the other explains, "you and the First Lady don't really know what this means to us, Mr. President. Having you here." What a long history of abuse lies behind those words, and what a burden of expectation for our first Black president.