A photograph of Barack Obama smiling broadly, wearing a dark jacket, standing in front of a stone archway. The image is the background for the book cover.

#1 *New York Times*
Bestselling
Author

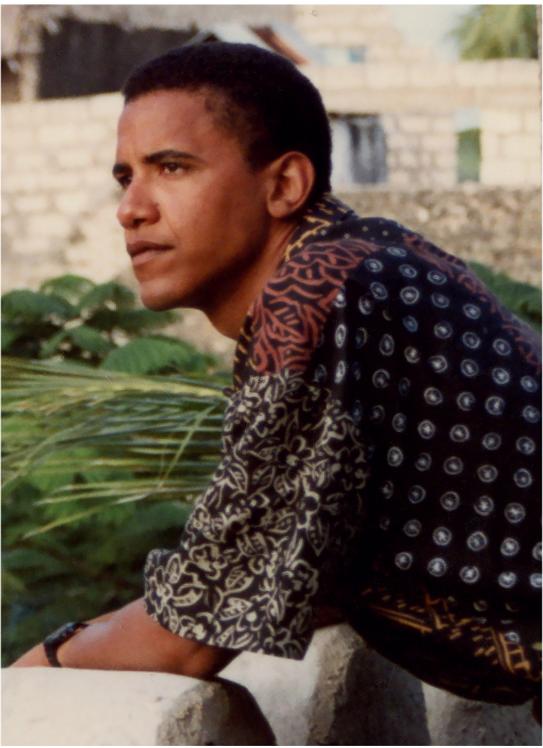
DREAMS
FROM MY
FATHER
— BY —
BARACK
OBAMA

A Story of Race
and Inheritance

ADAPTED FOR
YOUNG ADULTS

HC: 978-0-385-73872-9 • GLB: 978-0-385-90744-6 • EL: 978-0-375-89582-1

READERS' GUIDE



Barack Obama was the forty-fourth president of the United States, elected in November 2008 and holding office for two terms. He is the author of three *New York Times* bestselling books, *Dreams from My Father*, *The Audacity of Hope*, and *A Promised Land*, and was 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.

IN THIS GUIDE, YOU WILL FIND:

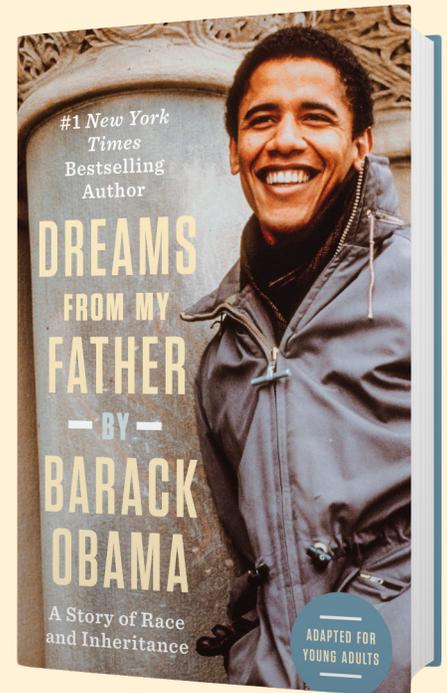
- **Essential Themes and Questions**
- **Curriculum Connections and Activities**
- **Book Club and Classroom Discussion Questions**
- **Journal Prompts**

Now adapted for young adults—the #1 *New York Times* bestselling memoir, which Toni Morrison called “quite extraordinary,” offers an intimate look at Barack Obama’s early days. This compelling journey traces the future forty-fourth president’s odyssey through family, race, and identity.

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. This unique edition includes a new introduction from the author, a full-color photo insert, and a family tree.

The son of a white American mother and a Black Kenyan father, Barack 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 as he faces the challenges of high school and college, living in New York, becoming a community organizer in Chicago, and traveling to Kenya. Through these experiences, he forms an enduring commitment to leadership and justice. Told through 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 confronts the complicated truth of his father’s life and legacy and comes to embrace his divided heritage.

On his journey to adulthood from a humble background, he forges his own path through 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 examine both where they come from and where they are capable of going.



LETTER TO EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

One day in 2008, I was teaching freshman English in a small classroom on the first floor of a school in suburban Colorado. Though this particular day appeared to be like any other, it proved to be anything but. I walked into school to start my day, and outside the window of my classroom, there were men in suits with earpieces and shades everywhere. It was like something out of a movie. They asked questions about exterior doors and windows and blocked off hallways. I continued to welcome students to class, write the learning objectives on the board, and start my day because that was what I had been told to do. It was a day like any other, yet it wasn't—the future forty-fourth president of the United States of America was coming to speak in our gym. Though I did not attend that day, I remain honored to have witnessed a time my ancestors prayed for, a time when a Black man was president of the United States of America.

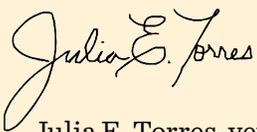
I am one of many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or other Person of Color) educators who are often the only nonwhite person on staff in their public school system. We, as the only person of color in predominantly white institutions, experience some of what President Obama describes in *Dreams from My Father*. In this memoir, you will read a unique coming-of-age story as President Barack Obama, an internationally revered world leader, takes us back to his roots. He remembers what it's like to be the only person in his immediate family who identified as a Black American, while at the same time helping readers understand the richness of being biracial in a society that has labeled itself a melting pot.

He reminds us of the important role that stepfathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and mothers play in raising young people to reach their full potential. He recalls the impact of having an upbringing that bridged oceans, spanning islands and continents, and helps readers understand that the future depends on our ability to recognize the beauty of our interconnectedness. Our 44th President grew up and was raised in one of the places geographically furthest from the mainland and yet, through lessons and love from his grandparents from Kansas, he carried ideals from the very interior of North America with him all the way to Indonesia, Kenya, and beyond.

Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop proffered that books can be windows, mirrors, and sliding doors, allowing young people to see into and imagine themselves in new worlds, while also mirroring their own experience. This book offers a window into the life of a young man destined to become a national and global leader. We know the importance of bringing texts into the classroom that serve as “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors,” allowing all young people to see their own potential, whether they want to be community organizers or leaders of nations.

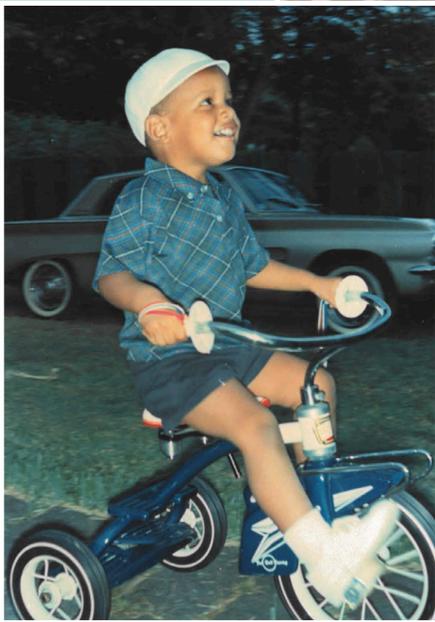
I look forward to a time when President Barack Obama's painting is not the only one in the [National Portrait Gallery](#) depicting a president of the United States who identifies as a person of color. I look forward to the discussions and lessons that will come from young people reading Barack Obama's story, and I look forward to a day when people feel truly empowered to be the change they want to see in the world. Perhaps this story will inspire them to become the leaders we need to change the future. It is my firm belief that in this memoir, you will feel the enduring message of hope that is perhaps the most resilient part of President Obama's life and legacy.

Happy Reading!



Julia E. Torres, veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver public schools

Photo Courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archive



My father, Barack Obama Sr., grew up in Kenya and studied at the University of Hawaii, where he met my mother, Ann.



Here I am as a child in Hawaii, riding my tricycle.

ESSENTIAL THEMES AND QUESTIONS

› Family

President Obama's family formed, came apart, and was re-formed many times. As he grew from boy to man, his understanding of family shifted. How do our families shape the way we show up in the world? How can families expand to include individuals beyond those we live with or may be related to?

› Identity

President Obama's racial and ethnic identity is multifaceted, though he does identify as Black. As such, he experienced an awakening of racial consciousness with respect to the human experience of Blackness within a global context. What sorts of experiences shape racial and ethnic identity?

› Grief and Loss

President Obama's father died far away from him, and he came to know about it from a relative. In the epilogue, Obama offers a meditation on the loss of his mother. How do grief and resilience live together? Can losing loved ones teach you how to love more completely? How can learning about who our parents are help us learn more about ourselves?

› Parenthood

President Obama's grandparents, stepfather, and mother all cared for him in extremely important ways in the absence of his biological father. When his father appeared in his life, he had very specific ways that he wanted Obama to perceive him. Do fathers have specific roles in communities and families? How is caregiving both an individual and shared experience?

› Scholarship

President Obama did not always take school seriously when he was a young boy. He learned a lot of life lessons one cannot learn in school from his grandfather, stepfather, and mother. What learning happens outside of school? How does geographic location and socioeconomic circumstance shape the form education takes?

› Activism

President Obama worked as a community organizer, which helped hone his leadership abilities and develop his sense of purpose with respect to the work he would do to serve humanity. Do citizens have a responsibility to give back to the communities in which they live? How can community organizing and social activism change the world for the better?

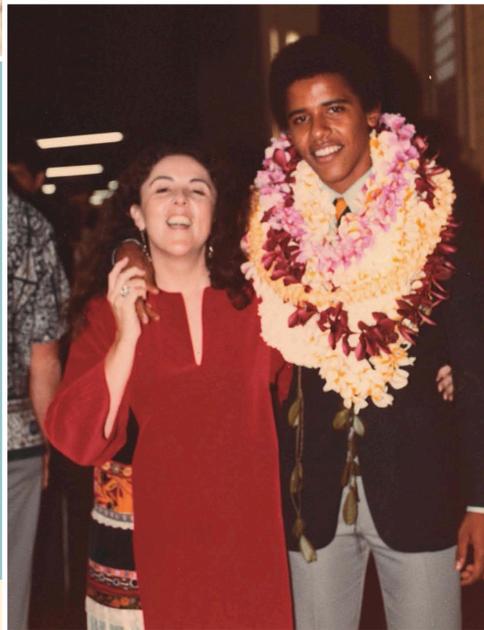
› Travel

President Obama grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia, after which he traveled to the continental U.S., Kenya, and beyond. What happens on a mental, spiritual, and interpersonal level when individuals leave their known and familiar environments to explore other places? What challenges exist for Black people traveling abroad?



My father was a stranger to me when he came to visit my mother and me for Christmas one year. It was the last time I saw him in person before he died, and the photos from that visit are the only ones I have of us together.

Photo Courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archive



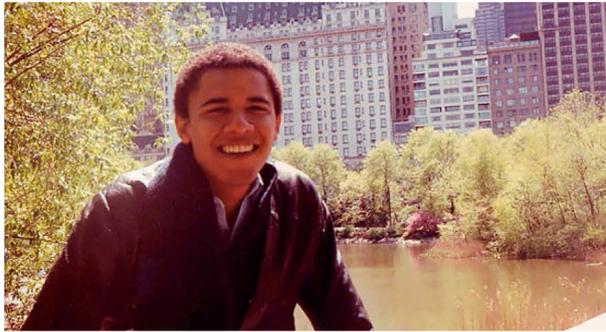
As a young man in high school, I wore my hair long and thought I was pretty hip.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. “It wasn’t until 1967—the year [President Obama] celebrated [his] sixth birthday, three years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., received the Nobel Peace Prize—that the Supreme Court of the United States would tell the state of Virginia that its ban on interracial marriage violated the U.S. Constitution.” (p. 9) Read *Loving vs. Virginia: A Documentary Novel of the Landmark Civil Rights Case* by Patricia Powell (2017) and/or watch *The Loving Story* (2011). Write an op-ed or essay with your reaction. Why do you think the United States had miscegenation laws? Research individuals who loved despite these laws. How has society in the U.S. evolved since their abolition? Use your resources to add as many specific details to your piece as possible.
2. Read the following article: “[11 Things You May Not Know About Hawai’i and Native Hawaiians](#).” Prepare a Tiktok video or other virtual presentation sharing what you have learned. The colonization that happened in Hawaii has happened all over the world. Research at least one other country that was colonized. Identify the indigenous inhabitants of that country and learn about their history. Educate those in your school community about what happened to these people in the wake of colonization and about the lives they lead today.
3. President Obama and his mother learned much about American foreign policy during their time in Indonesia. President Obama wrote that “the U.S. government had been upset by Sukarno’s Communist leanings and had decided he wasn’t a friend to America. . . . It was frightening that history could be swallowed up so completely, that people continued to go about their business beneath giant posters of the new president as if nothing had happened.” (p. 37) Using your resources, research at least one place impacted by American foreign policy, media, or presence. What is the story of American involvement from the perspective of local inhabitants? What counternarratives are American people told through the media? Using primary source documents wherever possible, create a presentation that shows both narratives.
4. While grappling with his own identity, President Obama delved into the works of great Black writers, concluding “Their art couldn’t help them in the end. All of them finally withdrew, exhausted and bitter—Du Bois to Africa, Baldwin to Europe, Hughes deep into Harlem.” (p. 83) Research Du Bois, Baldwin, or Hughes. What do their words reveal to you about Black American male identity? Use an annotation protocol or other method for close reading and analysis of one of their works.
5. *Black Orpheus* is a Brazilian film that portrays Black people in Brazil through a unique lens. Watch the film, or another Brazilian film of your choosing, and take note of differences and similarities between the Black experiences portrayed in the film and those inside the U.S. What do you know about African diasporic experiences? How are some of these experiences and perspectives reflected in President Obama’s family?
6. What’s in a name? President Obama reveals that “Barack means ‘Blessed.’ In Arabic. My grandfather was a Muslim.” (p. 98) What does your name mean? How or why was it given to you? At times in the story, President Obama goes by “Barry.” Is there an anglicized version of your name? If so, do you allow people to use it? Create an origin story for your name by researching its meaning and explaining why it was given to you. You may choose to use Google Drawings, Instagram, or iMovie to add visuals to your story.
7. In *Dreams from My Father*, President Obama alludes to changing demographics in Chicago and the struggles many individuals in Black communities faced as part of what drew him to community organizing. Use the information from Mapping Inequality or any other resource you are familiar with to map the history of redlining or white flight in your city or community. What story does the data tell? Create a Flipgrid or podcast

episode with your peers to discuss your reactions. How does what you discovered compare to white flight in Chicago?

8. President Obama offers thoughts about Black self-hatred and pride, or self-esteem. Much of our identities develop around the way the world perceives us and the way that we perceive ourselves. Read the Forward of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. [Watch this video from BuzzFeed](#) about ideal body types and standards of beauty throughout time. How has your concept of self been shaped by the external world? With your peers, create a social media campaign to cultivate self-esteem. You can use short videos, infographics, sound clips, or any other form of multimedia that will garner attention.
9. There are over 3,000 ethnic groups on the African continent, and seventy distinct groups within Kenya alone. Still, many people from the U.S. homogenize Africa and erroneously refer to the continent as a country. Research ethnic groups and languages in an African country of your choosing, and create a presentation to educate those in your community about its linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity.
10. Tell the story of your family as far back as is recorded or you and the elders in your family can remember. Name places and people as much as possible. Include as much detail as possible. End with a reflection about how your ancestors have contributed to you becoming the person you are.



After Occidental, I transferred to Columbia University in New York City. Here I am in Central Park.



Photo Courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archive



Before we were married, Michelle joined me for a trip to the family homestead in Alego.

BOOK CLUB AND 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 organizer 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 socialized 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 organizer, 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 organizing, 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 organizers?
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 young 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?

JOURNAL PROMPTS

1. Of his early day in Indonesia, President Obama says, “I could hardly believe my good fortune.” (p. 29) What is he referring to? What comparisons can you make between his childhood and yours? How is your environment different from his? Do you consider yourself to be fortunate? Why or why not?
2. If you are from the continental United States, have you ever traveled abroad? If so, write about your experience. What lessons did you learn? If you are not from the U.S., write about a time you traveled to an unfamiliar place. What did it sound, smell, and look like? How was it different from your home? If you have not traveled, where would you most like to go, and why?
3. Do you believe that “anything is possible so long as you [have] the courage to bring about change”? (p. 62)
4. President Obama wonders: “Had I chosen my own taste in music, my slang, my sense of humor, my basketball moves? Or was I hiding behind those things along with other Black people?” (p. 82) Do you choose these aspects of your own life, or are they the result of the environment in which you grow up? Do you feel pressure to like certain music, use certain vocabulary, or act a certain way? How do you feel about this?
5. What organizations exist in your community that function to provide services for individuals free of charge? Who runs them? What kind of organization would you like to start?
6. Does “self-esteem . . . depend on our ability to translate words into action”? Explain your thinking.
7. Have you ever lost touch with someone who lives far away? If so, what was it like when you got back in touch with them? If you have lost touch, what would it take to find them again?
8. From your perspective, does sharing memories make people family?
9. Read about the night runners. (pp. 258–259) What is the purpose of such stories? What are some superstitions or supernatural creatures from your culture? What were they created to explain?
10. Does your family have ancestral lands? If so, where are they? Have you ever seen them? Describe them using as much detail as you can. If not, what have you heard about them? What would you most like to discover? If not, what have you heard about them? What would you most like to discover? Research the land you are living on.
11. President Obama’s family is made up of many individuals connected to one another by bonds of blood, circumstance, and choice. Who are some of the people you consider family? What are your thoughts about the differences between family we are biologically related to and those we choose?

PRAISE FOR
DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE

**“BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED . . .
MOVING AND CANDID . . .**

this book belongs on the shelf beside works like James McBride’s *The Color of Water* and Gregory Howard Williams’s *Life on the Color Line* as a tale of living astride America’s racial categories.”

—Scott Turow

“PROVOCATIVE . . .

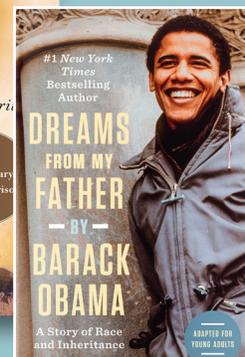
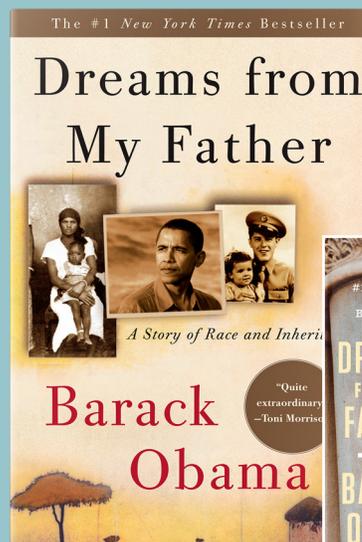
Persuasively describes the phenomenon of belonging to two different worlds, and thus belonging to neither.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“Obama’s writing is incisive yet forgiving.

**THIS IS A BOOK
WORTH SAVORING.”**

—Alex Kotlowitz,
author of *There Are No Children Here*



**“ONE OF THE MOST
POWERFUL BOOKS OF SELF-
DISCOVERY I’VE EVER READ,
all the more so for its illuminating
insights into the problems not only of
race, class, and color, but of culture
and ethnicity. It is also beautifully
written, skillfully layered, and paced
like a good novel.”**

—Charlayne Hunter-Gault,
author of *In My Place*

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.