



Michelle Obama: A Life

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An inspiring story of a modern American icon, here is the first comprehensive account of the life and times of Michelle Obama. With disciplined reporting and a storyteller's eye for revealing detail, Peter Slevin follows Michelle to the White House from her working-class childhood on Chicago's largely segregated South Side. He illuminates her tribulations at Princeton University and Harvard Law School during the racially charged 1980s and the dilemmas she faced in Chicago while building a high-powered career, raising a family and helping a young community organizer named Barack Obama become president of the United States. From the lessons she learned in Chicago to the messages she shares as one of the most recognizable women in the world, the story of this First Lady is the story of America. *Michelle Obama: A Life* is a fresh and compelling view of a woman of unique achievement and purpose.

From the Hardcover edition.

Michelle Obama: A Life Details

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From Reader Review Michelle Obama: A Life for online ebook

Donna Davis says

I received this book as a birthday gift from a gracious house guest. I think he chose it for me because he knew of my strong interest in civil rights issues. Although this is actually out of my wheelhouse, I decided to read it, and I was surprised how much of it I enjoyed. Of particular interest was the beginning of the book, where a surprising amount of the narrative was devoted to African-American history, especially in Chicago. I hadn't expected it and found it both interesting and useful.

I don't generally follow the lives and careers of mainstream American politicians or their spouses, so I didn't know much of anything about Michelle Obama, other than that she had made it plain, upon taking up that famous residence, that her family would be her main focus and if the public didn't like it they could lump it. After all, nobody was paying her a salary, so she had some choices.

Reading of how her parents struggled in order to get Michelle and her brother excellent educations, and of the tenacity with which Michelle approached school, social justice issues, and her career, I found myself feeling strangely sorry for her. Before her husband decided to pursue politics, her career outshone his. She was in demand and had a lot of choices. When she headed to the Ivy League, her classmates and professors were almost all white people, and the pressure was on her not only to succeed, but to be the one African-American that would be the example, the cultural education for a whole lot of privileged white people. That kind of hot spotlight would undo some people, make them decide to go on home and enroll at a school closer to home, but Obama—then Robinson—did it and did it well, and then she went back to her hometown, Chicago, to find ways to use her education to serve her community.

As the first Black first lady (FLOTUS), she's had to make some difficult choices, and there would be a certain level of criticism no matter what she chose to undertake. Her career had been ascending like a rocket, and she took what will likely be a permanent leave of absence in order to keep her family well tended. She hadn't wanted her spouse to go into politics, because she was convinced, as I am, that being a politician doesn't end up making a difference. She urged Barack to become an inspirational instructor, or a school administrator, or go to work for a strong nonprofit, but that wasn't what he wanted to do. He wrote a book; it didn't sell. (Occupying the Oval Office would change that.) But when two parents put their careers on a fast track simultaneously, often the ones that pay the price are the kids, and she wouldn't have that for their girls. If it came down to her career versus their development, she was determined to be there for them. And who am I to say that wasn't the right thing to do?

Slavin is not an official biographer; in fact, after leaving the White House, Michelle plans to publish memoirs of her own. However, this writer was given interviews with people very close to the First Family with Michelle's blessing, and maybe that is why some noteworthy items are glossed over.

Because whereas this memoir is about her more than him, a fair amount of the president works its way into the text. Their lives are joined, after all. And it does seem a little myopic not to have addressed the elephant in the room: the first Black president can't prevent cops all over the country from shooting Black men—and sometimes women—all the damn time and for no good reason. After all the protests that took place all over the nation, with chants and signs of "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" and "I Can't Breathe!", you'd think it would merit at least a paragraph.

It's like it never happened.

So if you are an admirer of the Obamas, this is not a bad book certainly. And it's tempting to jump into their court, so to speak, based solely on the amazingly stupid things about birth certificates and loyalty that the ultra-right has come out with, questions that a white presidential family would never have to confront.

But when push comes to shove, this book won't make a big difference, and sad to say, neither will the Obamas' eight years in the White House. It's good to know that American society has moved forward enough to elect a Black president, but like all the presidents before him, his authority is limited and to some degree, illusory.

I recommend this memoir to those with an interest in Michelle Obama. Those eternally present polls that reflect the public's perception of those in the White House show that a much greater number of Americans admire her than approve of the president. But of course, one doesn't have to be American to want to read this; one only needs to be interested in the life of this historically first, First Lady.

Celina says

Although limited in access, Peter Slevin was able to compose a serious and comprehensive overview on the life of Michelle Obama. From her ancestry tracing back to slavery and all the way to her life at the White House, Michelle Obama's story is nothing but awe-inspiring and riveting—a true and classic American story. If anything, my biggest gripe about Slevin's biography is the overly ubiquitous presence of Barack Obama. It felt like the story of Michelle Robinson was improperly rushed in order to quickly introduce the man that would later become the 44th President of the United States. If I wanted to read about Barack Obama, I simply would have chosen to pick up one of his books. However, I chose to pick up a biography about Michelle because I wanted to know more about Michelle, not simply as a President's wife but simply as the iconic First Lady that has inspired millions of young girls such as myself. Besides this small dissatisfaction, however, the book overall is romantically well-written, displaying Michelle Obama as the resplendent and complex woman that she is.

Jenn says

What a heroic life. Very inspiring. The description of her forebearers' arrival in Chicago from the Deep South during The Great Migration made me realize how very much they were refugees, not really welcomed in their new home and forced to live and work in the margins.

Carol Storm says

Well-written and detailed, but it tells you a lot more about Michelle Obama's achievements than it does about her personality. Every chapter reads like a list of reasons why people should respect the First Lady, without any suggestion that anyone actually likes her.

On the other hand, I had to smile when Michelle Obama mentioned how much it meant to her as a girl to see Diana Ross and The Supremes on the old Ed Sullivan Show. I'd love to know which Supremes song is her favorite!

But that's exactly the kind of thing this book won't tell you.

Sarah says

It was definitely interesting to read a biography of someone who is still well-known and in the position which got a biography to be written about her in the first place. It was also a rather strange experience to read about events and developments that have happened in my own remembrance...so often the biographies I read are about people before my memory. That being said, I love the overall story arc here - the focus on Michelle as a woman in her own right, not as the wife of the president. I also like that the book didn't shy away from tricky issues, from acknowledging that there aren't easy answers, and from recognizing that the work is far from done. The caveat of course is that it was definitely written from a place of support - not only is negativity lacking (which I appreciate), but also any true analysis of weaknesses or mistakes (which I appreciate less). In addition, at times I felt like the narrative was jumping around or was focusing in too much on Barack rather than Michelle. Most of the jumping around I think was due to trying to keep a sequential timeline, and so progress on initiatives was scattered throughout the book based on when it occurred rather than presenting a full picture of a project from start to finish. As for the sometimes too big focus on Barack, I suppose that's partially due to how big a role his political aspirations played in who she became, and also because it's probably hard to find material about somebody as an individual when they're playing a supporting role. All that being said and done though, definitely a good book - I learned a lot about where Michelle came from and how that shaped who she is and what she's done, and certainly came to appreciate more fully the way in which she has navigated her role as first lady and taken up causes in which she believes.

StMargarets says

An interesting overview of Michelle Obama's life and how her achievements fit in the larger picture of American history. The author gave a detailed account of the Great Migration in the early 20th Century that included both sides of Michelle's family.

Because of the sweeping scope of the narrative, there is very little about Michelle, the person. She is Michelle, historical figure. Not that I minded, or was surprised. She is still occupying the White House and I doubt any author would be able to have access to her or her closest friends until after Obama's term is over.

This is a meticulously researched book. The footnotes, bibliography, and index took up 40% on my kindle. This would be a solid source for any student writing a paper about the first lady. The added bonus is that student would be inspired to stay in school and continue to do their personal best because this message is repeated over and over again in this book. Very inspiring stuff.

Jean says

This book is part of my First Ladies reading project. I chose this book by Peter Slevin as it appeared to be a more true biography than some of the books about Michele Obama I looked at.

The first part of the book covers Michelle Obama's early life including her family roots in slavery and

segregation. Slevin covers the problems of growing up black in Chicago's south side. The book goes into the working class upbringing and how each generation has brought the family another step up from poverty.

Slevin reveals details about Michele's family upbringing and how her mother Mrs. Robinson created a warm and stable home environment for her high-achieving children.

Slevin goes into her time at Princeton and Harvard Law School and the underlying racial tensions. Slevin went into depth about her Thesis from Princeton reciting portions of it. The author discusses her problem of not being accepted by the blacks as she is too educated and not accepted by the white's because she is black. Slevin also covers her work history and her time at Chicago law firm Sidney Austin, the Chicago Mayor's office, a not for profit agency and the University of Chicago and the University's hospital. The remainder of the book covers the campaign and some as First Lady. Apparently Mrs. Obama said she is going to write her own memoirs as First Lady.

Slevin is a former Washington Post correspondent and now teaches journalism at Northwestern University. The book is well researched with complete access to the family. Slevin also interviewed family friends, colleagues and former classmates. The book is easy to read and provides a lot of information. I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. Robin Miles narrated the book.

Caitlin Rogers says

When thinking of people in the spotlight, especially the presidential spotlight, it is easy to criticize from afar out of the unknown truth. This book does nothing but say real, honest, and blatant things about the journey for Michelle Obama from her roots in working-class Chicago to the White House. I learned a lot that I did not previously know about Michelle and Barack though this book. I now have a new respect for both of these people, as I have read accounts of their lives and how unequivocally challenging and amazing it was for each person to raise themselves to a higher position in the world, while still remembering where they came from and whom they want to turn around and support in this world. This book is not only for African-Americans who want to read about Michelle and Barack Obama, it is for anyone who wants to see a lot of truth painted into a biography about our country's first black First Lady and her family.

Kyle Hoffman says

(4.5 stars)

I picked up Peter Slevin's biography of First Lady Michelle Obama on a whim, with admittedly low expectations. However, what could have been a "puff piece"--focusing solely on her image, fashion, and gossipy insider details of daily life in the White House--was instead, a serious, concise and inspiring portrait of a remarkable woman. Slevin places Mrs. Obama's life within the broader story of race relations in America. By the end of the book, the reader is convinced that Mrs. Obama--child of Chicago's south side, Princeton and Harvard Law graduate, distinguished careerwoman, and America's first African American first lady--is an exemplary role model whose life is a quintessential American success story. Remarkable reporting, fluently written. Highly recommended reading for all Americans.

Marla says

Very much enjoyed this book. It shed light on another side of Michelle and Barack. I'm a big Obama fan and it's nice to see what they went through during the campaigns and how hard it was to decide if Barack should run or not. She is a strong person and a great role model for women and girls. I have enjoyed seeing a loving family in the White House who are more like normal America than in previous years.

Linda says

I was hoping for a book about Michelle Obama, the person.
Instead I got a book about Michelle Obama, her curriculum vitae.

Roger Smittler says

Peter Slevin's Michelle Obama: A Life begins well. The first third of the book tracks Michelle's life until she meets Barack. It's a story can't be told enough as she receives the parenting that every child should have, excels in school, and achieves formidable goals. I learned a lot about the history of the South Side of Chicago.

The introduction of Barack into the story demonstrates a romanticism that has roots in the real world. She tells a friend, "That's man I'm going to live with." (By the way, in their first encounter, she's the mentor and he's the intern at a powerful Chicago law firm.)

That encounter is the pivot in the book as we learn more about Michelle AND Barack, with the President taking the central role.

The bio becomes less interesting as Slevin begins to write about the stereotypical choices that a working wife and mom must deal with. As he describes Barack rocket-like rise to the Senate and then to the presidential campaign, he focuses on Michelle's work to maintain a home and sense of a normal growing up for their daughters.

We get an overview of the many social initiatives that Michelle has advance. But, too often the bio puts her into stereotypical roles as a responder to the needs of others and not the initiator.

Near the end of the bio, Slevin sums up their relationship (so far at least) as Barack as the helium filled balloon and Michelle holds the string.

I look forward to reading a bio of Michelle 3-4 years after they leave the White House.

Tofts Reviews says

I picked up this book because I wanted to read about amazing Michelle Obama and perhaps catch a glimpse of life through her eyes. I wanted to read about her childhood to where she is today. More importantly, I wanted to read about how she balances First Lady duties with raising two children. I did not want to read about Barack's selfishness and work schedule (and the comprehensive reasons why) unless it directly related to Michelle's plight. Heartless of me, I know, but I am a mother/wife too.

This book captures the life of Barack Obama quite well, with snippets of Michelle Obama in relation to what Barack was doing at the time. This biography had a great feeling at the beginning, but when it hit page 120, it suddenly became the Barack Obama biography. Sentences like "If Barack was a helium balloon, Michelle was the one holding the string" are throughout. That prose then goes on to details of Barack's campaign trail. Another example is "As the appearances piled up, the staff discovered that Michelle possessed political skills her husband lacked." Speaking of her 'making the final sale' after Barack had done his work. What about the woman who worked constantly apart from her husband? Surely she wasn't attached to his side 24/7.

While her parents are portrayed as martyrs, Michelle comes off as a privileged individual. This however, does not negate all the good work she is doing today and all the great organizations she has created over the years. What I learned from Peter Slevin is that while Michelle Obama had a skewed outlook on life when she graduated from her prestigious university, she is now making it right with her work and associations outside of her First Lady position. I still do have much respect for Michelle Obama. I wished this book told me more about the great woman Michelle Obama is instead of the woman standing behind Barack Obama.

This is a very detailed account about everyone else in Michelle's life. And this left me hanging and annoyed.

-- Tofts Reviews

Penny McGill says

This reads like a quickly written People magazine article and would only have been worth my time if it had the same # of pictures I see in a People magazine.. with only 16 pages of glossy photos this did not balance off the content of the paragraphs.

So, is it worth reading? I guess if you want to read everything you can about the Obama family and don't mind trudging through everything else. The coverage he offers on different elements of their lives is imbalanced and I think he focused too much on criticisms made of Michelle Obama's physical appearance. A book like this gives you the impression there will be some kind of remarkable commentary on her life and how it has been lived but it was pretty average.

A pleasant read. Give it to a patron who wants to pass the time in a pleasant way but not be challenged. It leaves out a great deal of interesting content from both campaigns so it isn't a perfect choice for someone who has a keen eye on that part of the Obama story but for a nice overview of her life it is fine.

Kaushik Iyer says

Interesting, but not necessarily novel. Michelle Obama is quite remarkable, and this is a pretty good introduction to the story of her personal and professional lives.

Slevin is limited by access. There's almost none of it from the First Family, and what there is from friends and admirers is second-hand. This is a necessary ceiling on the rating / influence this book can have.

His portrayal of the young Michelle is strong and vivid though. Worth your time for that.
