

BOOK REVIEW

***Becoming***

Author: Michelle Obama

Publisher: Crown Publishing Group

Year of Publication: © 2018

ISBN 978-1-5247-6313-8

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Michelle Obama is perhaps the most relatable and refreshing first lady that the United States of America has ever had. She is also emerging as one of the most powerful and influential women in the world. In November 2018, she released a memoir entitled *Becoming*. The book, which became an instant best seller, provides an intimate glimpse of Obama's childhood, her struggles, her growth, and her ways of dealing with the roller coaster that is her husband's political career. *Becoming*, which has garnered a lot of positive response, is divided into three main parts: "Becoming Me", "Becoming Us", and "Becoming More". In the stories and experiences she has carefully strung together in each part of the book, Obama shares parts of her journey that made her who she is today—how she became.

The first part, "Becoming Me", tells the endearing stories of Obama's childhood and adolescence—how she grew and learned from her parents what it meant to be strong and compassionate while negotiating her identity as an African-American girl. Her father's quiet struggle against multiple sclerosis inspired Obama and taught her to embody the strength and determination that her father had shown her. She learned from her parents early on that "in life you control what you can" (Obama, 2018, p. 33). She had to deal, from a very young age, with the ways in which racial discrimination had affected everyone in her family, and how they had to work and try harder than everyone else in every endeavor. She also shares some of the most defining moments in her life—from her cousin's calling her out because she talked "like a white girl" when she was ten, to her school college counsellor's telling her that she was not Princeton material. But she also shares a lesson she learned from her father, that "failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result" (Obama,

2018, p. 43). A lesson which has served as the source of her unwavering strength and motivation.

In "Becoming Us", Obama opens up about her relationship with Barack, her husband, and her two children. She candidly shares her journey to balance her autonomy and independence as a woman, and her responsibilities as a wife and mother—a struggle that became more difficult as her husband's political career skyrocketed and caused him to attract more attention and expectation. This is where Obama illustrates how her identity as an African American woman is inseparable from every part of her journey; how every action that she took was (and is still) seen from a screen with a layer—her skin. Obama also shares intimate details of the struggles within her marriage, topics that often goes unnoticed or ignored—her miscarriage, her decision to get pregnant with IVF, and her turning to marriage counseling to resolve the strains and stress within her loving relationship with Barack Obama, her husband.

The third part, "Becoming More", deals with Obama's negotiating another role, in addition to those she had already had, that is the First Lady of the United States. She witnessed, in close up, the falseness that is the post-racial narrative. Being more privy to the issues of the country than most, Obama witnessed the disastrous impacts of discrimination against black people in a wider and more severe level. "The hatred was old and deep and as dangerous as ever," she remarks (Obama, 2018, p. 397). In the memoir, she reflects that both she and her husband had been aware that they were a "provocation". On the one hand, the Obama's being in the White House had become a motivation for people of minority groups to achieve more important roles in their fields and environments. On the other hand, it had also caused "fear

and resentment among others” (Obama, 2018, p. 397).

She also experienced, now more than ever, the lies of the post-feminist myth. If she was “Other” in Princeton and Harvard because of her skin, now she is “Other” in her own relationship because she was a woman—as this is what the role of the first lady traditionally entails. Obama shares how she worked on establishing her identity through her initiatives. Focusing on what she held dear in her heart, she began developing initiatives that dealt with the welfare of military families, as well as the health and education for children, especially young girls and the underprivileged. She managed to spread her message across the country and reach people across a wide age range using a platform she loved (and excelled at)—popular culture. This was the aspect that distinguished her from the other first ladies. There was always a refreshing air about her that was able to attract and captivate her audience. And again, she succeeded. She finished her service as first lady with grace and as her own person.

To the end of the book, Obama speaks about the presidential campaign of 2016 and Donald Trump’s winning the election. She expresses her shock and outrage. She straightforwardly calls her husband’s successor “a bully”, who was so “disgraceful” and “intolerable” that the overall standards of decency in the media “were simply lowered in order to make room for the candidate’s voice” (Obama, 2018, p. 408). However, she also expresses her belief in the people and her hope that progress would not be diminished. She highlights the importance of “inviting one another in” (Obama, 2018, p. 421), of working together to live as a community that does not fear or have a bias against one another. In light of the divisiveness of the current U.S. administration, this message could not be more important.

Becoming is an endearing, refreshing, and intimate account of the life of a young girl who would, one day, grow up to be one of the most powerful women in the world. The resonating message throughout the book is that we are good enough, that one can achieve one’s full potential if one is only willing to work for it. Michelle Obama underlines all this without turning a blind eye to the fact that in order to do this, some people need more boost than others do. However, more than that, Obama aims to empower her readers by showing them how the great-great-granddaughter of a slave could thrive and succeed in ways that had been previously unimaginable. In her candid account, Obama opens up about her problems and struggles that could have been easily overlooked from the outside. On top of that, Obama encourages the idea of optimism—the idea that no matter how bad the world

seems to be, being cynical is never a solution. Finally, she believes that there is power in sharing our own stories. We can learn, find a friend who goes through the same things as we do, and strengthen each other. In reading *Becoming*, we can feel this strength and inspiration.

REFERENCE

Obama, M. (2018). *Becoming*. New York: Crown Publishing Group (NY).