

Book Review

“Becoming”

By Michelle Obama
Crown Publishing Group
New York
(2018)

Michael Krentz, MD, MPH

Independent Author

Independent Consultant, Health Care & Public Health

MBO Partners

Norfolk, Virginia

Tel: (202) 997-4757

Email: mjk@mjkrentz.com

Author Note

The insights or views expressed in this review are those of the author. They do not reflect official policy of any of the institutions the author serves. The author has no conflicts of interest.

Introduction

“Now I think it’s one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child—What do you want to be when you grow up? As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that’s the end.”

— Michelle Obama, *BECOMING*

The August 1969 Woodstock phenomenon included a young Joan Baez crooning “We Shall Overcome,” Blood Sweat & Tears singing “God Bless the Child,” and Mexican immigrant Carlos Santana’s career-launching performance. Halfway across the country on the South Side of Chicago, five-year-old Michelle LaVaughn Robinson plinked through musical scales on an old upright piano downstairs from her parents’ apartment. Her beloved, yet demanding, great-aunt Robbie gave lessons to a constant stream of aspiring musicians.

Michelle would later write, “The sound of people trying...became the soundtrack of our lives.” The precocious student completed the basics, then worked her way through prescribed consecutive songs in the piano book, relishing a “magic in the learning.” Soon she broke Robbie’s rules and mastered an advanced song, which she proudly played for her mentor. Rigid Robbie reacted with predictable outrage, but Michelle’s parents “appreciated my feistiness and I’m glad for it. It was a flame inside me they wanted to keep lit.”

Did it ever.

Reviews

The fire lit in the pasture of Woodstock propagated through decades to inspire future generations of young Americans. Similarly, the passion inside Michelle Robinson guided her into adult life. Over the years, that internal glow would flourish far beyond the South Side to illuminate the White House, the nation, and the world.

In candid, powerful language tinged with pathos, *Becoming* describes not only the life-journey of a singular black girl, but also the parallel growth of a society ever striving to define itself.

Summary

“Becoming Me”

“My family was my world, the center of everything.”

Like most Americans, Michelle’s ancestors came from someplace else. She sprang from roots transplanted to Chicago from the deep South during the post-slavery Great Migration of African-Americans. Her father, Fraser Robinson, descended from slaves in South Carolina. Her mother, Marian Shields Robinson, hailed from similar origins in Alabama. Her grandfather, nicknamed “Southside,” so resented the brutal existence of hate and “stymied aspirations” that he distrusted even his white dentist. Fraser, though denied union membership because of race, remained committed to his job as a boiler technician for the city. Refusing to give in to progressive multiple sclerosis, he never missed a day’s work. Marian Robinson stayed home to rear her children with a parental mindset Michelle praises as “a kind of unflappable Zen neutrality.” In contrast to great-aunt Robbie’s rules-based rigor, Marian Robinson taught her son and daughter to develop their own counsel. “I’m not raising babies,” she’d tell them, “I’m raising adults.”

In adolescence, Michelle worried through her ascendance to a mostly white magnet high school. “My first months at Whitney Young gave me a glimpse of something that had previously been invisible—the apparatus of privilege and connection, what seemed like a network of half-hidden ladders and guide ropes that lay suspended overhead, ready to connect some but not all of us to the sky.” In a mantra repeated through future life passages, she wondered, “Am I good enough? . . . It was doubt about where I came from and what I’d believed about myself until now. It was like a malignant cell that threatened to divide and divide again, unless I could find some way to stop it.”

Typical teenage angst? Not every adolescent grows up in a transitional neighborhood abandoned first by the white people, then by the blacks able to move out; a milieu whose racial mix transforms from a white to a black majority where “kids know at a very young age they’re being devalued.” Teenager Michelle Robinson stood on the daunting divide that any American who is not a heterosexual white male must one day confront.

Michelle responded to those external and internal challenges with *Yes, I can*. She reasoned that “. . . failure is a feeling long before it’s an actual result. If you don’t get out there and define yourself, you’ll be quickly and inaccurately described by others.”

When a condescending guidance counselor said she was “not Princeton material,” Michelle fumed in silence. “I’ll show you.” She not only graduated from Princeton but also from Harvard Law School. “And in the end, I hadn’t needed to show her anything. I was only showing myself.”

“*Becoming Us*”

If opposites do attract, Michelle Robinson and Barack Obama were a perfect match.

Michelle: Family-rooted, driven overachiever, meticulous planner, punctual and organized. Prefers verbal communication and socializing in groups.

Barack: Unique offspring of a multicultural blended heritage, idealist, lives in the moment, multidimensional, questioning, intellectual. Prefers ponderous letters to spontaneous phone calls.

Their initial meeting did not augur a future relationship or a twenty-six-year-plus marriage. As a fresh summer associate at Sidley Austin Chicago law firm, Barack came under Michelle’s mentorship. They were the only African-Americans in the firm. He showed up so late for their first session that she almost wrote him off before he arrived—not the only time in their life he would keep her waiting.

Despite their apparent incompatibility, a relationship ignited. Soon they cohabited the apartment where Michelle grew up. Family-oriented traditionalist Michelle wanted marriage and children, but free-spirit Barack “was in no particular rush.” Each owned a contrasting perspective: “He saw marriage as the loving alignment of two people who could lead parallel lives but without forgoing any independent dreams or ambitions.” For her, “marriage was more like a full-on merger.” Later, while they celebrated his completion of the bar exam, he shocked her with a traditional yet dramatic public proposal. They wed in October 1992.

Michelle intuited that her drive to become a lawyer threw her into a lifestyle she regretted. She had striven to achieve the aim but did not relish the life. Barack, meanwhile, veered toward a visionary political career that would test their marriage.

She reveals with soul-wrenching candor their struggle to have children when Barack, still afflicted with chronic tardiness, commuted each week to Springfield as a state senator. She suffered the often demeaning gamut of fertility-testing and optimization, usually alone and resentful, left to rely on Barack’s “flooring it up the interstate after a late vote so that he could hit my ovulation window.” Unsuccessful, they resorted to in-vitro fertilization to conceive their two daughters.

Early days as a family waxed discordant. Michelle adjusted her own way of life to provide her girls the family-centered stability and predictability she remembered. Barack “always had his eyes on some far-off horizon, on his notion of the world as it should be. Just for once, I wanted him to be content with life as it was.”

Accustomed to a nuclear and extended family “where everyone always showed up,” Michelle begrudged her new reality—a triad of breast-feeding baby, restless three-year-old, and a partner whose unpredictable political schedule forced her to be responsible for most everything in the home. Despite his good intentions, Barack’s unreliability in keeping time commitments rankled her. At the end of each week, she delayed dinner or kept her daughters up to greet their father when he returned from Springfield. She learned that *On my way* expressed optimism and enthusiasm to be home, not an exact truth. *Almost home* became “not a geo-locator but rather a state of mind.”

Reviews

Distressed for their marriage, Michelle cajoled Barack into couple's counseling where they learned to separate weapons from wounds. Michelle ceased being "caught up in the notion that everything was unfair and then assiduously, like a Harvard-trained lawyer, collecting evidence to feed that hypothesis. I now tried out a new hypothesis: It was possible that I was more in charge of my happiness than I was allowing myself to be." She describes this epiphany as her "pivot point," her "moment of self-arrest." The home-to-family conundrum she solved by installing new boundaries and an ironclad schedule for dinner, baths, and bedtime—holding Barack responsible to either make it on time or not. She returned to her core wishes for her girls "to grow up strong and centered and also unaccommodating to any form of old-school patriarchy: I didn't want them ever to believe that life began when the man of the house arrives home. We didn't wait for Dad. It was his job now to catch up with us."

Their new normal suffered more challenging onslaughts as Barack's political career skyrocketed. From community organizer to state senator to U.S. senator, his magnetism and vision captivated a burgeoning audience of devotees. After his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention launched him into the national limelight, the unspoken question became not if but when he would run for President of the United States.

When Barack Obama requested his family's approval to pursue the Democratic nomination for the 2008 presidential election, Michelle consented. She did not want him to be President, but agreed because she thought he could not win. "We can just sort of get this out of the way," she thought. Then they could build the stable family life she craved.

No one was more surprised than Michelle Obama when she became the heir-apparent to Laura Bush as First Lady of the United States.

"Becoming More"

As if to mirror the realities of her experience during the ensuing presidential campaign and two terms in the White House, this section of the book accelerates and swirls as a Vitamix of public and private challenges, heartbreaks, and triumphs. We see a strong but sometimes uncertain woman, a devoted wife and mother, an advocate for ordinary people, an uneasy yet inspired icon: the first black woman to preside over a "house built by slaves" that was also a "fortress disguised as a home." With adroitness honed by years of self-becoming, Michelle Obama balanced the pressure of being an exemplar of American opportunity against her earnest intention to establish as normal a life as possible for her daughters—all the while supporting the leader of the free world, himself a novelty in American history. One consolation. Because her husband worked a short stroll from the family quarters, he came home for dinner most nights to cherish a consistent relationship with his wife and daughters.

The chronicle of Mrs. Obama's well-known public initiatives, such as the famous garden, the Let's Move campaign, and her support for military families, affords interesting behind-the-scenes insights. They pale against her painstaking efforts to produce a traditional life-experience for her daughters, especially as they entered adolescence. One delightful anecdote describes Michelle and Malia evading their Secret Service shadows to escape the fortress on foot, albeit only to a secluded courtyard, to witness the fervor of the crowd across the street celebrating the Supreme Court's historic judgment on marriage equality.

The White House fortress did not shelter Michelle and her family from mean-spirited, malicious assaults on her character and that of her husband. She reflects, “For more than six years now, Barack and I had lived with the awareness that we ourselves were a provocation.” Although she understood and often disregarded the sources, the hate hurt—more so when the attacks threatened the security of her family. In the book, she tempers her few mentions of the forty-fifth president, yet leaves no doubt about her feelings. She discusses the lies questioning Barack’s birthplace and citizenship with direct, explicit language: “Donald Trump, with his loud and reckless innuendos, was putting my family’s safety at risk. And for this, I’d never forgive him.”

Sobering words from an honest, admired, and guileless woman who later proclaimed, “When they go low, we go high.”

Reflection

Neither the Woodstock performers nor the half-million Americans who joined in the landmark spectacle could have predicted its culture-ripping impact on subsequent generations. Their spirit and voices symbolized the peace, love, and freedom that underlies America’s greatness.

The family-kindled flame in Michelle Robinson persisted through each twist of her adult journey—enlightening her progression from a girl who created drama by playing with dolls to an accomplished paragon who forged her own true-life drama. Telling her story, she remains ever perceptive, not only to her heritage, but to the challenges and opportunities imposed upon women and people of color by a white-male-derived culture. The glow from her internal fire and passion for truth reflect the power of free will and moral excellence that not even the darkest forces can extinguish.

In today’s contentious national milieu, the “go-high” road makes a proper legacy for Michelle Obama, not as the first black FLOTUS, but as the learned, honest, intuitive, family-devoted, and committed citizen-advocate whose strength rests in witnessing and enhancing the good in others. The beneficiaries of her keen vision are myriad: her husband, children, extended family, women, minorities of every kind, disadvantaged youths and adults, military families, and a host of Americans whose names we will never know.

Michelle Obama’s becoming story transcends the singular narrative of a descendant of slaves, who journeyed from meager beginnings to a seat of immense influence on myriad hearts and minds. It becomes the story of America itself—the *real* great America of humble origins, unlimited aspirations, and indomitable spirit and vision—the America that eclipses the vagaries of politics and self-adulation—the American reality that lights the cores of all citizens who strive to become their best dreams, and proclaim:

Yes, I can.