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In the Father's House

By DAVID HAVEN BLAKE | SEPTEMBER 19, 2008

PREMIUM

Honor and identity in the candidates' memoirs

Amid the spectacle of the presidential campaign, it is easy to forget that Barack Obama and John McCain have written highly engaging memoirs. Both men regularly talk about their life stories, but their books have played an unusually powerful role in defining and launching their candidacies. The titles of the memoirs — Obama's Dreams from My Father and McCain's Faith of My Fathers — are tantalizingly close. But the candidates' approaches to the genre reflect divergent perspectives on the politics of world and self.

As autobiographers, politicians have the difficult task of crafting their private experience to fit into larger public narratives. Whether presenting themselves as heroes, converts, or reformers, they must compose stories that seem both authentic and appealing, as if the meaning of their lives were suspended between the words and the voting public. The act of autobiography does not simply constitute the self; it constitutes an imagined polity.

Despite such high stakes (or, perhaps, because of them), the personal writings of presidential aspirants tend to be flat, tedious, and unrevealing. Written by committee, shaped by editors, and vetted by consultants, their books can seem as interesting as the back of a cereal box. The central message seems to be that the candidate is part of a healthy diet that will improve security, restore prosperity, and lower the nation's cholesterol by 15 points.

But Obama's Dreams from My Father (1995) and McCain's Faith of My Fathers (1999) are better, more satisfying books than the self-promotional tomes that have preceded them. Obama has a reflective and nuanced prose style that deftly conveys his complex experience of the world. He writes as a lifelong outsider for whom identity and community are problematic concepts. McCain's trials as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam make for a gripping story, one that he interweaves with the rich military history of his family. The memoir's deep-seated romanticism rests on the faith that suffering produces wisdom and insight.

With the help of a longtime staff member, Mark Salter, McCain wrote his memoir in anticipation of the 2000 presidential campaign. The book tells the story of a military hero whose torture and captivity singularly prepared him for higher office. That experience has become so integral to McCain's public identity that supporters become apoplectic when anyone questions its political relevance.

Obama's memoir is highly unusual as a piece of campaign literature, for he wrote it years before he arrived on the national stage. Listen to Obama on the campaign trail, and you'll hear how frequently he refers to his books (he followed his memoir 11 years later with The Audacity of Hope). Authorship is profoundly important to this candidate. Literary critics have long explored the relationship between autobiography and identity, wondering whether the writer's "I" produces an alternate self. Reading Dreams From My Father, one gets the sense that the book created Barack Obama as much as Barack Obama created the book.

Considering their significant trials and adversity, readers might expect McCain and Obama to have emphasized their personal resilience. Experiences like growing up with a single parent or suffering years of captivity often generate narratives of self-reliance. But Dreams from My Father and Faith of My Fathers de-emphasize the individual will. Obama does not tell a rags-to-riches story. McCain does not present himself as an action hero beating back his enemies. Although there is no shortage of egotism in these books, the authors take a step toward what Paul John Eakins has described as a relational life story in which the self is presented in the context of other people's lives.

As the titles indicate, the most important figures in McCain's and Obama's memoirs are their fathers. (The timing could not be better, for despite the current battle for female voters, stories about fathers and grandfathers were ubiquitous in the 2008 primary season, with Hillary Clinton, Mitt Romney, and John Edwards all touting their fathers in times of electoral distress.) When both men reflect on the meaning of family, they focus on their patriarchs, the hard drinking, demanding men who were absent for much of their youth — Obama's because he returned to his native Kenya, McCain's because he was frequently at sea.

Obama and McCain may boast of their independence on the campaign trail, but their memoirs depict them as dutiful sons who tried to fulfill their fathers' ambitions rather than defy them. When they describe periods of adolescent rebellion, fathers and grandfathers are never the targets of their revolt. For example, McCain's punkish behavior and spotty grades at the U.S. Naval Academy are part of a family tradition that dates as far back as 1906. When McCain graduated fifth from the bottom of his Annapolis class, he could take comfort in knowing that his father and grandfather had done almost as poorly.

Outsiders may have difficulty appreciating the depth of the military's respect for the McCain patriarchs. The grandfather, Slew McCain, oversaw land-based air operations during the Battle of Guadalcanal, and as the commander of a group of aircraft carriers, he led decisive battles off the coasts of Japan and the Philippines. McCain's father, Jack, commanded a submarine in World War II, and at the height of the Vietnam War he served as commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command. Nicknamed "Mr. Seapower," he was the first son of a four-star admiral to reach that rank himself.

The central themes of John McCain's young life were honor and privilege. Both father and grandfather placed their service to the Navy above their families, and with a tinge of regret, McCain acknowledges that he was slated for a similar career. Such a life may have been limiting, but it also brought rewards. McCain grew up a Washington insider. His parents "kept a home on Capitol Hill," where they entertained prominent politicians and military leaders. For several years in the 1950s, the chairman of the House Armed Forces Committee regularly breakfasted at the McCain home.

Like Slew before him, Jack McCain's penchant for riotous living only burnished his reputation among his fellow sailors. He boozed, he swore, he drunkenly smashed up an officers' club when a bartender refused to serve him. It is little wonder that his son, the future senator, would arrive at Annapolis with a sense of both expectation and entitlement. Imagine a wayward Harry Potter carousing his way through Hogwarts, and you get a good picture of McCain's early years in the Navy. Drinking, womanizing, challenging rules and regulations, he inspired more than a few superiors to look for someone else with a lightning bolt on his forehead.

On October 26, 1967, McCain's plane was shot down by North Vietnamese forces in an air raid over Hanoi. The New York Times carried the story on the front page. The Viet Cong mockingly referred to their prized captive, the admiral's son, as "the crown prince." They transferred the badly wounded McCain to the "Hanoi Hilton," a notorious prison camp where they hoped to break him. For months he resisted and in despair attempted suicide. Eventually, however, under extreme duress, McCain signed a statement confessing to war crimes. The act left him feeling ashamed and faithless.

It was at that point, however, that McCain's sense of honor, the faith of his fathers, began to kick in. McCain explains that POW's have a code of conduct that forbids them to accept release until the men and women captured before them have been set free. The North Vietnamese hoped to embarrass McCain's father by granting his son an early release. Despite beatings and torture, McCain refused to give the North Vietnamese this public-relations victory. He would not choose self-preservation over his military loyalty.

For much of his life, McCain had listened to his family discuss honor and courage, but the concepts remained obscure to him, as if his father and grandfather had been speaking a different language. Imprisonment drove the meaning home. It taught McCain that glory belonged "to the act of being constant to something greater than yourself, to a cause, to your principles, to the people on whom you rely, and who rely on you in return." This was the faith of McCain's fathers, the recognition that one's self-regard was indivisible from the respect of his fellow servicemen.

Throughout his years in the Navy, McCain had been nagged by the question of whether his family name and background had helped his career. In Vietnam he refused to invoke his privilege when it would have helped him the most. In McCain's narration, the act of self-sacrifice did not distinguish him from others. It showed that he belonged.

There are multiple ways to structure a story like McCain's. Many POW narratives follow the basic pattern of the Odyssey, in which a detained warrior tries to find his way home. But Faith of My Fathers shows little interest in homecomings, and it concludes before the hero reaches American soil. The book most resembles the Iliad, with McCain storming into some endless battle shouting his ancestors' names.

Barack Obama begins his memoir with a phone call from Kenya informing him of his father's death. The news sets the tone for a story marked by absence. Dreams from My Father gives Obama the role of Odysseus' son, the boy who searches for his lost father as a way of learning about himself. Unlike The Odyssey, however, the reunion never occurs.

Obama's mother met Barack Hussein Obama when they were students at the University of Hawaii. For several years the couple lived happily, but when the Kenyan received a scholarship to study economics at Harvard, he left his wife and 2-year old son behind. After earning his Ph.D., he returned to Kenya, where, according to custom, he kept a number of wives.

The marriage's rupture introduced a series of father figures into Obama's life — among them his Kansas-born grandfather, an Indonesian geologist (his mother's second husband), an African-American poet named Frank, and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Obama's mother, Stanley Ann, provides a good deal of fathering as well.

Aside from letters, Obama's father had little contact with his grade-school son. When he traveled to Hawaii for a monthlong visit, the relationship seemed awkward and forced. Having fibbed to his buddies that his father was a prince, Obama was shocked by how fragile he actually was.

Despite misgivings, the young Obama attributed mythic powers to his father. His presence in the family's Honolulu apartment seemed to conjure the optimism of the early 1960s, the period before the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Kennedys.

That spirit would be a constant in the boy's life. A year after his father's death, Obama realized that even in his absence, his father had given him a "bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to, or disappoint."

Obama did not learn his father's history until his half-sister Auma, a linguist studying in Germany, visited him in Chicago. After graduating from Harvard, the Old Man, as his African children called him, had taken a lucrative job with an oil company. His education and commitment to his people had given him prominence in the young country. He married several times and raised several families. Buoyed by his success, the Old Man took a position in Jomo Kenyatta's government, but his criticism of the president quickly ruined his career. He was banished from public service and blacklisted among foreign companies. His relations with his children became strained, and he battled alcohol and poverty. After years of struggle, the Old Man died in a car accident just as his prospects had again begun to look up.

The climax of Obama's book is his first trip to Kenya, where he meets dozens of sisters, brothers, aunts, cousins, and family friends. He visits his grandmother, who, with Auma translating, relates the family history. (The scene provides an interesting contrast with McCain, who wrote a research paper at Annapolis about his grandfather.) The experience helps Obama appreciate his father's struggle to advance himself without leaving his people behind.

In Africa, Obama understands his birthright to be the feelings of estrangement that come from living in multiple racial and geopolitical worlds. This estrangement had been a source of confusion for much of Obama's life. His father's story inspires him to use his position to serve the larger community.

Obama subtitles his memoir A Story of Race and Inheritance, and the book provides a revelatory account of growing up black in the 1970s and 1980s. College students across the country will soon find the book on their reading lists, where it will occupy an honored position next to the writings of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Ann Jacobs, and Malcolm X.

But Obama's acceptance of his complex, hybrid identity makes his autobiography a story for the 21st century. A child of the diaspora, a child of the United States, he understands that the self is made from disparate parts rather than handed down to us complete. His multi-ethnic heritage reflects the ways in which cultural and racial categories break down and new formations emerge.

In Nairobi, Obama has a telling conversation with an African historian whose daughter speaks in a mixture of English, Swahili, German, and Luo. After years of trying to persuade the girl to speak one language properly, the historian has given up. "I'm less interested in a daughter who's authentically African," the mother tells Obama, "than one who is authentically herself."

Dreams From My Father addresses a world in which identities are assembled across a range of continents, cultures, and experiences. As he has done in the presidential campaign, Obama offers himself as a coherent representative of history's many streams, a man who embodies our differences and the valuable perspectives they can bring.

Having united a family across several marriages and adopted a child from Bangladesh, McCain knows something of this point of view. But the faith he has in his fathers can seem personally and intellectually inflexible, as if his character were the product of an immutable destiny.

Indeed, as he recently told The Washington Post, McCain sees himself as a romantic fatalist in the mold of Robert Jordan, the hero of Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls. Burdened by abstractions like honor and glory, McCain's vision of the United States, and the role of its military, can seem narrow and intransigent. (After months of campaigning, for example, it is still not clear how McCain's sense of honor actually translates into a concrete goal for Iraq. What is the relationship between "victory with honor" and the romance of self-sacrifice?) The senator's vision ultimately comes from generations of fighting McCains, an ancestry he proudly traces back to a clan of warring Scotsmen.

For all of Obama's stirring rhetoric, recent months have demonstrated that he is a political pragmatist at heart. Dreams From My Father roots that pragmatism in the experience of growing up on the margins of community, without the Old Man. Obama

spent much of his life dreaming of his father. The "from" in the title represents an act of will — as if in writing the book the author bequeathed a legacy to himself. Whatever you think of Obama the politician, he has honed his pragmatism since youth. He is the son who pieces together new alliances and possibilities.

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