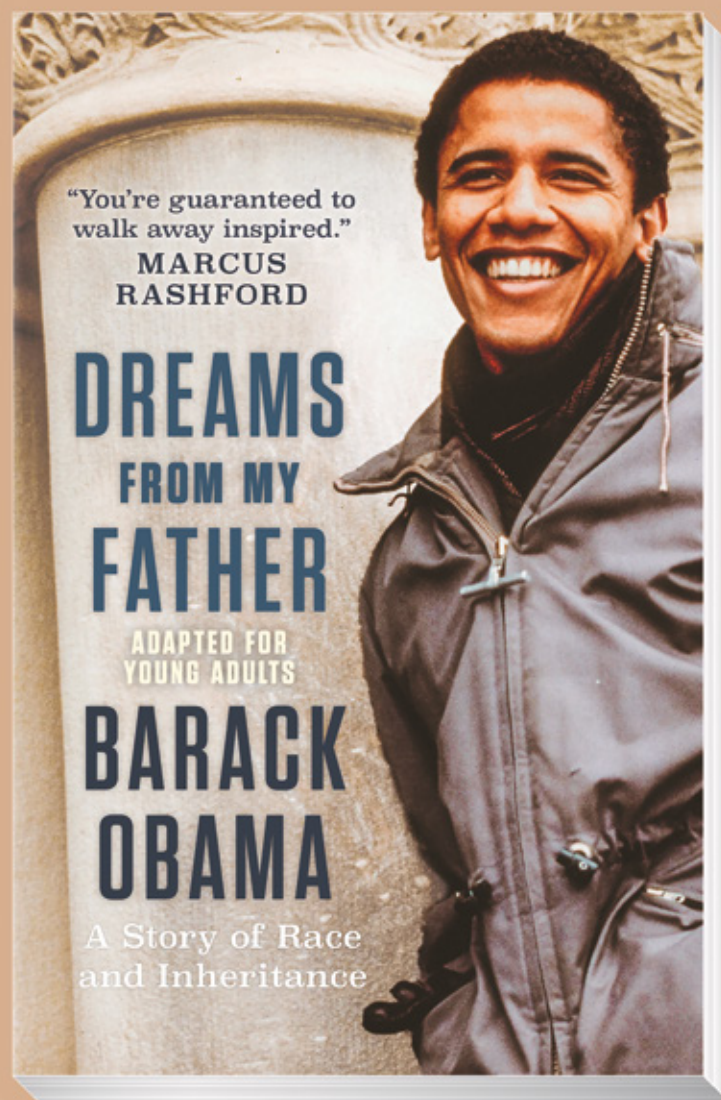


# DREAM BIG

WITH THE YOUNG ADULT EDITION OF THE  
NO. 1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

**“YOU’RE  
GUARANTEED TO  
WALK AWAY  
INSPIRED.”**  
Marcus Rashford



**“Obama is a  
BORN  
NARRATOR.”**  
*The Sunday Times*

**“EXTRAORDINARY...  
It’s unique. It’s his.”**  
Toni Morrison

# DREAMS FROM MY FATHER

## BARACK OBAMA

### DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR WALKER BOOKS

#### ABOUT THE BOOK

This version of Obama's memoir, newly reissued for Young Adults, is a vivid portrait of the young man that would one day become the first Black president of the United States. Through the people and circumstances of his upbringing, the reader finds the struggles and beliefs, the determination and the events that set the young Barack on the path to greatness. Written with warmth, candour and honesty, it is an illuminating look at one of modern western history's most significant figures, and equally a vital interrogation of changing race relations and civil rights in America, Kenya, and the wider world.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barack Obama was the 44th president of the United States, elected in November 2008 and holding office for two terms. He is the recipient of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize and the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dreams from My Father*, *The Audacity of Hope*, and *A Promised Land*. He lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife, Michelle. They have two daughters, Malia and Sasha.

#### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

There is much to discuss in *Dreams from My Father*, and conversations could go in many directions. Groups should be encouraged to explore their thoughts organically, to interrogate the book with the same vigour with which it was written. Group leaders should be mindful of sensitivities that may be raised through discussion, not just in relation to race but also single-parent and non-nuclear families, and displacement and broader civil rights.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

##### Getting started:

To begin, ask what members of the group thought of *Dreams from My Father*. What impressions were readers left with? What did they think of this younger Barack Obama, before high office? Did they see in the book a future President of the United States?

##### 1. Memoir

'The act of writing is exactly that powerful. It's a chance to be inquisitive with yourself, to observe the world, confront your limitations, walk in the shoes of others, and try on new ideas.' – p.11

Who is this book for? Does Obama write out of desire, pleasure, necessity? All of these? Consider this quotation from the introduction – what is Obama suggesting writing can do for you? To what extent does anyone think that this memoir is as much for the writer, Obama, as it is for an imagined audience? What does this say about the writing process?

##### 2. Advice and guidance

"'Now, there's something you can learn from your dad,'" he would tell me. "Confidence. The secret to a man's success.'" – p.20

Throughout the book, the young Obama receives wisdom, advice, guidance. Sometimes as aphorisms like this one quoted, other times as long and complex thoughts, ideas and reflections. Sometimes angrily, sometimes in good faith, sometimes perhaps in bad faith. What is the importance of this collected advice Obama receives, throughout *Dreams from My Father*? How important, or not, is each piece of advice recollected? Explore together some of the motivations behind the giver of advice – why do they offer this advice? For whose benefit is it given?

### 3. Respect

'...although you didn't have to be rich to be respectable, you sure had to work harder at it if you weren't.' – p.26

The theme of respect runs through this memoir – respect for elders, traditions, race, family, customs, history... How are different ideas of respect earned or commanded? You might like to consider Lolo's beliefs around strength, or Gramps and Toot's battles and hardships, or Barack Obama senior's presence and charisma that won over so many people, even when he was in penury himself. Are any of these ideas of respect all encompassing? What conclusions does Obama draw on this theme? Consider alongside the next question.

### 4. Self-respect & self-esteem

'Didn't self-esteem finally depend on our ability to translate words into action?' – p.179

Self-respect and self-esteem are strong presences through the novel. How does self-respect differ from self-esteem? Self-esteem is seen as intrinsically tied into ideas around race-relations and equality, with different viewpoints heard, seen, expressed, and experimented with. As a tool for Black empowerment, what does Obama imply are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

### 5. History

'All this was recent history. And yet, by the time my family arrived in 1959, all these injustices seemed to have vanished from people's memories.' - p.35

'I've always believed that the best way to meet the future involves making an earnest attempt at understanding the past.' – p.10

The history of many countries impacts the experiences of everyone within this memoir. More immediately, Obama explores the history of the generations before him, in the search for answers to his own questions. Look at the second quote, from the introduction. Is he successful in his attempt to answer his questions? Does history provide answers for him, about the future, or about himself? What place does history play in the book? Is it a positive, or a negative thing? Or has it simply been, existed, for better or for worse? How can history, personal or collective, impact on members of the group discussing this book?

### 6. Dreams and illusion

'The stories my mother and grandparents told me about my father were part of this dream of a just world in which all racial barriers would dissolve. That dream cast a spell.' – p.38

Why is the book called 'Dreams from My Father'? Discuss the disappointments and let downs that Obama repeatedly experiences in the book. Are all his dreams deflated? What about his father's dreams? Bearing in mind that this was written long before his presidency, what impact do group members think these experiences had on him? What does the young Obama teach his future self, when he comes to govern the whole of the United States, as its first Black president?

### 7. Experience

'Later, lying alone beneath a mosquito net canopy, I listened to the crickets chirp under the moonlight and remembered the chicken's last twitch of life. I could hardly believe my good fortune.' – p.45

Look together at the episode depicted on pp 44–45. Why is this something that Obama recalls in his memoir? What does this incident show him? Before describing his good fortune, does this seem like a positive experience to the reader? Discuss why certain details are explored in this depth, where other, significant details of his life (e.g. passing references to girlfriends, or his studies) are not explored or are only briefly mentioned.

## 8. Origins

“‘Had to be here to understand,’ he had said. He’d meant here in Chicago; but he could also have meant here in his shoes, an older Black man who still burns from a lifetime of insults, of foiled or abandoned ambitions.’ - p.156

The book is divided into three parts: ‘Origins’, ‘Chicago’ and ‘Kenya’; discuss the significance of each, in turn. Whose ‘origins’ does he refer to? Why is Kenya, his father’s homeland, not included within those origins? Why does Chicago warrant such a significant part of the book, when Obama has lived in so many different places?

## 9. Barack Obama Sr.

‘Oh, Father, I cried. There was no shame in your confusion. Just as there was no shame in your father’s before you. If only you both had not been silent. // It was the silence that betrayed us.’ – p.330

How does the reader come to understand the full picture of Obama’s father? Why does Obama present him in this way, in bits and pieces, each revelation in its proper time? Discuss the author’s ambition in allowing the reader to follow his dreams of his father, never seeing the full picture until near the end of his own journey – what impact does this have? How would the reading experience be different, if, for example, it began with another side of his father – the ‘bitter drunk’ or ‘abusive husband’ of page 192?

## 10. The Audacity of Hope

‘Beside him, his mother glanced at me with a faint smile before turning back toward the altar. It was only when I thanked the boy that I felt the tears running down my cheeks.’ – p.238

Is this a hopeful book? Why does anyone think the sermon depicted from page 235 was so important to the author? What did this sermon offer that the other lessons he had learnt did not? Why might the idea that hope could have an audacious quality have appealed to Obama at the time? *The Audacity of Hope* is the title of Obama’s second book, released shortly before he announced his run for president – to what extent is this ‘audacity’ learned from his earlier life? To Obama, to others, to members of the group, what, actually, is the ‘audacity’ of hope?