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Barack Obama: The Story (Book Review)

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Van Dyke continues his challenge using unambiguous language. He plainly identifies that the earth is the Lord's (192), that the creation is of moral significance (203), that the biblical concept of rulership is one of sacrificial service (197), and that this redemptive activity is not only about the effect on the environment but also about loving God and our neighbor and our own transformation (208).

This is an urgently needed clarion call to obediently bear God's image, to love what he loved, to care for what he cares for—no apologies offered or needed.

This book should not stay in the hands of those who find themselves agreeing with Van Dyke. Read it and pass it on. Better yet, read it and buy a copy to give to your sister who just doesn't understand you.

Maraniss, David. *Barack Obama: The Story*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012. 672 pp. ISBN 10:1439160406 or 13:978-143916404. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, professor emeritus, Dordt College.

Long, long ago, biographical criticism—interpreting a story or poem on the basis of what we know about a writer's life—lost favor when New Criticism began to assert that a poem is a poem is a poem, and not simply the by-product of an artist's life story.

Think of the Psalms, for instance: some, like Psalm 51, begin with a preface that indicates when and where David penned it. That's nice and it's helpful. Some, like Psalm 23, don't. Is 23 somehow inferior? Of course not. Furthermore, you can read 51 knowing nothing of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his arranging the death of her husband and still shiver with the intensity of the grasping need for forgiveness.

But for decades, the kind of criticism that would use Edgar Allen Poe's abysmal life, for instance, to explain what he means in his poems or stories was thought somehow a violation of the holiness given to art, to a poem, itself.

Along came what is called "the New Historicism," which essentially puts the creation of a poem or play or novel or script into its own time period once more, but then attempts to explain something about its author and its emergence into the cultural conversation by way of historical events that may not even be referred to in the poem or story, or by the poet himself or herself. While I'm not familiar with her whole canon, it's quite possible that someone like the Canadian short story writer Alice Munro may never have written a story about any character in or out of the War in Vietnam. Yet, it would be foolhardy to argue that, even though she is a Canadian who sets her work consistently in Canada, Alice Munro was not in some very powerful ways shaped by the Vietnam War and the effects of the entire era.

David Maraniss's new biography (the first volume), *Barack Obama: The Story*, takes a kind of New Historical approach to the President's life, churning

up details lots of folks might think absurdly removed from what is relevant. Early on, he draws out the story of Obama's great-grandmother's suicide (in 1926) with the kind of detail that may seem unnecessary, given the fact that her suicide happened five decades before the President was even born—not to mention that vastly more consequential events seem obvious in the President's life (his father's almost total absence, as well as his mother's frequent absences, for instance). But what Maraniss likes to pull from the story is the almost happenstance machinations of history itself, where little things create big things.

If you're simply interested in the present, of course, or in the good stuff (a white girlfriend whose diaries Maraniss quotes, a bunch of young kids smoking pot), the incredible detail Maraniss marshalls out may well seem not only arcane but boring. But Maraniss is a storyteller who not only loves great stories but also has an eye for finding them and a heart greatly capable of writing them. It's a brick of a book—672 pages—but Maraniss is the kind of biographer who knows exactly how to string a story, a thousand stories, into one powerful saga.

Maraniss operates with the theory that any single life—yours or mine—is almost always a conglomeration of nature, nurture, and sheer randomness. Here's an example from my own life: when my grandfather was told about his son-in-law's desire to work in Michigan, he cried, having lost another daughter in a car accident on a foggy night less than a decade before. My father saw the tears and decided not to leave. If he had, I would have been brought up in Michigan, in Grand Rapids. Thus, the lakeshore fog that was the cause of a fatal accident changed the course of my life long before I had any choice at all in the matter. "I believe that life is chaotic, a jumble of accidents, ambitions, misconceptions, bold intentions, lazy happenstances,

and unintended consequences,” Maraniss writes, maybe a third of the way into the book, “yet I also believe that there are connections that illuminate our world, revealing its endless mystery and wonder.”

We could do much worse than to listen to someone who is radically taken by awe.

On the other hand, there’s no doubt that Maraniss is interested in taking on some of the radically conservative myth-makers who’ve made outrageous claims about Obama’s birth, his childhood and background. For instance, he makes very clear that while Obama’s Kenyan grandfather was a Muslim, Hussein Onyango’s development as a free-thinker, as a human being for that matter, was far more profoundly influenced by Christian and white missionaries in his Kenyan neighborhood than by his own adopted Islamic faith. In a way, Hussein Onyango was more Seventh-Day Adventist in his thinking than he was Moslem or Mau Mau.

What Maraniss does quite convincingly is explode the attitude or perception that Barack Obama is not “one of us,” an idea that is at once as bizarre as it is misguided. Plainly, the man’s story is rooted in American history far more than it is in anywhere near Kenya—he barely knew his father, after all. Maraniss’s biography prompts even an Obama supporter to wonder why on earth the President, years ago, wrote a book about his father (*Dreams From My Father*), since it’s very clear that, for most all of his life, Barack Obama, Sr., was simply never there. What’s more, the reality that his father was a half a planet away, given the man’s innumerable personal problems (alcohol, womanizing, temper problems), undoubtedly was, for his own son, a sheer blessing.

Obama is, without a doubt, as much a “rags-to-riches” hero as Ben Franklin sold himself to be in

his *Autobiography*. His being conceived was almost an accident—his mother (a 17-year-old white girl) and father (a 25-year-old African) were husband and wife for barely more than a month and lovers for little more than that. The senior Obama was already married and the father of two in Kenya, a family he’d left behind when he came to America to study. For all intents and purposes, through much of his life, this President grew up with his grandparents. Not only that, if Maraniss is right, Obama’s Kansas-born grandfather was himself, as people here might say, “a piece of work.” His was never an easy life.

Some of the claims Obama himself makes in *Dreams From My Father* about his mother’s devotion to him when she was half a world away sound like wishful thinking. Maraniss shows clearly that Barack Obama pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, the paradigm we love to attribute to the quintessential American hero, the dream of thousands, even millions, who would still like to live here in America. The man made it himself.

His story—documented in incredible detail by David Maraniss in this new and comprehensive biography—is the real American story, the story of a hard luck kid who nonetheless succeeded in a country and a culture where personal initiative and plain old grit promise precisely the startling things he’s been able to achieve.

All of that isn’t a reason to vote for him, of course; but it is, or so it seems to me, a reason to respect him. After all, in purely American terms, the man made it, and he did so on his own.

David Maraniss’s new and almost endless biography is fascinating reading and helpful, or so it seems to me, in understanding what we can of just exactly who it was this country voted for in the 2008 presidential election.

Cooper, Tim. *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011. 343 pages. ISBN: 9780754663614. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History, Emeritus, Dordt College.

We are told that on the day Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) died, a great thunderstorm rolled across much of England. It was hard in those days, as well as now, not to see the event as portentous. Within four years immense changes befell England and the rest of the British Isles. The English Republic—“the Commonwealth of England”—was swept away, and the Stuart monarchy restored. The leaders of those within the English Church who had labored persistently for the further reformation

of its government and worship, now often dubbed “puritans,” were manipulated out of their pulpits and livelihoods by the ensuing “Great Ejection” of August 24, 1662. In the 1640s these Puritans had triumphed over their opponents in church and state, the high Anglican and Arminian party led by Archbishop Laud (1573-1645), but after 1660 the situation was reversed, and the Puritans themselves had to suffer the bitter perils of marginalization, exclusion, and persecution.