

Obama: From Promise to Power, by David Mendell. New York: Amistad, 2007. x, 406 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$25.95 cloth.

Reviewers Glen Jeansonne and David Luhrssen are colleagues in Milwaukee. Jeansonne is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Among his books are *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (1988), and *Messiah of the Masses: Huey P. Long and the Great Depression* (1993). Luhrssen, a journalist and historian, collaborated with Jeansonne on *A Time of Paradox: America since 1890* (2006).

As a political reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, David Mendell was strategically positioned to chronicle the rise of Barack Obama. Mendell was present as Obama ascended from the relative obscurity of the Illinois state senate to a status approaching stardom. He tracked Obama during his campaign for the U.S. Senate through his announcement that he would seek the Democratic presidential nomination. Mendell was present at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, where Obama, invited on short notice to deliver the keynote address, introduced himself to a national audience. The author admires Obama but is not uncritical, perceiving him as a work in progress.

Mendell enjoyed unusual access to Obama and his relatives; the quotes he gathered and the events he witnessed make *From Promise to Power* a useful primary source, a contemporary record of Obama's personal and political life. *From Promise to Power* is obviously the work of a reporter for the daily press, pounded out on deadline with a hurried journalist's easy prose. His account confirms the axiom that journalism is history's rough first draft. The book is sparsely footnoted, without an index.

As Mendell reiterates, many Americans perceive Obama as a likable symbol of the country's promise, a politician who might be able to transcend politics. The son of an idealistic white American mother and an ambitious Kenyan politician, raised in the relative affluence of multicultural Hawaii, Obama slips between the racial lines that continue to set the boundaries of the American imagination. Mendell observes that Obama's mixed ancestry places him in a category different from Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, or others who claim to speak for black America.

The political reporter's study fleshes out the details of Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995). The theme of *Dreams from My Father* concerned Obama's search for the father who abandoned him at age two and returned to Africa. By interviewing family members and visiting places where Obama spent his childhood, Mendell adds details about his subject's formative years, including the role of Obama's mother and grandmother in shaping his

character. Mendell also explores the ramifications of Obama's political message outlined in his second book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006).

Traveling with the press pool during Obama's 2004 campaign for the U.S. Senate, Mendell had numerous opportunities to measure Obama's personality. Mendell observed the candidate's habit of sneaking cigarettes out of camera range and points out that he was initially unprepared for the crush of adulation that accompanied his sudden rise. The time span between the intimacy of local politics and national prominence was unusually short for Obama; Mendell speculates about whether he is ready for the rigors of a lengthy presidential campaign, especially when confronted by an opponent as seasoned as Hillary Clinton.

Mendell's portrait reinforces the impression of Obama as an inspiring speaker, thoughtful and philosophical, a conciliator whose instinct is to focus on commonalities rather than divisions. His initial attraction was based on the novelty of being the first black candidate with a reasonable chance to be nominated by a major party, and who does not indulge in hyperbole. In Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses, he revealed his ability to attract votes in a predominantly rural state with few minorities. Iowa voters will thus undoubtedly follow his ultimate fate in the 2008 elections and beyond with keen interest, and may thus be interested in this account of his rise to national prominence.

Dreaming the Mississippi, by Katherine Fischer. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. vii, 208 pp. Illustrations, glossary, bibliography, questions for discussion. \$18.95 paper.

Reviewer Patrick Nunnally is Mississippi River Program Coordinator, University of Minnesota. A landscape historian who specializes in developing interpretive and educational material pertaining to rivers, scenic byways, and trails, he is also the author of "The Picturesque Mississippi," in *Grand Excursions on the Upper Mississippi River: Places, Landscapes, and Regional Identity after 1854* (2004).

Structure is a challenge for authors writing about the Mississippi River. Many stick to conventions of travel literature, carrying their narrative thread up or down the river, as their journey leads them. Others develop their ideas chronologically, recounting how their theme has emerged through time. Katherine Fischer uses her life's experience with the Mississippi River in the vicinity of Dubuque as the lens through which she examines many of the most common themes and memorable moments of everyday experience: buying a new house, making friends, learning the landscape of a new community. All in all,