



This is a repository copy of *Barack Obama, A Promised Land* (Penguin, 2020), Pp.768. ISBN: 978–0241491515.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/174431/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Flinders, M. orcid.org/0000-0003-3585-9010 (2021) *Barack Obama, A Promised Land* (Penguin, 2020), Pp.768. ISBN: 978–0241491515. *Society*, 58 (2). pp. 138-145. ISSN 0147-2011

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-021-00571-1>

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *Society*. The final authenticated version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-021-00571-1>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

**Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (Penguin, 2020), pp.768.
ISBN: 978-0241491515**

Superman Inside the Barrel: The Deep Story of Obama's *Promised Land*

It's very rare that a book tells a single story; still rarer for a political memoir. The paradox of Obama's *A Promised Land* is that it is arguably and fairly obviously two books interwoven as one. There is the shallow/cosmetic/manifest story which is essentially an often eye-wateringly detailed chronological account of Obama's presidential campaign through to May 2011. And then there is what ethnographers might label 'the deep story' which is essentially the tapestry of narratives that Obama himself uses to explain how he felt and how he sought to interpret, understand and deal with the dilemmas he faced as president (i.e. the inevitable grating and grinding, pressures and demands). Superficial stories provide information, facts, figures, schedules and detail; deep stories provide a sense of mood and feeling and emotional insight. The former works in straight lines, the latter through tone and texture; the former in black and white, the latter in shades of grey.

Reviewers of Obama's memoir (or at least this first volume) have generally failed to register this 'double-dimension'. This is reflected in their moans and groans about both its length and professorial style.¹ The book is too long and the style often too straight and, as such, *feels* to the reader as if it lacks the charm and openness of the 'Obama-effect'. This is because the 'deep story' through which it is possible to see into the soul of the American presidency is hidden pretty deep and demands some excavation. But it is there and, as such, what the professional reviewers with their prickly pens have arguably done is to fall headfirst into a very specific literary trap whereby they have read the text but failed to *see beneath* the letters and words, the dots and dashes and into the (subterranean) story which is actually being told. And yet Obama's apparent hesitancy in telling this underlying story more openly is itself intriguing and revealing. Indeed, this is not what the reader is led to expect.

First and foremost, I hoped to give an honest rendering of my time in office – not just a historical record of key events and what happened on my watch and important figures with whom I interacted but also an account of some of the political, economic and cultural cross-currents that helped determine the challenges my administration faced and the choices my team and I made in response. Where possible, I wanted to offer readers a sense of what it's like to *be* the president of the United States; I wanted to pull the curtain back a bit and remind people that, for all its power and pomp the presidency is just a job and our federal government is a human enterprise like any other, and the men and women who work in the White House experience the same daily mix of satisfaction, disappointment, office friction, screw-ups and small triumphs as the rest of their fellow citizens (pp. xiii-xiv) [italics in the original].

The curtains are, as it were, pulled-back just ‘a bit’ but never flung open wide enough to provide quite the ‘sense of what it is like to *be* the president’ that is promised. The windows remain obscured, as it were, by the dense historical netting that has been so carefully created. As such the main ambition of this review essay is to expose and reflect upon those glimpses into the everyday, lived experience of the president that these memoirs disclose without explicitly declaring. It sets out to achieve this through the telling of three tales which can be woven together, each in their own very special ways, to expose the deeper and more interesting story of how it feels to be ‘in the barrel’ that is the American presidency.

I. Not Waving, But Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he’s dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

Stevie Smith, 1957

Teasing tales out of books in order to reveal their emotional foundations and dissect the fragile connective tissue which binds each page and chapter can be a tricky task. Especially if the author decides to plant their roots deep in a vast tangled text of detail. What the keen reader needs to find is the end (or the beginning) of a thread that can be pulled gently out in order to uncover the essence of an inner argument. It is this thread of subconscious writing which can then be deployed to trace and connect together exactly that underlying set of dilemmas that may otherwise have remained well hidden. Picking up the thread in this book is, however, fairly easy. It is signalled in the preface and continues like a constant cry throughout the book. It seeks to remind the reader that politics is a messy business, a worldly art and a brutal game; and that for all the super-human expectations that surrounded Obama, he was, alas, only ever human.ⁱⁱ The trap that he could never quite escape from was the gap between the politician the public wanted him to be and the person he knew he was and could only ever be.

In large part, this sense of feeling trapped stems from a basic component of democratic politics. The need to foster hope, belief and confidence in large sections of the public – ‘Yes, we can!’ – that things can be different and better while knowing full well that the White House is full of rubber-levers and that levering change is a Herculean endeavour given the gridlocked and labyrinthine governmental machine. The trap is therefore to some extent one of the politician’s own making. Lift the public’s expectations *too* high and failure is almost inevitable; pitch them too low and you’re boring, unambitious, not worth electing in the first place.

When it came to public expectations Obama went high, he went early and it arguably all began in a small town called Metropolis in Southern Illinois (pop. 6,407). It was there back in 2007 that a largely unknown State Senator with big ambitions and a love of superhero comics called Barack Obama could not resist the temptation to pose for the cameras in front of the 15ft bronze statue of Superman. Arms flexed, legs splayed, chest pumped, ears sticking-out ... the photos of Obama silhouetted against a super-human figure would emerge to become a key element of the cultural iconography surrounding his 2008 campaign. The painter and illustrator, Alex Ross, depicted Obama as Superman tearing open his suit to reveal a short with an ‘O’-symbol and ‘Obama-man’ was born. The media gorged upon the dynamic imagery, and Obama utilised this framing to full effect. "Contrary to the rumors you have heard, I was not born in a manger" he told the Al Smith Dinner in 2008 "I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father, Jor-El, to save the planet Earth."ⁱⁱⁱ

Shepard Fairey’s graphic art poster, titled HOPE, with a stylised white, red and blue version of my face staring off into the distance, seemed suddenly ubiquitous. It felt as if the campaign had moved beyond politics and into the realm of popular culture. “You’re the new ‘in’ thing” Valerie [Jarrett] would tease. This worried me....[T]he continuing elevation of me as a symbol ran contrary to my organiser’s instincts, that sense that change involves ‘we’ and not ‘me’. It was personally disorientating, too, requiring me to constantly take stock to make sure I wasn’t buying into the hype and remind myself of the distance between the airbrushed image and the flawed, often uncertain person I was. I was also contending with the likelihood that if I was elected president, it would be impossible to meet the outsized expectations now attached to me (p.196).

It also worried Obama’s team. The seasoned and straight-talking political operator David Axelrod complained about the emergence of “Obama the Icon” (p.108). This phrase captured a shift in the emotional temperature of campaign events that Obama had himself become aware of. At the beginning of the campaign as he walked off the stage in various school halls or churches people would call his name, take photos and try and shake his hand. But as the campaign developed and the election grew closer the physical emotions heightened to a level he had never expected and as he walked off stage people would now scream, cry, touch his face and “pass howling babies across rows of strangers for me to hold” (p.136). “At some basic level people were no longer seeing *me*, I realized, with all my quirks and shortcomings. Instead, they had taken possession of my likeness and made it a vessel for a million dreams. I knew a time would come when I would have to disappoint them, falling short of the image that my campaign and I had helped to construct” (p.136).

But beyond the promises is a deeper story about what it's like to *be* not only a president but also a presidential candidate. The surface, helter-skelter tale of the presidential race is town hall meetings, relentless greeting and non-stop media intrusion in a high-blame, low-trust context. It's no fun. Robert Gibbs, Obama's communications chief, described going on the campaign trail as "a non-stop colonoscopy" (p.76). "I'll be honest, Barack", David Axelrod whispered, "The process can be exhilarating, but it's mostly misery. It's like a stress test, an EKG on the soul. And for all your talent, I don't know how well you'll respond. Neither do you. The whole thing is so crazy, so undignified and brutal, that you have to be a little pathological to do what it takes to win" (p.76). The undignified brutality of the campaign was brought home to Obama when he ended a trip to Israel in July 2008 with a surprise visit to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He spent a few minutes in subdued contemplation before following tradition and squeezing a small prayer card into a crack in the wall. "I had assumed those words were between me and God. But the next day they showed up in an Israeli newspaper before achieving eternal life on the internet. Apparently, a bystander dug my scrap of paper out of the wall after we left – a reminder of the price that came with stepping onto the world stage. The line between my private and public lives was dissolving: each thought and gesture was now a matter of global interest. Get used to it, I told myself. It's part of the deal" (p.160).

With the benefit of hindsight, it's tempting to argue that in terms of presidential timing, fate handed Obama a pretty tough deal, as wave-upon-wave of crises crashed down upon him. The American economy was still reeling from the Great Recession despite the injection of nearly a trillion dollars of public investment courtesy of the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*, vitriol surrounded the *Affordable Care Act*, security concerns were escalating, a way out of Afghanistan and Iraq seemed some way off, GITMO was no closer to resolution, the public hated the Troubled Asset Relief Program because no bankers had been jailed, the Greek economy imploded and threatened to set-off a domino-effect across Europe, China continued to be recalcitrant over trade policy, and the Deepwater Horizon disaster created the biggest marine oil slick in history, extending over 57,500 square miles in the Gulf of Mexico. And from the summer of 2009 the Tea Party movement had emerged to galvanise an increasingly aggressive, divisive and simplistic mode of politics in which Obama was the main target. Shepard Fairey's campaign poster of Obama suddenly became ubiquitous again, only now the word HOPE had been replaced by NOPE.

The deep story revealed in this book is that of Max Weber's "slow boring of hard woods."^{iv} It's the tale of a candidate who campaigned in poetry but was forced to govern in prose as the audacity of hope became compromised and often crushed on the hard and sharp rocks of reality'. George Packer is correct to see *A Promised Land* as "an exercise in ironic realism."^v

Obama's early naivety and idealism is revealed in the tiniest of tales. The new president had initially told his team that in the spirit of openness and transparency he wanted every meeting about his healthcare plans to be held in open and in the full gaze of the public, possibly even broadcast live on C-Span. "When I later brought this idea up with Rahm [Emanuel] he looked like he wished I weren't the president, just so he could more vividly explain the stupidity

of my plan. If we were going to get a bill passed, he told me, the process would involve dozens of deals and compromises along the way – and it wasn't going to be conducted like a civics seminar. 'Making sausage isn't pretty, Mr President' he said 'And you're asking for a really big piece of sausage'" (p.381). It's the sausage machine on Capitol Hill that is revealed when the curtains are pulled back. It is tortuous and tangled machine politics at its most basic with ambition gradually suffocated and eviscerated at every turn by the constant process of complex bargaining, back-slapping and brinkmanship needed to see proposals get turned into law. "At times, I felt like the fisherman in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*' Obama notes 'sharks gnawing at my catch as I tried to tow it to shore'" (p.555).

The abiding impression left with the reader is that for most of his first two years as president, and even during large parts of the campaign, the outwardly confident Obama – Hawaiian cool complete with superman cape – was, in fact "not waving, but drowning". Indeed, the waves of expectations would often crash upon him at the most unexpected moments and from the most unexpected directions.

In the early hours of October 9, 2009 the phone by Obama's bed rings and the White House switchboard informs the blurry-eyed president that Gibbs wants to talk to him urgently. "Calls that early from my staff were rare, and my heart froze. Was it a terrorist attack? A Natural disaster?" (p. 439). Gibbs explains that Obama has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. "What do you mean? *For what?*" (p.439) the president asks. Michelle, probably fearing the worst, rolls over to face her husband and asks what Gibbs wanted. "I'm getting the Nobel Peace Prize" Obama replied. "That's wonderful honey (p.439)" she said, then rolled over to get a little more sleep as if he'd won two free tickets to a local soccer match. But for Obama the gnawing thread of unrealistic hopes is pulling ever tighter, it's almost suffocating, he's not waving but drowning. "I didn't feel that I deserved to be in the company of those transformative figures who'd been honored in the past" he writes (p.440) "Walking back into the Oval [Office], I asked Katie to hold the congratulatory calls that were starting to come in and took a few minutes to consider the widening gap between the expectations and the realities of my presidency (p.440)." Only six days before his prize was announced, three hundred Afghan militants had overrun a small US military outpost in the Hindu Kush, killing eight soldiers and wounding many more. October 2009 would become the deadliest month for US troops in Afghanistan since the start of the war eight years earlier. "And rather than ushering a new era of peace, I was facing the prospect of committing more soldiers to war" (p.440).

At the Nobel awards ceremony in Stockholm a month later, the small gold medal that had been placed in his hand (66mm in diameter, 175g in weight) appears to have weighed heavily on Obama's mind. He had been in office for just eight months and here he was accepting a Nobel Peace Prize he felt obliged but unworthy to accept. That night as he pulled the curtains back in his hotel room, he was met with the vista of several thousand people holding candles below his window – "It was a magical sight, as if a pool of stars had descended from the sky" (p.446) – but as he leant out from the window to wave to the crowds, he could only think that "The idea that I, or any one person, could bring order to such chaos seemed laughable; on some level, the crowds below were cheering an illusion" (p.446).

Maintaining this “illusion” while attempting to work through a political system that seems virtually designed to maintain inertia is a key part of the deep story contained in these memoirs. The historian and journalist, Tim Stanley is correct to note that “running through the book is a sense of weariness with the system” and it appears that to *be* “the man in the arena” is an unforgiving place to be.^{vi} And yet Obama chose to step into the arena. What’s too often overlooked is the manner in which those around a president or prime minister are themselves swept along and plunged into a world they never wanted or expected.

II. The Woman in the Arena

It is not the critic who counts, not the one who points out how the strong man stumbled or how the doer of deeds might have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred with sweat and dust and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, if he wins, knows the triumph of high achievement; and who, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt, 1910^{vii}

Forget Obama. Too easy, too obvious. Look beneath and beyond the endless policy briefings, town hall meetings, diplomatic missions and glad-handing and what you find is the underpinning foundations of the Obama presidency. Stripped right back to basics, what did Obama offer vast sections of the American public he calls “the forgotten people” (p. 63)? He offered them a sense of emotional anchorage in an increasingly fluid and frightening socio-political context. Obama picked up on this emotional “offer” very early in the campaign when he realised that “[T]he most effective answers, it seemed, were designed not to illuminate but to evoke an emotion... Whether I liked it or not, people were moved by emotions, not facts” (p. 89). This insight connects with studies that have explored why and how “feelings trump facts” in relation to both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, but the point being made is that Obama did not cope with the burdens of office alone.^{viii} It was his family – his wife and daughters – who provided *his* emotional anchorage and kept him grounded. With this in mind one of the most interesting tales in the book concerns family life, in general, and Michelle Obama, in particular. Not only had she been forced reluctantly to “step into the arena” with her husband, and to carry the expectations that came with being First Lady, but it was she who constantly strove to carve-out some sense of a normal life for her husband and kids. It is Michelle who in many ways accepts the burdens of an office she never asked for.

The second tale is therefore concerned with Barack Obama’s blend of selflessness *and* selfishness. He and Michelle had first met when Obama joined a legal firm and Michelle was his mentor. But very quickly it was her career that took second place to his. His election to the Illinois Senate, for example, placed huge pressure on a young family as Obama often lived away

during the week and when home he was committed to trying to maintain three jobs. If Obama was the iceberg, then it was Michelle struggling underneath the surface trying to keep the whole family afloat. It was Michelle who often felt too stretched, too tired... “not waving, but drowning” and somehow stuck in a deal she had never agreed to. “This is not what I signed-up for, Barack” Michelle complained “I feel like I am doing it all by myself” (p. 36). Which she was, and which Obama was acutely aware of:

Michelle bore the brunt of all of this, shuttling between mothering and work, unconvinced that she was doing either job very well. At the end of each night, after feeding and bath time and story time and cleaning up the apartment and trying to keep track of whether she had picked up the dry cleaning and making a note to herself to schedule an appointment with the paediatrician, she would often fall into an empty bed, knowing the whole cycle would start all over again in a few short hours while her husband was off doing ‘important things’ (p.35).

Maybe this is why the curtains are never pulled right back? Maybe the story is slightly too painful and embarrassing to tell. The undeniable fact is that Obama always led and his family were expected to follow. The slight irony of *A Promised Land* is therefore that its most insightful glimpse into the real world experience of being the president is not actually about Obama. It’s about his wife and kids and the sacrifices they made as they were swept along in his slipstream and into the vortex. At times the pressure on their marriage appears to have been intense, even intolerable, and it all comes to a head in late 2006 as talk of Barack as a future presidential candidate grew. “Our evenings and weekends appeared normal so long as Malia and Sasha were swirling about, but I felt the tension whenever Michelle and I were alone” (p. 70). In the end he felt he had no choice but to broach the issue. “You know I didn’t plan any of this...until a few months ago, the idea of me running seemed crazy. But given everything that’s happened, I feel like we have to give the idea a serious look” (p.70). Michelle is less than impressed.

Did you say *we*? You mean *you*, Barack. Not *we*. This is *your* thing. I’ve supported you the whole time, because I believe in you, even though I *bate* politics. I hate the way it exposes our family. You know *that*. And now, finally, we have some stability ...even if it’s still not normal, not the way I’d choose for us to live ...and now you tell me you’re going to run for *president*? God, Barack... when is it going to be enough?

How could I blame her for feeling this way? By even suggesting the possibility of a run, by involving my staff before I’d asked for her blessing, I had put her in an impossible spot. For years now, I’d asked Michelle for fortitude and forbearance when it came to my political endeavours, and she’d given it – reluctantly but with love. And then each time I’d come back again, asking for more [*italics in the original*] (p.70).

And the more Obama asked the more, it appears, Michelle was willing to concede, even if it meant her being pulled into the vicious and personalised world of presidential politics. “Michelle continued to light up the campaign trail. With the girls in school, we limited her appearances to tight races and her travel mostly to weekends, but wherever she went, she was funny and engaging, insightful and blunt.... And yet according to some commentators, Michelle was... different, not First Lady material. She seemed ‘angry, they said (p.133).’ The anger, it

appears stemmed from the gap and the trap surrounding the issue of expectations, but now tinged with racial undertones. One Fox News segment described her as ‘Obama’s Baby Mama.’ Although this sort of commentary remained fairly rare and Obama’s team considered it all part of the game but that was not how Michelle experienced it.

She understood that alongside the straight-jacket that political wives were supposed to stay in... there was an extra set of stereotypes applied to Black women, familiar tropes that Black girls steadily absorbed like toxins from the day that they first saw a blond Barbie doll or poured Aunt Jemima syrup on their pancakes. That they did not meet the prescribed standards of femininity, that their butts were too big and their hair too nappy, that they were too loud or hot-tempered or cutting towards men – that they were not just ‘emasculating’ but masculine (p.133).

The fact that Obama knew Michelle had not chosen to enter politics created a fault line in their relationship that these memoirs struggle to paper over. Sending a wife into the arena who had never wanted to be there was “like sending a civilian into live fire without a flak jacket” (p.134) as Obama commented after Michelle had experienced one particularly unpleasant media mauling. And yet if Michelle was the anchor then his kids, Malia and Sasha, were the president’s buoyancy aids – always lifting him up when he was down and pulling him back down to earth when things were good. In terms of understanding the everyday lived experience of the Obama presidency, it’s hard to over-state just what a central role they played and how their own lives were affected by his choices. This is where the partially drawn curtains do reveal a very clear sense of the love and the humour and the basic human relationships that carried Obama along. The trip to the zoo on a hot Sunday afternoon when Barack insists that his baseball cap and shades will somehow render him invisible to the public of Chicago. Whether termed as a “father failure” or “dad disaster”, the plan ends with Obama mobbed and the trip abandoned. As they all drove home in a somewhat subdued state, seven-year old Malia declared from the backseat that her daddy now needed “an alias” before going on to suggest “Johnny McJohn John (p.60)”. He would also have to change his voice, she suggested; to which four-year old Sasha added in a mocking style “Daddy talks *so* slow” (p.60). “That’s a great idea, honey”, Michelle responded as laughter erupted in the car “but the only way for Daddy to disguise himself is if he had an operation to pin back his ears” (p.60).

At dinner one night, Malia asks her father what he was going to do about the tigers. “What do you mean, sweetie? Obama asks. Well you know they’re my favorite animal, right?” she replied and went on to explain a school project about the animal’s plight. Sasha chimed in “You should do something, Daddy”. I looked at Michelle who shrugged and said “You *are* the president” (p.486). In the middle of the Deepwater Horizon as the environmental and economic damage seems almost unfathomable, a young Sasha walks into the bathroom while her father is shaving and casually asks, “Did you plug the hole yet, Daddy?” (p.569). The news that their father has won the Nobel Peace Prize is immediately relegated by his girls beneath the domestic fact that it is also their dog’s birthday and “a three-day weekend (p.439)”. It’s these glimpses into how it felt to *be* the president that reveal the most in these memoirs and that bring us to a final tale about the man himself.

III. Fire and Ashes

As you submit to the compromises demanded by public life, your public self begins to alter the person inside. Within a year of entering politics, I had the disorientated feeling of having been taken over by a doppelganger, a strange new persona I could barely recognise when I looked at myself in the mirror....I had never been so well-dressed in my life and had never felt so hollow. Looking back now, I would say that some sense of hollowness, some sense of a divide between the face you present to the world and the face you reserve for the mirror, is a sign of sound mental health. It's when you no longer notice that the public self has taken over the private self that trouble starts.

Michael Ignatieff, *Fire and Ashes*, (2013), p.81

A Promised Land is, we are told, a memoir of two parts of which this is just the first volume. The central argument of this review is that the first volume is itself a tale of two parts. The first and most extensive element is a maddeningly dense and detailed account of his day-to-day presidential tasks and duties. Everyone, but everyone, receives both a name check and a thanks. And yet beneath the vastness of these memoirs there lurks a deeper story about the essence of contemporary presidential politics. That is, there are few incentives for telling the truth, no rewards for candour. Self-dramatization is the essence of politics, you have to (re)invent yourself for public consumption and this is something that Obama achieved by becoming the first meme president. 'Obama-man' was born in opposition but was brought back down to earth in office. Funnily enough, the memoirs that kept entering my head when I read Obama's book were those not of a former American president but of a Canadian politician, Michael Ignatieff. It is his book, *Fire and Ashes* (F&A), with their reflections on success and failure in politics that resonated with those of Obama.^{ix}

"What drew me most was the chance to stop being a spectator" Ignatieff notes, "I'd been in the stands all my life, watching the game. Now I thought it was time to step into the arena" (F&A, p. 8). His was an experience of politics 'as raw combat' (p. 38) with many of the feelings and experiences that Obama acknowledges, no matter how obliquely in these memoirs. "[N]othing prepares you for the use of language once you enter the political arena. It is unlike any word game you have ever played.... You enter the eternal present where every syllable you've ever uttered, every tweet, Facebook post, newspaper article or cringe inducing photograph remains in cyber-space forever for your enemies to use against you" (F&A, p. 77). After a while, the compromises and chaos, the back-stabbing and bear-baiting that public life demands wore Ignatieff down to the point that he felt hollow and little more than a pawn in a game of mass (dis)illusion. One of the most poignant expressions of a similar sense of hollowness for Obama came the day after he had signed the Recovery Act when he travelled to Mesa, Arizona (pop. 509,000), to announce a plan to try and cope with the collapsing housing market. What greeted him was a loosely connected network of "ghost towns" (p.270) many of them newly built but now lifeless after the subprime-driven housing bubble burst. Obama fell into conversation with one the last remaining homeowners.

He was a sturdy, fortyish man in a white t-shirt who had turned off his lawnmower to shake my hand while a towheaded little boy zipped around behind him on a red tricycle. He was luckier than many of his neighbours, he told me: He'd had enough seniority at the factory where he worked to avoid the first wave of layoffs, and his wife's nursing job seemed relatively secure. Still, the house they'd paid \$400,000 to purchase at the height of the bubble was now worth half that amount. They had quietly debated whether their best move was to default on their mortgage and walk away. Toward the end of our conversation the man looked back at his son. 'I remember my dad talking about the American Dream when I was a kid. How the most important thing was to work hard. Buy a house. Raise a family. Do things right. What happened to that? When did that become just a load of....?' He trailed off, looking pained before wiping the sweat from his face and restarting his mower (p.270).

This could almost be an extract from Arlie Russell Hochschild's wonderful ethnographic study - *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016) - of political disenchantment and white working class support for the Tea Party, but for Obama it was like watching a man drowning at sea.^x Obama knew that nothing he could do could save him. "And when the money was spent, no matter how effective the sandbags proved to be, a whole lot of folks would be flooded out anyway" (p.241).

His senior advisers did their best to introduce and explain the ungrateful realities of presidential life: "Trust me. The presidency is like a new car" Emanuel explained "It starts depreciating the minute you drive it off the lot (p.233)." Axelrod came at the same issue from a different angle by pointing out that "when things are bad no one cares that things could have been worse (p.241)." But these are the moments when the deep story of how it *feels* to be president really comes to the surface. The feeling that you are, to some extent, maintaining an illusion of control and an outward sense of normalcy that shields the public from having to confront the reality of an increasingly disorderly and precarious world. It was exactly this sense of almost living a lie, of creating false confidence and maintaining an illusion that had been with him since his very first day in office.

As he looked down upon and waved towards the estimated 1.8 million people who had flocked to Washington from every corner and state in the union to watch his inauguration, what's interesting is that the main emotion that seemed to be running through his head at that moment was not elation, joy or happiness but a sense of imposing fear or dread that hinged upon the expectations that he had so successfully generated. Other world leaders have used their memoirs to acknowledge the existence of similar feelings at the summit of their electoral success, but few have been thrown straight into the sort of experience that Obama faced at his inauguration.^{xi} The night before the event Michael Chertoff, President Bush's Secretary of Homeland Security, had called Obama to inform him of credible intelligence indicating that four Somali nationals were thought to be planning a major terrorist event at the inauguration. The already intense security was strengthened and emergency mass evacuation plans put in place. The suspects were still at large but no one beyond a handful of Obama's staffers knew of the threat.

“I hadn’t even told Michelle, not wanting to add to the day’s stress” Obama recounts, “No one had nuclear war or terrorism on their minds. No one except me” (p.228).

Scanning people in the pews – friends, family members, colleagues, some of whom caught my eye and smiled or waved with excitement - I realized that this was now part of my job: maintaining an outward sense of normalcy, upholding for everyone the fiction that we live in a safe and orderly world, even as I stared down the dark hole of chance and prepared as best I could for the possibility that at any given moment on any given day chaos might break through (p.228).

If Obama’s job was to maintain an illusion of control in the midst of almost uncontrollable social, cultural, technological and political tides then it could be argued that he actually did a pretty good job. The early years of his first term were defined by progressive legislation and social change. But it was never going to be enough. By the 2010 mid-term elections the gap between the emotions that had led to his election and the limitations he faced as a mere mortal were starting to show. “[E]ven without looking at the polls, I could sense a change in the atmosphere on the campaign trail: an air of doubt hovering over each rally, a forced, almost desperate quality to the cheers and laughter, as if the crowds and I were a couple at the end of a whirlwind romance, trying to muster up feelings that had started to fade. How could I blame them? They had expected my election to transform their country, to make government work for ordinary people, to restore some sense of civility in Washington. Instead, many of their lives had grown harder, and Washington seemed just as broken, distant and bitterly partisan as ever...Whatever irrational optimism I’d carried with me from vacation had long been extinguished by Election Day – 2 Nov. 2010” (p.591). And yet, of course, this is not quite true. In line with Ignatieff’s emphasis on fire and ashes, the romance was not quite dead and Obama would rise phoenix-like from the ashes of the mid-term elections to win a second presidential term.

A Promised Land is therefore a book built on an understanding of political promises, great expectations and genuine emotional intelligence. It’s a memoir that tells at least two-intertwined stories and numerous tales of what Obama *did* (descriptive, detailed, diligently displayed) and how he *felt* (over-joyed, over-whelmed, very often ‘not waving but drowning’ and always ‘in the barrel’). It’s this latter *deep story* that only Obama can tell, historians can deal with the detail. So let’s hope that the second volume of these memoirs lives up to the promise of the first and really does throw the White House curtains wide-open.

ⁱ See, for example, Younge, G. ‘A Promised Land by Barack Obama review – an impressive but incomplete memoir’, *The Guardian*, 26 November, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/26/a-promised-land-by-barack-obama-review-an-impressive-but-incomplete-memoir>

ⁱⁱ Readers with an interest in ‘the messy business, worldly art and a brutal game’ that is politics might like to read through the following seam of scholarship. Crick, B. *In Defence of Politics*: (Penguin, 1962), Sharansky, N. *The Case for Democracy*, (Public Affairs, 2004), Stoker, G. *Why Politics Matters*, (Palgrave, 2006), Turner, K and Hogan, M. *The Worldly Art of Politics*, (Federation Press, 2006), Flinders, M. *Defending Politics*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), Gamble, A. *Politics – Why It Matters*, (Polity, 2019).

ⁱⁱⁱ CBS News, ‘McCain and Obama crack jokes at charity event’, 16 October, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mccain-obama-crack-jokes-at-charity-event/>

^{iv} Weber, M. ‘Politics as Vocation’, originally a speech at Munich University, 1918, published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblot, Munich. From H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-128.

^v Packer, G. ‘Obama’s Memoir Is an Exercise in Ironic Realism’, *The Atlantic*, 17 November, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/barack-obamas-tragic-realism/617129/>

^{vi} Stanley, T. ‘A Promised Land by Barack Obama: A Surprisingly Sad, passive-aggressive memoir’, *The Telegraph*, 17 November, 2020. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/promised-land-barack-obama-review-surprisingly-sad-passive-aggressive/>

^{vii} ‘Citizenship In A Republic’, delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France on 23 April, 1910. Taken from <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Documents/maninarena.htm>

^{viii} See Flinders, M. 2020. ‘Why Feelings Trump Facts: Anti-politics, Citizenship and Emotion’, *Emotions and Society*, 2(1), 21-40.

^{ix} Ignatieff, M. 2013. *Fire and Ashes*, (Harvard University Press, 2013).

^x Hochschild, A. 2016. *Strangers in Their Own Land*, (New Press, 2013).

^{xi} Tony Blair, for example, reveals in his memoirs that in the immediate aftermath of his landslide election in May 1997, the predominant emotion on becoming the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was fear and foreboding. See Blair, T. *A Journey*, (Random House, 2010).

Reviewer:

Matthew Flinders is Founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre and Professor of Politics at the University of Sheffield. He is also Vice-President of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom.

Email: m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk