A READER'S GUIDE FOR

BECOMING

BY MICHELLE OBAMA

#IAMBECOMING | BECOMINGMICHELLEOBAMA.COM

CROWN

BECOMING

A READER'S GUIDE

"I'm an ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey. In sharing my story, I hope to help create space for other stories and other voices, to widen the pathway for who belongs and why." —Michelle Obama

---

1. Mrs. Obama begins her book with a story about making cheese toast on a quiet night at home, a few months after leaving the White House. Why do you think she chose this story to begin her memoir?

2. In *Becoming,* we get to know the constellation of Mrs. Obama's extended family through her eyes. Her grandfather Southside filled his house with music and makeshift speakers and merriment, and the sound of her great-aunt Robbie's piano lessons came up through the floorboards of her bedroom. Years later, Mrs. Obama would fill the White House with music and culture through live performances and several programs aimed at children. How do those kinds of early memories leave an imprint on us as we grow older? What were the sounds, sights, and smells that you remember from visiting grandparents or other elders, and how have they left a mark on you?

3. Early in Mrs. Obama's life, a young relative asks her, "How come you talk like a white girl?" (p. 40). Mrs. Obama came from a home where she was expected to be smart and to "own" her smartness and "inhabit it with pride" but lived in a neighborhood where "speaking a certain way—the 'white' way, as some would have it—was perceived as a betrayal . . . as somehow denying our culture." What is it like to live straddled across different worlds? What is it like to harbor ambitions that put you at odds with the community and the people you love and trust the most?

4. Mrs. Obama writes that her parents talked to her and Craig like adults, "indulg[ing] every question we asked" (p. 25), from juvenile complaints about breakfast to more serious topics like sex, drugs, and racism. How did Fraser and Marian Robinson's parenting strategy influence Mrs. Obama later in life? Do you agree that parents should answer their children's questions honestly, or do you think it's better to shield them from the messiness of adult life?

5. In discussing her neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, Mrs. Obama writes, "Failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result. It's vulnerability that breeds with self-doubt and then is escalated, often deliberately, by fear" (p. 43). How did this insight shape Mrs. Obama's work and mission as First Lady? What can we all do—as individuals, parents, and community members—to help break this cycle?

6. Early in her senior year at Whitney Young High School, Mrs. Obama went for an obligatory first appointment with the school college counselor. Mrs. Obama was treasurer of the senior class. She had earned a spot in the National Honor Society. She was on track to graduate in the top 10 percent of her class and she was interested in joining her older brother, Craig, at Princeton University. The guidance counselor said to her, "I'm not sure that you're Princeton material" (p. 66). How did Mrs. Obama handle hearing that statement? How does one avoid having one's dreams dislodged by someone else's lower expectations?

7. In high school Mrs. Obama said she felt like she was representing her neighborhood. At Princeton, faced with questions of whether she was the product of Affirmative Action programs, she felt like she was representing her race. Was that more than a feeling? Was she actually representing her communities in those settings? Have you had moments in life where you feel as though you are representing one of your communities?

8. In her early life Mrs. Obama writes about being a "box checker," but as she gets older she learns how to "swerve" to adjust to life's circumstances. What does it mean to swerve and how do we develop that skill in life?

9. When Mrs. Obama's friend Suzanne is diagnosed with terminal cancer, it destabilizes Mrs. Obama's view of "the world as it should be." How does Mrs. Obama cope with Suzanne's death, and the death of her father the following year? How did these early experiences of loss shape her decision to step off the career path of a corporate lawyer?

10. In *Becoming,* Mrs. Obama describes a number of women who have served as mentors for her at different times in her life, including Czerny Brasuell, Valerie Jarrett, and Susan Sher. What do these women have in common? What lessons did Mrs. Obama learn from them about finding a fulfilling career as a parent? Who are your mentors and how do you cultivate those relationships?

11. In describing her relationship with her husband, Mrs. Obama writes, "Coexisting with Barack's strong sense of purpose—sleeping in the same bed with it, sitting at the breakfast table with it—was something to which I had to adjust, not because he flaunted it, exactly, but because it was so alive" (pp. 131–2). How did this sense of purpose affect their life as a married couple? Do you have someone in your life who supports or shares your own sense of purpose?

12. Mrs. Obama writes: "I've learned that it's harder to hate up close" (p. 270). How did her experiences on the campaign trail help her come up with this insight? How do we create spaces where people can come together to talk, listen, and share stories and ideals to build stronger communities, even when people might not agree or share the same history or perspective?

13. In Chapter 15, Mrs. Obama explains why she chose to support her husband's run for the presidency despite her misgivings about politics. What made her change her mind? Would you have made the same choice? How do you balance the competing worlds of family life and work in your life?

14. As Mrs. Obama notes, First Lady is a role without a job description. How did Mrs. Obama choose to approach the role? If you were in charge of writing the job description for the First Lady, what would you include and exclude?

15. In *Becoming,* Mrs. Obama writes candidly about detractors who tried to invalidate her standing or her work. "I was female, Black, and strong, which to certain people, maintaining a certain mindset, translated only to 'angry.' It was another damaging cliché, one that's been forever used to sweep minority women to the perimeter of every room, an unconscious signal not to listen to what we've got to say" (p. 265). What is the root of that "angry Black woman" cliché? How and why does it do damage?

16. When describing her visit to the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in London, Mrs. Obama finds herself experiencing "a strange, quiet revelation: They were me, as I'd once been. And I was them, as they could be" (p. 319). What did it mean for the girls to see themselves in Mrs. Obama? Why does she feel such a connection to these girls, and to girls' education more generally? How did she use her visibility as First Lady to bring attention to these issues?

17. Mrs. Obama has surrounded herself with a strong and supportive circle of friends from an early age. In some cases the circle was within reach; as she got older and busier, she had to work harder to create and maintain her circle of support. She writes, "Friendships between women, as any woman will tell you, are built of a thousand small kindnesses . . . swapped back and forth and over again" (p. 361). How did she create the building blocks of strong friendships in her life? What is the value in creating and maintaining a circle of strength?

18. Mrs. Obama will always be remembered for her fabulous sense of style, but her clothing choices were as much about strategy as about fashion: "Optics governed more or less everything in the political world, and I factored this into every outfit" (p. 333). How did she use this "fashion diplomacy" to send a message to America and the world? How and when do you use clothing or accessories as an extension of your voice?

19. In the epilogue, Mrs. Obama writes, "I've never been a fan of politics, and my experience over the last ten years has done little to change that" (p. 419). Did you find her statement surprising? Do you think politics is an effective way to make social change?

20. Why do you think Michelle Obama chose to name her memoir *Becoming*? What does the idea of "becoming" mean to you?


BECOMING
"Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"The more I told my story, the more my voice settled into itself. I liked my story. What's your story?"
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"The most successful people I know have figured out how to live with criticism, to lean on the people who believe in them, and to push onward with their goals."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"I'm an ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey. In sharing my story, I hope to help create space for other stories and other voices, to widen the pathway for who belongs and why."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"If you don't get out there and define yourself, you'll be quickly and inaccurately defined by others."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"I was raised to be confident and see no limits, to believe I could go after and get absolutely anything I wanted. And I wanted everything. . . . What do you want?"
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"I have a habit that has sustained me for life, keeping a close and high-spirited council of girlfriends—a safe harbor of female wisdom."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
A CONVERSATION WITH MICHELLE OBAMA
#IAMBECOMING | BECOMINGMICHELLEOBAMA.COM
CROWN
BECOMING
"Education has been the primary instrument of change in my own life, my lever upward in the world."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"Becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"So many of us go through life with our stories hidden, feeling ashamed or afraid when our whole truth doesn't live up to some established ideal. . . . That is, until someone dares to start telling that story differently."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"To me, the magic is in the learning."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"What kind of person do I want to be? How do I want to contribute to the world?"
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"Am I good enough? Yes I am."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING
BECOMING
"I was lucky to have parents, teachers, and mentors who'd fed me with a consistent, simple message: You matter."
Michelle Obama
SHARE YOUR STORY #IAMBECOMING

Q. What was unexpected about the writing process?

A. The process turned out to be really meaningful for me. I spent a lot of time just reflecting and thinking, which is something I just didn't have much time to do for about a decade. Once Barack began his campaign for president, every day felt like a sprint. So it was nice to decompress a little bit and ask myself, "How did I get here? Where did my story take a turn?" I uncovered a lot of smaller moments—moments that folks might not know about, but that I realized were really foundational to the woman I became.

Q. What did you hope to accomplish in writing your memoir?

A. My main hope was to create something that could be useful to other people, to give them something they could use in their own lives. So I focused on telling my story as honestly as I could. I'm not settling scores or giving a political play-by-play. I hoped to bring people inside the experience of growing up a working-class Black girl on the South Side of Chicago who became First Lady of the United States. It's all of me, all right there on those pages, which means I feel a little vulnerable knowing what I'm putting out there. But I hope if I can share my story, with all its ups and downs, then other people might have the courage to share theirs, too.

Q. You write candidly that your time as a lawyer was not a happy period in your career. What advice would you give people who are unsure about their path and who need a little help figuring out their passion?

A. If you're someone who's lucky enough to think about fulfillment in your career—and there are a lot of people out there who aren't—I think the best thing you can do is listen to yourself. I mean, really, really listen. You've got to make sure you're not acting on someone else's expectations. That's where I got stuck. I spent my early adulthood checking the boxes I thought society expected of me, before I realized that it was making me miserable. I went through a lot of introspection. I did some journaling. And I realized that what I really wanted to do was help people, so I set off on a career of public service. So what I'd say is do your best to listen to yourself and tune out the rest.

Q. During your life you have experienced highs and lows but also so many unimaginable circumstances. How have you adapted to the unpredictability of the journey that has unfolded in your life?

A. I learned that sometimes you've just got to throw your hands up and let the roller coaster do its thing. There's no guidebook for anything, whether you're juggling two little kids, a demanding job, and a husband who's got big goals—or you're parenting two slightly older kids while figuring out which form of address to use with the prime minister seated next to you at dinner.

Q. You write about your inner struggle, at times questioning whether or not you're good enough. Do you have any input on how to quell self-doubt?

A. I may have had some successes in my life, but I can still feel the twinge of embarrassment from when I misspelled a word in front of my class when I was in kindergarten. I still remember the doubts I had about myself as a working-class minority student on an affluent, mostly white college campus. I think we all carry moments like that—and let me tell you, they don't disappear when you suddenly find yourself speaking to crowded arenas and meeting the Queen of England.

What's helped is getting older and living through some of those doubts, and realizing they're not the end of your life. In fact, they can be a new beginning. It doesn't make the feelings any less difficult in the moment, of course, but in the end, self-doubt can actually be useful, as long as we don't let it overwhelm the way we think about ourselves. It's all a part of becoming.