

Michelle Obama: An American Story

by *David Colbert*

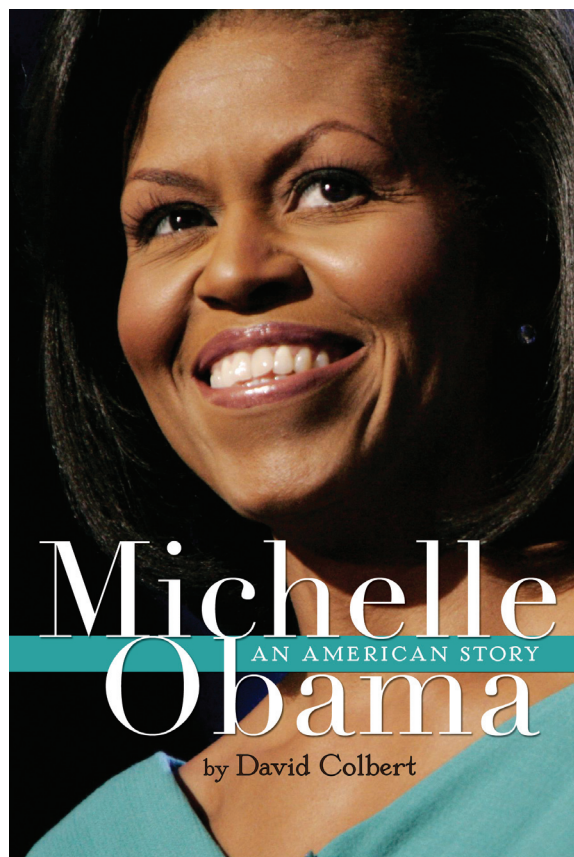
This *New York Times* bestseller for children tells the extraordinary story of our new first lady in the context of American history: slavery, freedom and the Reconstruction era, Jim Crow, the Great Migration, life in the northern industrial cities, the civil rights movement, and finally her own era, which includes extraordinary gains for women. It's also the story of a family's strength. Michelle's confidence, grace, and warmth are gifts from her parents: a courageous father who battled a severe disability yet never stopped working, and a mother who showed Michelle how to exceed the highest standards.

No other resident of the White House shares Michelle Obama's connection to American history. Michelle's story makes established curriculum come alive.

David Colbert is the author of twenty books, including biographies of Anne Frank, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Lincoln.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Recalling her high school years and later experiences, Michelle told a group of students, "The thing that made me different from a lot of other kids who didn't have opportunities was that I tried new stuff and I wasn't afraid to be uncomfortable. You guys have got to do that, because the things you want in life will not get handed to you. There is a lot of opportunity out there. But you've got to want it" (page 62). What kind of challenge interests you but makes you uncomfortable? What are some of the ways you could get over that fear as Michelle did?
- When Michelle arrived at Princeton University in the fall of 1981, the parent of one of her roommates didn't want the roommate to be living with an African American. Years later, the roommate and her mother felt sorry about their racism, and admitted it was wrong. Could you forgive someone who apologized to you for something like that? Would you mean it? (See pages 67–83.)
- After graduating from Princeton University and feeling pressure to succeed professionally and financially, Michelle entered Harvard Law School. Later, she wondered if it was the right decision. Have you ever felt pressure to succeed at something that wasn't right



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for you? How did you react? Did you try, or give up? Why? If going to Harvard Law was a mistake in some way, what did Michelle do to make the best of the situation? Have any of your own mistakes helped you in some way? How? (See pages 85–87.)

- Talking about when he and Michelle were children, Michelle's brother, Craig Robinson, said, "We as a family were extremely cynical about politics and politicians" (page 12). But Michelle has said some of her "earliest memories" of her father "are of tagging along with him as we'd walk door to door and help folks register to vote" (page 10). If Michelle's family was cynical about politics, why was her father politically active? Do you think it's important for people to vote? Why or why not?
- In 2008 when Barack was nominated by the Democratic Party as its presidential candidate, Michelle's speech to the Democratic National Convention included praise of her brother. She called him "my mentor, my protector, and my lifelong friend" (page 8). How did their love for each other—and their friendly rivalry—shape her character and her decisions? (See pages 8–9, 14–22.)

- In that same speech, Michelle told the audience, “My dad was our rock. He was our champion, our hero” (page 13). Do you have someone in your life you consider your mentor or hero? Why? Does anyone think of you that way?

- “Michelle remembers watching her teenage brother practicing how he would rescue their father from their upstairs apartment in case of a fire” (page 14). Why did Michelle’s brother Craig feel he would have to rescue their father? What other feelings did Michelle and Craig have about the situation, and how do you think it affected their lives? (See pages 13–22.)

- One of the symbols of America—the White House—was built by slaves (page 33). Does knowing this make you feel any different about the White House?

- After the Civil War ended, Colbert writes, “South Carolina no longer had laws that prevented slaves from learning to read or write, but the state’s African American children were still expected to work rather than go to school” (page 35). Do you think this was fair? How would you feel if it was against the law for you to receive an education? What might you do about it?

- During the 2008 presidential campaign, Michelle complained to a reporter about the way her words were misinterpreted: “It’s like I can’t think out loud,” she said (page 134). Have you ever felt misunderstood? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it?

ACTIVITIES

- Growing up, Michelle and her family made summer visits to relatives in Georgetown, South Carolina, the heart of Gullah culture.

Read some of the stories of the Gullah trickster character Br’er Rabbit, then draw a “Wanted” poster for Br’er Rabbit that lists some of the tricks he’s played.

Draw a map of the world that shows where trickster characters in other cultures originated. Include their names and what kind of animal they are, or draw a picture of each one on your map.

Make a chart or graph comparing trickster stories. Include information about the different characters, the plots, and the lessons imparted in the stories.

Retell one of the trickster stories, using props.

Create your own trickster character, and write a story about it.

- Michelle’s mother said, “If you aren’t challenged, you don’t make any progress” (page 21). Here are some other quotes about challenge. Pick the one that has the most personal meaning for you, and describe why. Make up one of your own.

“When someone tells me there is only one way to do things, it always lights a fire under my butt. My instant reaction is, ‘I’m going to prove you wrong!’” —Picabo Street

“Life’s challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they’re supposed to help you discover who you are.” —Bernice Johnson Reagon

“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“You must be the change you want to see in the world.”
—Mahatma Gandhi

- When Michelle was twenty-four years old, she graduated from Harvard Law School. Her parents put a funny message in her yearbook: “We knew you would do this fifteen years ago when we could never make you shut up.” Draw a picture of yourself at twenty-four. Write down things you think you will have achieved by then, and things you might have yet to do.

BEYOND THE BOOK

FRIENDFIELD PLANTATION

Information page at South Carolina Plantations
south-carolina-plantations.com/georgetown/friendfield-sampit-river.html

Photographs from the National Register of Historic Places
www.nationalregister.sc.gov/georgetown/S10817722037/index.htm

The White House Historical Association: “African Americans”
www.whitehousehistory.org/05/subs/05_c.html

GULLAH

“The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone–America Connection,”
Joseph A. Opala
www.yale.edu/glc/gullah/index.htm

The New Testament translated into Gullah
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5283230

Gullah Net
www.knowitall.org/gullahnet/

RECONSTRUCTION

“Reconstruction” from “The American Experience,” PBS
www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/index.html

THE GREAT MIGRATION

“In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience,”
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library
www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm

CHICAGO FREEDOM MOVEMENT

CFM40 “Fulfilling the Dream” Archive
cfm40.middlebury.edu/

RACE AND GENDER AT PRINCETON

“African Americans and Princeton University: A Brief History”
www.princeton.edu/mudd/news/faq/topics/African_Americans.shtml

“The History of Women at Princeton University”
www.princeton.edu/mudd/news/faq/topics/women.shtml