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Becoming

by Michelle Obama | 2018 | 448 pages

4.45 ★★★★★ 1M+ ratings

Memoir

Biography

Autobiography



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Key Takeaways

1. From South Side Chicago to the White House: Michelle Obama's Journey

"I grew up with a disabled dad in a too-small house with not much money in a starting-to-fail neighborhood, and I also grew up surrounded by love and music in a diverse city in a country where an education can take you far."

Humble beginnings. Michelle Obama's story begins in a working-class neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Raised in a small apartment with her parents and brother Craig, she learned early on the values of hard work, education, and family unity. Her father, Fraser Robinson III, worked as a pump operator for the city water plant despite battling multiple sclerosis, while her mother, Marian, dedicated herself to raising the children.

Defying expectations. Despite the limitations of her surroundings, Michelle excelled academically, attending magnet schools and eventually gaining admission to Princeton University. Her journey from a modest upbringing to the Ivy League exemplifies the power of determination and the support of a loving family. This foundation would shape her worldview and drive her future endeavors, ultimately leading her to become the first African American First Lady of the United States.

2. The Power of Education and Mentorship in Shaping Lives

"I was a black working-class kid from the South Side of Chicago, but it turned out when it came to college, I could compete with anyone."

Education as equalizer. Michelle's experiences at Princeton and Harvard Law School underscored the transformative power of education. Despite initial self-doubts and feelings of not belonging, she thrived academically and socially, proving that talent and hard work could overcome socioeconomic barriers.

Mentorship matters. Throughout her life, Michelle benefited from mentors who recognized her potential and provided guidance:

- Her parents, who prioritized education and encouraged her ambitions
- Teachers who challenged and supported her intellectual growth
- Professional mentors like Valerie Jarrett, who helped shape her career

These relationships not only aided Michelle's personal development but also inspired her to become a mentor herself, particularly to young women and girls from underprivileged backgrounds.

3. Balancing Career Ambitions with Family Life

"I'd been raised to be confident and see no limits, to believe I could go after and get absolutely anything I wanted. And I wanted everything."

Career crossroads. Michelle's journey from corporate law to public service illustrates the challenges of aligning personal values with professional pursuits. Despite early success at Sidley & Austin, she felt unfulfilled and sought more meaningful work.

Work-life integration. Balancing career ambitions with family life became a central theme in Michelle's story:

- Transitioning to roles in city government and non-profits that aligned with her values

- Juggling work responsibilities with raising young children
- Supporting Barack's political career while maintaining her own identity

Her experiences highlight the ongoing struggle many women face in trying to "have it all" and the importance of making choices that reflect personal values and priorities.

4. Navigating the Challenges of a Political Campaign

"I've learned that it's harder to hate up close."

Personal sacrifices. The Obama family's entry into national politics brought unprecedented challenges and scrutiny. Michelle had to:

- Adapt to the loss of privacy and constant public attention
- Confront racist and sexist attacks on her character
- Balance campaign duties with parenting and maintaining normalcy for her daughters

Connecting with voters. Despite initial reservations, Michelle found her voice on the campaign trail:

- Focusing on personal stories and relatable experiences
- Emphasizing shared American values across diverse communities
- Using her platform to advocate for issues like military families and childhood obesity

Her approach of meeting people face-to-face and sharing her authentic self helped counteract negative narratives and win over voters.

5. Adapting to Life in the White House and the Public Eye

"I was both a black woman and a First Lady—to some people a contradiction, to others a symbol of progress."

Unprecedented scrutiny. Life in the White House brought a level of attention and criticism unlike anything Michelle had experienced before:

- Every outfit, gesture, and word was analyzed and often misinterpreted
- She faced ongoing racist and sexist attacks from certain media outlets and political opponents
- The pressure to be a role model for African Americans while appealing to all Americans was constant

Creating a new normal. Despite the challenges, Michelle worked to:

- Maintain a sense of normalcy for her family, especially Sasha and Malia
- Carve out a meaningful role for herself as First Lady
- Use her platform to advocate for causes she cared about, such as healthy living and education

She learned to navigate the complexities of public life while staying true to her values and identity.

6. Championing Health, Education, and Military Families

"When you've worked hard, and done well, and walked through that doorway of opportunity, you do not slam it shut behind you. You reach back and you give other folks the same chances that helped you succeed."

Focused initiatives. As First Lady, Michelle launched several key programs:

- Let's Move!: Combating childhood obesity through nutrition and exercise
- Joining Forces: Supporting military families
- Reach Higher: Encouraging students to pursue higher education

Leveraging influence. Michelle used her position to:

- Bring attention to often overlooked issues
- Partner with businesses, non-profits, and government agencies
- Create lasting change through policy and grassroots efforts

Her initiatives demonstrated the potential of the First Lady role to effect meaningful change beyond traditional ceremonial duties.

7. Maintaining Authenticity and Personal Connections Amidst Fame

"For me, 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."

Staying grounded. Despite the whirlwind of White House life, Michelle prioritized:

- Regular connections with family and long-time friends
- Maintaining routines and traditions from pre-White House life
- Seeking out normal experiences when possible, like shopping trips or workouts

Authentic leadership. Michelle's approach to her role emphasized:

- Speaking from personal experience and genuine emotion
- Focusing on relatable issues that impacted everyday Americans
- Using humor and informality to connect with people, especially youth

By remaining true to herself, Michelle was able to connect with Americans in a way that transcended politics and position.

8. Confronting Racism and Promoting Diversity in America

"You may not always have a comfortable life. And you will not always be able to solve all the world's problems at once. But don't ever underestimate the impact you can have, because history has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own."

Personal experiences. Michelle's life story highlights the ongoing reality of racism in America:

- Childhood experiences of white flight in her South Side neighborhood
- Facing skepticism and lowered expectations as a black student at elite institutions
- Confronting racist attacks and stereotypes during the campaign and presidency

Advocating for change. As First Lady, Michelle used her platform to:

- Promote diversity and inclusion in various sectors, including education and the arts
- Speak openly about the challenges faced by people of color in America
- Inspire young people, especially minorities, to pursue their dreams despite obstacles

Her presence in the White House itself served as a powerful symbol of progress and possibility for African Americans and other marginalized groups.

9. The Importance of Female Friendships and Support Systems

"Friendships between women, as any woman will tell you, are built of a thousand small kindnesses... swapped back and forth and over again."

Lifelong bonds. Throughout her life, Michelle has relied on a strong network of female friends:

- Childhood friends from the South Side who knew her before fame
- College and professional peers who understood her struggles and ambitions
- Fellow political spouses who could relate to the unique pressures of public life

Creating community. As First Lady, Michelle prioritized:

- Regular gatherings with close friends, including "Boot Camp" weekends
- Mentoring young women, both formally and informally
- Promoting the importance of female solidarity and support

These relationships provided emotional support, honest feedback, and moments of normalcy amidst the pressures of public life.

10. Parenting in the Spotlight: Protecting and Nurturing Sasha and Malia

"I've learned that it's harder to hate up close."

Maintaining normalcy. Despite living in the White House, Michelle and Barack worked to give their daughters as normal a childhood as possible:

- Establishing routines and responsibilities, like making their own beds
- Encouraging friendships and activities outside the political sphere
- Limiting media exposure and public appearances

Preparing for scrutiny. Michelle helped her daughters navigate:

- The constant presence of Secret Service protection
- Potential negative attention from the media and public
- The unique pressures of being the children of the President

Their approach emphasized the importance of family bonds, education, and personal growth over the trappings of fame or power.

11. Redefining the Role of First Lady: Michelle's Initiatives and Impact

"For me, 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."

Breaking new ground. Michelle redefined the role of First Lady by:

- Focusing on substantive policy issues like health and education
- Using modern communication tools and media to reach new audiences
- Balancing traditional duties with innovative approaches to advocacy

Lasting legacy. Her initiatives had tangible impacts:

- Let's Move! led to changes in school lunch programs and food labeling
- Joining Forces raised awareness and support for military families
- Reach Higher increased college attendance rates among underserved populations

Michelle's approach to the role demonstrated how the position of First Lady could be leveraged for significant social impact while remaining true to personal values and authenticity.

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Review Summary

★★★★☆ 4.45 out of 5

Average of 1M+ ratings from Goodreads and Amazon.

Becoming receives overwhelmingly positive reviews, praised for its candid, inspirational, and relatable storytelling. Readers appreciate Michelle Obama's honesty about her life experiences, from childhood to the White House. Many find her journey empowering and her writing style engaging. The audiobook narrated by Obama herself is highly recommended. Some readers note emotional responses to her story. A few criticisms mention overly polished writing or unnecessary details, but overall, the memoir is celebrated for its authenticity and insight into Obama's life and character.

About the Author

Michelle Obama is a highly accomplished public figure known for her role as First Lady of the United States from 2009 to 2017. Born and raised in Chicago, she excelled academically, graduating from Princeton University and Harvard Law School. Obama began her career as an attorney before transitioning to public service roles in Chicago, including work at the mayor's office and the University of Chicago. She founded the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, demonstrating her commitment to youth empowerment and public service. As an author, Obama has achieved global success with her

memoirs. She continues to be an influential voice in public discourse, residing in Washington, D.C. with her family.