



Left: Yuri Gripas/Getty Images; above: Scott Olson/Getty Images
 Above: Obama checks out the pie at Manny's Coffee Shop and Deli in Chicago. At left: Obama and Jarrett in Hyde Park.

Obama & Chicago, by the book

Recent books about Barack Obama provide glimpses of the city that built a president

BY KEITH KOENEMAN

It is often revealing to see ourselves as others perceive us. A new friend, colleague or acquaintance may point out aspects of our personalities that we had failed to fully appreciate. The experience can be positive: Suddenly, in our own eyes, we become funnier, more intelligent or beautiful than before. But the opposite can also happen. At those times, the reflection of ourselves seems distorted and disorientating, like an image displayed in a fun-house mirror.

In describing Chicago, recent books on Barack Obama tend to unveil such magnified portraits of our city. The depictions range from poverty-stricken to powerful, but the narratives of Obama's ascent tend to focus on three slices of Chicago: black neighborhoods on the far South Side, Hyde Park and the downtown area.

Here is summarized portrait based largely on some of those books:

Obama was drawn to Chicago in 1985, two years after Harold Washington became one of the first black mayors of a major U.S. city. Washington's victory had deeply stirred Obama. "I originally moved to Chicago in part because of the inspiration of Mayor Washington's campaign," he would say more than two decades later. "For those of you who recall that era, and recall Chicago at that time, it's hard to forget the sense of possibility that he sparked in people. I'll never forget how he reached out to everyone — black, brown, and white — to build a coalition for change."

Washington inspired many blacks and started to break open the machine-dominated political process. But to longtime white Chicagoans, his reign as mayor appeared chaotic. The City Council fought bitterly and launched a political civil war known as the "Council Wars," while the already fractious city started to become known as "Beirut on the Lake." From the outside, the Council Wars appeared to be a black-vs.-white political civil war. "Fast Eddie" Vrdolyak and Eddie Burke led the white alderman. Mayor Washington headed the black group. For years, the

City Council waged an embittered power struggle and achieved little of substance.

But the 24-year-old Obama was far from the bitter political action downtown. The idealistic young man was working in Roseland and West Pullman, poor black neighborhoods on the Far South Side of Chicago. In his job as a community organizer, Obama tried to help the residents of Altgeld Gardens public housing project to improve the quality of their lives. Built at the end of World War II, Altgeld Gardens looked like a brown, low-rise army barracks. Its surrounding neighborhood contained one of the densest concentrations of industrial contamination in America. The manufacturing jobs had long left, and what remained was a polluted wasteland with little hope for its inhabitants.

Working in this impoverished environment, Obama reached out to local churches, the dominant institutions for many blacks. But he soon found frustration in his dealings with Chicago's black preachers. Instead of idealism, many of these religious leaders were motivated by self-aggrandizement, political calculation and greed. As he worked through his disappointment and the challenges of community organizing, Obama decided that he could help more people if he earned a law degree and pursued a career in politics. Inspired by Harold Washington, his new goal became to become the mayor of Chicago. The fifth floor of City Hall was where he felt he could really have a positive impact.

After attending Harvard Law School for three years, Obama returned to Chicago in 1991 and settled again in unique Hyde Park. Bordered by Lake Michigan on the east and the University of Chicago on the west, Hyde Park was racially integrated, socio-economically diverse and the epicenter of progressive politics in Chicago. Elected officials such as Charles Merriam, Paul Douglas, Leon Despres, Abner Mikva and Harold Washington had created a tradition of reform-oriented politics in Hyde Park that served as a counterweight to the local Democratic machine. It was also the headquarters of Jesse Jackson, the influential black activist who had run for president in



Nuccio DiNuzzo/Chicago Tribune

Above: November 2008 election night rally in Grant Park downtown Chicago. At right: Obama's house in Hyde Park.



Zbigniew Bzdak/Chicago Tribune

1984 and 1988.

Obama was attracted to the progressive political tradition of Hyde Park, but he also enjoyed its local restaurants, businesses and community institutions. The rising politician sat for his regular haircuts at the Hyde Park Hair Salon. Ate meals at Dixie Kitchen and Valois cafe. Browsed for books at the Seminary Co-op and 57th Street Books. Played basketball along the lakefront at the Promontory Point courts. Attended the sermons of Reverend Wright at Trinity United Church of Christ.

Despite these attractions, Hyde Park became a special place for Obama for three other reasons, beginning with his fiancée, Michelle Robinson. Robinson had grown up in South Shore, a black neighborhood along the lakefront. She was grounded in this community near Hyde Park and close to her family and friends, and together Robinson and Obama put down the deep roots that he had lacked in his own childhood. The second important influence was the University of Chicago. In 1991, Obama accepted a fellowship position at the law school. He would stay on until 2004 as he moved up the political ladder, teaching constitutional law and writing his memoir, "Dreams from My Father." At the University of Chicago, Obama deepened his own belief system, improved his public-speaking talents and gained entrance to one of the most powerful institutional networks in the city. Finally, Hyde Park was home to a community of black powerbrokers — business people, politicians, academics and activists — who became important in Obama's rise from obscurity to prominence.

Valerie Jarrett was the most important. Jarrett started out her public service career as a lawyer in Harold Washington's administration and became a key player in the administration of Mayor Richard M. Daley. Jarrett was a strong thinker who could be both direct and diplomatic, and she used her powerful network of Daley administration contacts to link Obama up with both Chicago's white North Side elites and the city's black South Side leaders.

Slowly but surely, Obama used his charisma, intelligence and networking skills to cross over from Hyde Park

into the large-stakes milieu of downtown Chicago. By the time the ambitious Obama began running for the United States Senate in 2002, he had to face the reality of political power in Chicago: All roads ran through City Hall and Daley's political establishment. Obama signed on with David Axelrod, the longtime media adviser for Mayor Daley. Obama won, becoming only the third African-American U.S. senator in more than 100 years.

Two years later, in November 2006, Obama drove to the offices of Axelrod's consulting firm in an off the beaten track River North location. He was to share a private lunch with Bill Daley and seek his advice on running for president. "Yeah, you gotta run," advised the youngest Daley brother. "Why not? What have you got to lose? Can you win? I think you can."

Obama began plotting his campaign in Axelrod's fourth floor conference room. His closest confidantes, including Axelrod, Jarrett and his wife, Michelle, were invited. This was the beginning of Obama's two-year odyssey to become the first black President of the United States. Obama won the presidential election in 2008 by a comfortable margin.

Obama's November victory celebration in Grant Park brought out a crowd of nearly 250,000 energized supporters. Music blared, cameras flashed and people hugged and celebrated in Chicago's front yard as they waited for the President-elect. Numerous celebrities and politicians attended, including Oprah Winfrey, Brad Pitt and Jesse Jackson. Obama would soon become the nation's first black President, as well as the first big-city President in many decades. And Chicago would have an achievement of its own. One of its own politicians had made it into the nation's highest office.

Four years later, the world now sees Chicago differently. It is the hometown of America's first black president. It is Obama's Chicago.

Keith Koenen is author of "First Son: The Biography of Richard M. Daley," scheduled for publication next spring by the University of Chicago Press.

Books on Obama

"The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream," by Barack Obama. Obama's second book, which focuses on his political vision for America. Nice for the coffee table.

"The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama," by David Remnick. Well researched and written, Remnick's book captures Obama's narrative of ascent. One of the best biographies on Obama.

"Confidence Men: Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a President," by Ron Suskind. Gossipy look into the Obama White House. Fun to read, but largely lacking in insight.

"Culture of Opportunity: Obama's Chicago: The People, Politics, and Ideas of Hyde Park," by Rebecca Janowitz. Focuses on the unique history and culture of Hyde Park, the South Side neighborhood where Obama developed into a politician and established his family.

"Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance," by Barack Obama. Obama's memoir of growing up a talented, mixed-race American. The book reveals an authentic voice and is movingly written.

"The Escape Artists: How Obama's Team Fumbled the Recovery," by Noam Scheiber. A tough-minded look at how Obama and his team fumbled the economic recovery. Worth reading for those interested in the intersection of economics and politics.

"Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime," by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin. A strategic, inside look at the 2008 presidential campaign and how Obama became the first black President of the United States.

"Obama: From Promise to Power," by David Mendell. Essential reading for anyone interested in Obama's life before he became famous. Good insights into Chicago politics.

"The Obamas," by Jodi Kantor. Puts a lens on Michelle and Barack Obama as a couple, contrasting their personalities and their "old life" in Chicago versus the reality of the White House.

"The Promise: President Obama, Year One," by Jonathan Alter. A fast-paced, well-written narrative of Obama's first year as President.

"Young Mr. Obama: Chicago and the Making of a Black President," by Edward McClelland. Describes how the path to the White House began for Obama on the South Side of Chicago. Full of local color, McClelland's book conveys a sense of place and how it helped to shape Obama.