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Book Reviews

by Kam Williams
Special To *The Skanner News*

American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White, and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama by Rachel L. Swarns

"On November 4, 2008, Michelle Obama stood before a crowd of thousands of roaring, singing and weeping supporters in Chicago's Grant Park... It was Election Night and her husband had just become the first African-American President of the United States..."

Like many African-Americans... Mrs. Obama knew her grandparents as a girl, but only bits and pieces about the relatives who came before them. She had grown up hearing whispers about white ancestors in her in her family tree, but no one knew who they were...

The First Lady wanted her girls to understand their own history, and she wanted to know more about it herself... The only way to do that is to go backwards, one generation at a time, peeling back the layers of history to unearth the story of one remarkable family and one singular nation...

Let the ancestors tell their stories. Let them speak from the grave!"

— Excerpted from the Introduction (pgs. 3-15)

Between Barack Obama's heartfelt memoir "Dreams from My Father" and a few further-enlightening, encyclopedic biographies of the President written by the likes of Dinesh Sharma ("Barack Obama in Hawai'i and Indonesia") and David Maraniss ("Barack Obama: The Story"), we have a pretty complete picture of the President's heritage. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said about the First Lady prior to the publication of this painstakingly-researched opus.

Thus, the nation owes a debt of gratitude to Rachel L. Swarns, a reporter for the New York Times since 1995, for donning her investigative journalist cap to dig into Michelle Robinson Obama's past. The upshot of that quest resulted in a reconstructed family tree going back to the 18th Century, including a slave-owning white great-great-grandfather.

He was a plantation owner who mated with teenaged Melvinia Shields, Michelle's maternal great-great-grandmother. From evidence unearthed, the author establishes that he victim was helpless to protest because she had not only been "separated from any close family" since the age of eight but was "living in a society that viewed a white man's rape of his slave women as a right, not a crime."

Most of Michelle Obama's ancestors lived in the Deep South, with her paternal great-grandfather, James Preston Johnson, who settled in Chicago in 1908, being among the first to participate in the Great African-American Migration northward. The book includes photos of both black and white relatives, a motley crew whose progeny you hope might someday have an opportunity to assemble to share a beer in the Rose Garden, if not make up for lost generations at a full-blown family reunion inside the White House.

The First Lady's lineage as a most-intriguing, multiracial mosaic.

The Black Chicago Renaissance Edited by Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey, Jr.

"Beginning in the 1930s and lasting into the 1950s, black Chicago experienced a cultural renaissance that rivaled and, some argued, exceeded the cultural outpouring in Harlem... However, [it] has yet to receive its full due. This volume addresses that neglect..."

Black cultural artists in music and dance and in visual and literary arts demonstrated cognizance of the centrality of race and sex in the distribution of power, the ways in which the social construction of both interacted to determine social privileges and exclusions. The challenge was to deconstruct racial categories and rid 'blackness' of its negative symbolism."

— Excerpted from the Introduction (pg. xv-xvi)

Since the Harlem Renaissance, New York has been considered the unofficial capital of black America. However,

that designation might be undeserving when one reflects upon Chicago's considerable contributions not only culturally, but socially and politically.

For example, the Windy City sent its first African-American to Congress sixteen years before the Big Apple which only elected Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. in 1944. Furthermore, half of the six black U.S. Senators in history represented Illinois, and I know I don't have to tell you that President Obama hails from Chicago.

In terms of the arts, the city boasted such icons as novelist Richard Wright, choreographer Katherine Dunham, and poets Arna Bontemps, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks during its heyday. What's ironic is that at the very same time they were promoting positive images of African-Americans, Amos 'n' Andy, a minstrel radio show originating in Chicago, was doing just the opposite.

The white stars of that popular program did demeaning impersonations featuring "mispronounced words, garbled grammar and characterizations of black women as bossy and black men as clownish." Meanwhile, A. Philip Randolph was organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters into a union to demand a living wage from the Chicago Pullman Car Company, "the single-largest employer of black people in the United States."

An impressive history lesson and compendium of fascinating factoids proving that the so-called Second City need not take a back seat to New York, at least when discussing the achievements of its African-American intelligentsia.

Who Would Have Thunk It!

The First Adventures of the Fraser Foster Kids by George C. Fraser and Emma Fraser-Pendleton

"Our story began a very long time ago when we were little kids with no place to live. Our mother got sick and our father had to give us up, so we were put into a shelter—and then foster homes. We were in foster homes for 13 years! It was very hard, but we made it..."

Some people think foster families are these amazing folks who just want to help needy children... But those weren't

the ones we ever got... It made us wonder why people who didn't even like kids took us in.

It wasn't until later that we realized it was about money. You see, the city gave families a monthly check for every child they took in...

It worked for us."

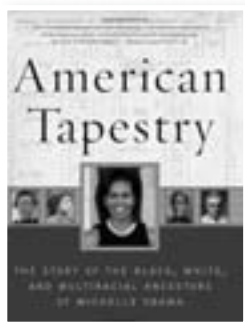
— Excerpted from the Foreword (pgs. 4-5)

George and Emma Fraser and were born to a woman who gave birth to 11 children before succumbing to a mental illness that would leave her institutionalized for the last 37 years of her life. A half-dozen of the kids had the same father, a man who was so overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a single-dad that he turned his offspring to the foster care system.

At least Mr. Fraser insisted that George, Emma and their youngest sibling, Joe, never be separated but instead always be placed with the same family. Unfortunately, most of the foster parents the trio had to endure turned out to be sadistic scoundrels who were only in it for the payments they got from the state as opposed to having an altruistic concern for the welfare of vulnerable orphans.

Joe passed on at an early age, but George and Emma went on to overcome a traumatic childhood marked by torture, teasing, instability and an absence of love, eventually earning college degrees and enjoying impressive professional careers. Who Would Have Thunk It, a "factual" account of "how we wished it could have been," is a heartbreaking semi-autobiographical memoir co-written by George and Emma.

Illustrated by award-winning cartoonist Jerry Craft, this mix of real life and make believe was cleverly crafted as a combination cautionary fable for adults and message of hope for children who might currently find themselves stuck in a similar predicament. A frightening, foster care nightmare with a fortuitous fairytale ending.



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