

BOOKS

David Maraniss treks the globe to tell Obama's story, with out-of-this-world results

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In this June 8 photo, President Barack Obama talks about the economy in the briefing room of the White House.

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At one point in the summer of 2009, I had a chance to ask David Maraniss if he had a title yet for the book he was researching on Barack Obama.

Maraniss, who considers Madison his home town and lives here with his wife, Linda, about half the year, was at the time immersed in the Obama story.

His methodology — refined in several acclaimed nonfiction best-sellers — is exhaustive. Maraniss not only wants to speak with everyone involved, he needs to see the neighborhoods they inhabited. By July 2009, his Obama

odyssey had taken Maraniss to Kansas, Honolulu and Chicago, but not yet to Kenya or Indonesia. He said the working title for the book was “Out of This World: The Making of Barack Obama, a Family Biography.”

The finished book, with a publication date of June 19, has a simpler title: “Barack Obama: The Story.” It’s a fine title — the book tells an intriguing story and Maraniss is a terrific storyteller — but it may help to recall that earlier, discarded title.

For if it does anything, “Barack Obama: The Story” relates in great detail the world that produced the historic future president. In doing so the extended families of his mother and father are brought to vivid life. We witness their victories and defeats, and, especially, their wholesale differences.

The character in the title does not appear until Chapter 7, when he is born in — yes — Honolulu. We learn he would not have existed at all if, in Nairobi, a student named Barack Hussein Obama hadn’t read an article in the Saturday Evening Post extolling the virtues of the University of Hawaii, and decided to enroll. Or if a young woman with the odd name of Stanley Ann Durham hadn’t followed her furniture salesman father from Washington state to Honolulu and also entered the university in fall 1960.

“Here is when, where and how,” Maraniss writes, “the two unlikely family stories of this chronicle weave into the same cloth.”

They met in, of all places, a Russian class. By November, she was pregnant with the baby who

would become president.

The early chapters leading up to the meeting of the future president's mother and father alternate between the two families. I found them fascinating, in part perhaps because I was not particularly familiar with President Obama's back story.

I have not read his memoir, "Dreams from My Father," nor either of the biographies of his parents, Janny Scott's "A Singular Woman" about his mother and Sally Jacobs' "The Other Barack" about his father. Maraniss gives both high marks in his bibliography. He finds Obama's own memoir less reliable.

But I think even people familiar with the history will find much of value in "Barack Obama: The Story." Maraniss' doggedness as a reporter means there will be new nuggets for every reader. He was the first to interview Barack Sr.'s second American wife (though she later spoke to Jacobs), and, most famously due to its excerpting in Vanity Fair, Maraniss alone found Genevieve Cook, the future president's "New York girlfriend" when he was in his early 20s.

Then there is the richness of the writing, informed by Maraniss' insistence on seeing and hearing for himself. It can't have been easy, near the end of his research, to leave his wife in Madison and eventually catch the longest non-stop flight in the world, 19 hours, Newark to Singapore, with a final jump to Jakarta.

But Maraniss went because Obama went. The boy then known as Barry accompanied his mother to Indonesia in October 1967 after she had separated from his father.

Barry would eventually return to

Honolulu, living for the most part with his grandparents. It was there he attended high school, discovering pot and basketball, beginning the journey of coming to terms with race, family and the world that made him.

In "Barack Obama: The Story," Maraniss then follows the future president to the United States mainland, but not, it should be noted, to the White House.

While Maraniss and Obama did meet in the Oval Office — their scheduled 45 minute interview ran over 90 — the book itself ends in Chicago, where Obama at last feels at home, even as he prepares to leave for Harvard and law school.

Maraniss has indicated there will be a second volume, although not immediately. In the meantime readers can feast on this one, a sweeping narrative and a tale that really is out of this world.

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