

*The Washington Post* / March 25, 2011 / by Craig Fehrman  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/two-books-on-the-influence-of-books-on-obama/2011/02/18/AFQzOpXB\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/two-books-on-the-influence-of-books-on-obama/2011/02/18/AFQzOpXB_story.html)

## Two books on the influence of books on Obama

*A review of James Kloppenberg's Reading Obama and Jack Cashill's Deconstructing Obama:*

We all probably agree on a few things about books. Books remain our most serious medium. They're more carefully written than newspapers, more factually reliable than magazines, more durable than tweets or blog posts. Books are more cerebral. Books are more responsible. Books matter *more*.

Politicians have long exploited the symbolic power of books. In his *Six Crises*, Richard Nixon remembers a conversation with the newly elected John F. Kennedy. "Every public man should write a book," Kennedy tells Nixon, "because it tends to elevate him in popular esteem to the respected status of an 'intellectual.'" There are other reasons to write books—namely, access to and profit from one's supporters—but this tweedy status can often make the biggest difference. That's what happened with Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, and, in our own time, it's happened with Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, two books that have sold millions of copies and inspired nearly as many breathless tributes. In fact, in *Deconstructing Obama*, Jack Cashill argues that these books lie behind "the foundational myth of Obama as genius."

We'll get to Cashill in a minute, but let's first turn to James Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama*. Kloppenberg is a professor of intellectual history at Harvard, and he wants to identify and analyze the thinkers behind Obama's thinking. This means interviewing Obama's former professors, examining the articles he edited while president of the Harvard Law Review, and, above all, reverse-engineering his two books.

Based on this research, Kloppenberg believes that "Barack Obama is the product of three distinct developments": the American democratic tradition, the philosophy of pragmatism, and the academic debates that defined campuses during Obama's own education. Each contributed to Obama's desire for compromise and consensus. Each turns out to be more complicated than one might initially suspect.

Take Obama's pragmatism. Kloppenberg insists on separating vulgar pragmatism ("an instinctive hankering for what is possible in the short term") from philosophical pragmatism (an approach that "embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation")—and does so because Obama separates them, as well. It is the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, Kloppenberg argues, that has shaped Obama more than anything else.

Obama also draws on more contemporary sources. For example, Kloppenberg traces Obama's debts not only to the James Madison and Co., but also to Gordon Wood's argument for their "civic republicanism" and their desire for a continuous national debate. Kloppenberg cares most

about these political and historical concepts, and that means *Audacity*, which he notes is “often dismissed, incorrectly, as a typical piece of campaign fluff,” plays a larger role in his analysis than *Dreams*. Still, Obama’s more widely-praised memoir becomes important when Kloppenberg turns to the tug-of-war between universalism and particularism. Obama, he suggests, never picks a side, borrowing instead the best ideas from both.

This dynamic should feel familiar to Obama watchers. Indeed, his commitment to pragmatism requires him to admit that, sometimes, it doesn’t offer the best solution. “It has not always been the pragmatist,” Obama writes in *Audacity*, who “has created the conditions for liberty.” In a 2006 cover story for *Time*, Joe Klein counted more than 50 of these “on the one hand, . . . on the other hand” formulations in Obama’s new book. Klein saw them as a sign of the senator’s political savvy. But *Reading Obama* suggests they were something else, or something more: the result of a sincere and coherent worldview.

*Reading Obama* rarely tells a direct, X-read-Y-and-Y-cited-Z kind of story. Kloppenberg works through his intellectuals and intellectual movements with a style that is clear, methodical, and dry. (The one exception comes in his wonderfully barbed asides about the Washington media.) But *Reading Obama* earns its keep based on its content. Kloppenberg fills in Obama’s contexts with terrific capsule histories—of philosophy’s 1960s turn to scientism, of legal studies’ 1980s turmoil, and of individuals ranging from John Rawls to Clifford Geertz. This is not a beach or even a commuter read. But it is one where you will learn about much more than Barack Obama.

\* \* \*

And yet Kloppenberg keeps circling back to the president. For Kloppenberg, Obama stands as a philosopher president, someone whose peers include Adams, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Wilson. Of course, other than Wilson, those presidents wrote very little that resembles a modern book. Another way to say this is that, ultimately, Kloppenberg seems more interested in Obama’s words than in their form. Still, Kloppenberg is clearly a seduced reader, and one suspects this seduction began, Kennedy-like, with the form of those words—with a good old-fashioned single-author book.

That’s why Jack Cashill has targeted Obama’s books. In *Deconstructing Obama*, Cashill, an author, blogger, and Ph.D., argues that Obama could not have written his books—and that he turned to “unrepentant terrorist” Bill Ayers for assistance.

Let’s start with Cashill’s grand theory of Obama. In 1994 (and this is all according to Cashill), a “desperate” Barack asked Ayers to help him finish his egregiously overdue book. Ayers, recognizing Obama as a politically sympathetic up-and-comer, agreed to write or rewrite parts of *Dreams* and to edit others. Like all politicians, Obama got plenty of help with his speeches, and, when it came time for his second book, *Audacity*, he encouraged his staff to ape Ayers—and even brought back the man himself to write the book’s prologue and much of its epilogue.

To support this theory, Cashill turns to several kinds of evidence: chronological (Obama’s schedule didn’t allow enough time to write either book); biographical (Christopher Andersen’s *Barack and Michelle* has two unnamed sources who say Ayers helped Obama); statistical (while

he distrusts stylometric studies, Cashill includes them when they support his theory); and, most of all, stylistic (Obama and Ayers both rely on “the language of the sea,” though only Ayers comes from a nautical background).

While Cashill strives for a scholarly tone—he even *sic*’s his own emails—he packages *Deconstructing Obama* as a memoir-slash-detective story, moving from his initial discovery of Ayers’s role to his current battles with the the “Obama machine.” This tale is much less exciting than it sounds.

It’s also much less convincing. Take an example Cashill believes, based on its shared “imagery” and “structure,” “almost enough to convict” the president. In his memoir, *Fugitive Days*, Ayers writes: “The confrontation in the Fishbowl flowed like a swollen river into the teach-in, carrying me along the cascading waters from room to room, hall to hall, bouncing off boulders.” Now here’s the convictable passage from Obama’s *Dreams*: “I heard all our voices begin to run together, the sound of three generations tumbling over each other like the currents of a slow-moving stream, my questions like rocks roiling the water, the breaks in memory separating the currents.”

*Deconstructing Obama* includes many more stylistic overlaps, and most of them are just as flimsy: Obama and Ayers both misquote a line from Carl Sandburg’s famous poem “Chicago”; they both misspell the name of a city in South Africa (though they misspell it in different ways); they both love the words “flutter” and “ragged.” But Cashill sabotages even these examples by making errors of fact and interpretation. In order to score a cheap shot on Obama’s flip-flopping, Cashill wrongly says *Dreams*’ new 2004 preface was “written after his keynote speech at the Democratic convention,” when in fact it was finished well before. Cashill keys onto the word *ballast*, which Obama and Ayers both use in their memoirs. When the word is “flat-out misused” in *Audacity*—Obama describes religion as “a ballast against the buffeting winds of today’s headlines”—Cashill sees it as proof that Ayers has left the building. “No one in the know,” Cashill writes, “uses the phrase ‘ballast against’ in reference to a ship.” Perhaps not, but plenty of people use it in reference to “a balloon or airship” (the *OED*’s second definition), including Obama here.

And this gets at Cashill’s real method: bending or inventing evidence to fit his theories. He attacks the media for ignoring Andersen’s book, even after it received the Obama’s “tacit blessing.” (In fact, the White House so disliked the book that it canceled a staffer’s CNN appearance because the network booked Andersen—and quizzed him about the Ayers connection.) Cashill even bends the theories themselves. He critiques Obama’s student writing for pages at a time, but still takes the time to prove that “Pop,” an early poem, was actually written by Frank Marshall Davis (and that the poem’s “amber stain” may allude to an act of oral sex between Davis and Obama).

\* \* \*

The most distressing thing about *Deconstructing Obama*, then, may be what it reveals about the publishing industry. Cashill spends lots of time detailing how the media ignored his research—and this includes Republican outlets like Fox News and the *National Review*. Yet Cashill has now

published a book with the conservative imprint of Simon & Schuster, one of the biggest publishers in the country. Books may be our most important medium—the symbiotic relationship between Obama’s and Kloppenberg’s offers proof of that—but they’re also our least accountable. Anything that sells is fit to print, even if it is as grotesquely padded, delusionally argued, and comprehensively paranoid as *Deconstructing Obama*.

All this to say that you can’t trust a book by its cover. That’s a point Jack Cashill set out to make—and did, thoroughly, though not in the way he intended.