



# BECOMING

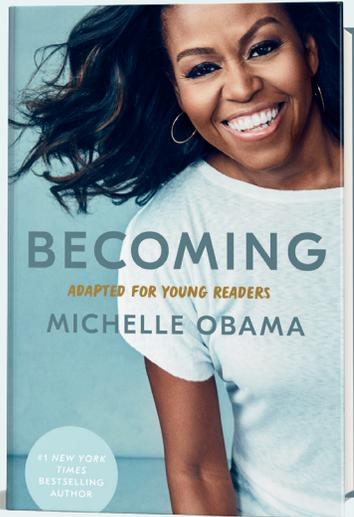
*ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS*

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#1 NEW YORK  
TIMES  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR

READER'S GUIDE

HC: 978-0-593-30374-0 • GLB: 978-0-593-30375-7 • EL: 978-0-593-30376-4



## MICHELLE OBAMA'S WORLDWIDE BESTSELLING MEMOIR, *BECOMING* IS NOW ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS.

### EXCERPT FROM THE FOREWARD: A NOTE TO READERS, YOUNG ADULT VERSION OF *BECOMING*

When I began the process of writing this book, I wasn't sure what shape it would ultimately take, let alone what the title might be. One thing I did know was that I wanted to be honest—and this edition for young readers is no different. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago in the 1960s and '70s, my parents, Fraser and Marian Robinson, always kept it straight with me and my brother. They never sugarcoated hard truths or presented their reality as anything other than what it was—because they knew we could handle it. I want to give you all that same respect.

So my promise to you is to give you my story in all its messy glory—from my first kiss and the insecurities I felt growing up to the chaos of a campaign trail and the strange experience of shaking hands with the Queen of England.

I hope that as you're reading my story, you'll also think about your own—because it's the most beautiful gift you'll ever have. The bumps and bruises, the joys and triumphs and bursts of laughter—they all combine to make you who you are. And who you are is not some static, unchanging thing. It will change every day and every year, and none of us know what shape our lives will ultimately take. That's what becoming is all about. And just like you, I still have a whole lot of becoming left to do, too.

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# LETTER TO EDUCATORS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

One beautiful spring day in 2018, I strolled through the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, and headed into a room abuzz with excited whispers. I followed the crowd and stood back to observe the most glorious scene. There was a line to approach and be photographed with the portrait of Mrs. Michelle Robinson Obama. I happily got in line with other Black girls and women and took my turn with the portrait. The closest word to describe how I felt is *pride*. I still feel a tremendous sense of pride and gratitude to live in a time when this woman also lives, works, and contributes to humanity. I'm sure I'm not the only one who then made my way to the gift shop to get every item with that image on it so that I could have her spirit with me in as many ways as possible. My mug with her portrait is still the one I use when I need a little boost of courage or determination.

Fast-forward a few months to the book launch for *Becoming*. I was lucky enough to get a coveted ticket to meet Mrs. Obama at the Tattered Cover—our local indie bookstore that has since become the largest Black-owned independent bookstore in the country. Again, I happily stood in line and waited my turn, but when the time came to meet her, to shake hands and get to speak with her, I lost all sense of time. We had the most lovely and spirited conversation, and I'm delighted to say that everything people exclaim about Mrs. Obama is true. She does make you feel like she knows you. She is open, personable, warm, and inviting. She does care as much about serving humanity as she appears to, and her words are backed up by her actions. After our few moments together, signed copies of *Becoming* in hand, a friend and I were lucky enough to be featured as part of her Instagram story. We spoke about what we were (and still are) becoming.

Which brings us to this guide! I am a librarian and secondary public school educator, a Black American, a great-grandchild of immigrants, and a citizen of the United States. I read a lot of books, as many as possible, all the time. I can honestly say that in reading *Becoming*, young people the world over, and those who serve them, are in for a treat. There are plenty of what educators like to call “teachable moments,” but there are also “relatable moments” in which readers will experience some of the most pivotal events of Mrs. Obama’s life. It is a tremendous gift to Black women in particular to hear such a personal account of her experiences growing up on the South Side of Chicago and her journey to the White House and beyond. We can all expand our view of history as it has been reported or taught while reading about the unprecedented circumstances that led the Obamas to the White House. Perhaps the most revelatory part of this book is the retelling of what it was like to experience the Obama administration through the eyes and heart of someone directly affected as a mother, wife, community organizer, and American citizen. I loved reading this book for all these reasons and so many more, and I look forward to sharing its wisdom with the incredible young people in my life and in my community. May these questions and ideas for consideration support your journey as you engage in the work of helping young people learn how important their voices and stories are. As Mrs. Obama says, “Becoming is never giving up on the idea that there’s more growing to be done.” I have found that there is definitely pain, and there can be struggle, but there is also so much joy, discovery, and personal growth in the journey to becoming. I hope this guide serves as a bridge to help take you there.



Julia E. Torres, veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver public schools



Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson



Being the First Family came with unique privileges and challenges, but through it all, we stayed true to ourselves.

# ESSENTIAL THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Review and discuss overarching themes and questions present in Mrs. Obama's memoir.

**ACTIVISM:** Both President and Mrs. Obama worked to find jobs that were in line with their beliefs and used their education, talents, and abilities in service of the people in their communities. *Do citizens have a responsibility to give back to their communities? How can community organizing and social activism change the world for the better?*

**FAMILY:** The Robinson and Obama families, as well as groups of extended friend families, have helped Mrs. Obama become the woman she is now. They also serve as a support system, helping her navigate the triumphs and challenges of life in the public eye. *How do our families shape the way we show up? How can families expand beyond those we live with or are related to?*

**GRIEF AND LOSS:** Both President and Mrs. Obama experienced the death of parents and loved ones. *How do "grief and resilience live together"? Can losing loved ones teach you how to love more completely?*

**PARENTHOOD:** Mrs. Obama makes it clear that one of her most important roles is being a mother. Even so, she faced challenges trying to parent her children on the campaign trail and in the public eye. *What challenges exist for caregivers who also serve the public? How is caregiving both an individual and a shared experience?*

**POLITICS:** Politics as a means to achieve social equality has always been a subject of debate. Mrs. Obama expresses her belief that humanity can be helped outside the realm of politics. *To what extent can politicians change the world for good? What makes political changes lasting and sustainable?*

**ROMANCE:** Mrs. Obama describes her experience meeting and falling in love with President Obama in a refreshingly honest way. She describes their partnership as that of two people with individual goals, aspirations, and lives who were complete before they met and chose to come together to build something bigger in service of humanity and in alignment with their beliefs. *How do societies romanticize meeting a partner and falling in love? What challenges do single women face regarding marriage and courtship that single men do not?*

**SCHOLARSHIP:** Mrs. Obama took school seriously, and in her pursuit of excellence, she attended and graduated from some of the most respected institutions in the United States. With the help of her teachers and her family, she also worked hard to succeed during high school. *What attributes and traits are necessary in order to achieve excellence in high school and college? What barriers exist for Black women that do not exist for others?*

**TRAVEL:** The Obamas traveled the world before they became public officials. Mrs. Obama describes her travels as healing experiences and opportunities for learning, growth, and expansion. *What happens on a mental, spiritual, and interpersonal level when individuals leave their familiar environments to explore other places? What are some social and economic challenges that exist for people from minoritized or underserved communities looking to travel abroad? How can those be overcome?*

# ESSENTIAL THEMES AND QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

**ON RACE:** Mrs. Obama identifies as Black American, but she discusses how ethnically and culturally diverse President Obama's family is and how she learned other ways of being Black when she traveled beyond her community. On the presidential campaign trail, the Obamas faced racial discrimination and were confronted with hateful narratives meant to discredit President Obama as a serious candidate for the presidency. It is important to talk to students about [media bias](#), [racism](#), and [implicit bias](#). Intra-racial discrimination and [colorism](#) are terms students should also understand. Blackness doesn't look one way, and though race is a social construct largely dependent on how others perceive an individual, there are different definitions and ways to experience and express culture and ethnicity.

**ON POLITICS:** American politics is largely a two-party system, which can often lead to a very divided country. Though Mrs. Obama's role as First Lady of the United States was not an official job with specific duties, she has become one of the world's best-known ambassadors for girls' education and one of the most revered and respected occupants of the White House. To keep students informed about the causes of political divides so that they don't miss out on stories like *Becoming* simply because of political affiliation, educators may want to check out this resource from [learningforjustice.org](#) on [Polarized Classrooms](#).

**ON STORIES:** Mrs. Obama tells readers about her experience meeting and being married to America's 44th president, but she also shares her experience of becoming Mrs. Michelle Obama and being human in this world. In the epilogue, she states that she is an "ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey." She also reiterates how important it is for all of us to share our stories so that we can come closer to one another, "begin to fear less, to make fewer wrong assumptions." She says, "There's power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice. And there's grace in being willing to know and hear others. This is how we become."

Photo courtesy of the University of Chicago School of Medicine



Photo courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archives



I worked hard to connect South Side communities with local hospitals and find residents affordable health care in my job at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

It was difficult, but important for me, to balance the needs of my family with the demands of my job.



# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Use the following questions and activity prompts to augment classroom and library lessons.

**1.** In *Becoming Me*, Mrs. Obama says, “Fifteen years before my parents moved to South Shore, the neighborhood had been 96 percent white. By the time I’d leave for college decades later, it would be about 96 percent Black.” Use the information from [Mapping Inequality](#) or any other resource you are familiar with to map the history of redlining or “white flight” in your city or community. What story does it tell? Create a Flipgrid or podcast episode with your peers to discuss your reactions. How does this compare to [white flight in Chicago](#)?

**2.** In chapter 3, Mrs. Obama says, “Inside our tight city grid, fire was almost a fact of life, a random but persistent snatcher of homes and hearts.” One of the most famous fires in history was the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which destroyed 17,500 buildings. Research the history of fires in residential areas in Chicago, particularly the South Side. What recent news stories can you find? Humanize the victims of these fires by finding out facts about their lives. Consider creating a wall of remembrance to honor the victims with information you find. What changes in city infrastructure or policies would need to happen in order to prevent such fires? How can you support community members looking to make these changes? How can you boost awareness of this ongoing issue?

**3.** In chapter 5, Mrs. Obama reveals that her high school was “meant to be 40 percent Black, 40 percent white, and 20 percent Hispanic or other. But when I attended, about 80 percent of the students were nonwhite.” Today, many schools in America are more segregated than they have ever been. Read [The Continuing Reality of Segregated Schools](#), and use your resources to research school segregation in your city and create a presentation or host a town hall event for adults in

your community to share your findings. Consider the following questions:

- a. What is the racial, cultural, and ethnic makeup of students in your city?
- b. What is the difference between school ratings for public and independent (“private”) schools?
- c. What is the correlation to race and ethnicity demographics in neighborhoods or districts? Is there a connection to property values or income distribution?
- d. What problems occur for individuals who attend segregated schools?
- e. What benefits can students from historically marginalized or underfunded communities gain from forming freedom schools?
- f. What is your solution to the modern problem of segregated schools?

**4.** Mrs. Obama says in chapter 9 that President Obama’s early organizing work focused on convincing people that “our stories connected us to one another, and that our stories could help create meaningful change.” How do you tell your story? Can you use it to create change? Think about the story of your school, your community, or any organization you are involved with. Create a storytelling project for a group that is important to you, or tell your own story. Consider watching or hosting a screening of [Girl Rising](#) for inspiration.

**5.** Research Project VOTE! and Public Allies. How were these initiatives instrumental in creating change for the communities in which they began and operated? Are there any organizations like them where you live? If so, how can you join the work? If not, could you start one?

# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

- 6.** Mrs. Obama is straightforward about being reluctant to support her husband's entry into politics. What is the history of Black people in America and politics? Consider voter disenfranchisement, the electoral college, redlining, and the origins of voter registration laws. It may be helpful to watch clips from [All In for Voting](#) to get a perspective of the broader picture. Consider doing some of the activities from the [All In for Voting lessons](#) on civic engagement.
- 7.** How did the Obama presidency represent hope and possibilities for change in national governance, not just for Black Americans but for all Americans? What changes have we seen in national leadership since President Obama's time in office? Research how you can support local politicians identifying as female and/or from underrepresented ethnic, racial, religious, or cultural groups. Many of them can be found in this article: [Groups Help Women and Minorities Get Elected](#)
- 8.** Watch and read the transcripts from President Obama's speeches on [July 27, 2004](#), [January 20, 2009](#), [February 21, 2009](#), and [January 21, 2013](#), or Mrs. Obama's speeches at the [Democratic National Convention in 2016](#) and in [New Hampshire in 2016](#). How does the personal information from *Becoming* add to your understanding of what was said in these instances? Using any of these speeches as an example, write a speech about an issue you care deeply about. Share your speech with as many or as few people as you like—just practice using your voice to promote change.
- 9.** Mrs. Obama planted a garden at the White House that became the people's garden. In *Becoming*, she remarks that "with a garden you never know for sure what will or won't happen—whether anything, in fact, will grow." Was the garden a success? Create a visual timeline or other representation of Mrs. Obama's initiatives as First Lady: Let's Move!, Reach Higher, Let Girls Learn, and Joining Forces. If there are organizations continuing the work started during that time, identify them and share how people in your community can lend their support.
- 10.** Mrs. Obama says, "When Barack was first elected, some commentators had declared that our country was entering a 'post-racial' era, in which skin color would no longer matter." Do you believe this happened? Read [We Were Eight Years in Power by Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) and discuss your thoughts with those in your community, using a protocol for holding [courageous conversations about race](#).
- 11.** Research the history and current state of the Black Lives Matter movement. What has been accomplished? What demands have not been met? How can you participate? Organize a chapter of [Black Lives Matter at School](#) and get involved in organizing your peers.
- 12.** Watch the only time [Mrs. Obama subbed for President Obama in a weekly address to the nation](#). Read the transcript. React. Respond. What is Let Girls Learn, and what is the state of it today? How can you get involved in supporting greater access to learning for girls around the globe? Identify barriers to learning and develop a social action plan for girls in a specific region of your country or the world. Present your findings using social media or an in-person information session. (Additional resource: The Obama Foundation's [girlsopportunitiesalliance.com](#))

Photo courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archives



This is my family dressed up for a celebration—my dad, Fraser; my mom, Marian; and my protective big brother, Craig.



Me as a baby with my great-aunt and piano teacher, Robbie.



Photo courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archives

Photo courtesy of the Obama-Robinson Family Archives



My dad, Fraser Robinson, worked for more than twenty years in the city of Chicago, tending boilers at a water filtration plant on the lakeshore. Even as his multiple sclerosis made it increasingly difficult for him to walk, he never missed a day of work.

# BOOK CLUB AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use the following questions for book club and community reading conversations.

## PROLOGUE

1. What can be gained by sharing moments in our lives when we have felt vulnerable? What lessons did Mrs. Obama learn from her father? Look for moments when those lessons reappear in the narrative.

## BECOMING ME

1. How do Mrs. Obama's childhood experiences with her great-aunt Robbie shape her pursuit of excellence?

2. What do we learn about Mrs. Obama's character after her fight with DeeDee? Make a prediction about how this lesson might help her later in life.

3. Mrs. Obama speaks in chapter 4 about "a habit that has sustained me for life, keeping a close and high-spirited group of girlfriends whose wisdom I can rely on." Who is in your inner circle? Make a list of those you feel you can truly rely on. Who relies on you?

4. In chapter 4, Mrs. Obama recalls that "it's because of my mom that whenever I catch the scent of Pine-Sol, I automatically feel better about life." What scents or other sensory memories remind you of your caregivers and the comforts of home? Write or record yourself talking about a short vignette or moment in time, using as much sensory detail as possible.

5. When Mrs. Obama says, "Most of my new high school friends were Black, but that didn't necessarily mean that our experiences had been the same," she describes different ways of being Black and an awareness that Black people are not a monolith, or all the same in cultural or ethnic expression. What different ethnic or cultural groups within Blackness have you learned about or experienced, either personally or indirectly?

6. How is Mrs. Obama's experience at Whitney M. Young High School different from her experience at Bryn Mawr Elementary School? What skills did these experiences help her develop?

7. When she was in high school, Mrs. Obama's parents invested in her by sending her on a school trip to Paris. How do you think this trip changed her? What impact can a change in environment have on a person?

8. When Mrs. Obama says, "Failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result," she is commenting on a suggestion of failure planted by a counselor who was supposed to encourage her to succeed. Have you ever felt that someone implied you would fail before you even tried to succeed? How did this affect your willingness to try?

9. What is the importance of the Third World Center at Princeton? How does it represent a safe space for students identifying as Black? Do you have such a space in your learning environment? Who are the mentors or trusted adults who make it work? If you don't have one, what would it take to create one?

# BOOK CLUB AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

**10.** Mrs. Obama says in chapter 6, “At Princeton I was representing my race.” That responsibility, coupled with the awareness of how overwhelmingly male and white the environment was, meant that “anytime I found my voice in class or nailed an exam, I quietly hoped it helped make a larger point.” What are some of the interpersonal and institutional barriers Black women face that others do not? How can allies lift some of the weight of representation for minoritized people in predominantly white, cis male spaces?

**11.** In chapter 8, Mrs. Obama says, “I thought of myself basically as knowing three languages. I knew the relaxed way we talked on the South Side, and the formal speech of the Ivy League, and now I spoke Lawyer, too.” This is known as code-switching and is an aspect of living in almost every society, especially in one with as much historical and institutional segregation as the United States. Do you or anyone you know have experience with code-switching? How does it help you connect with people in different spaces? Is it possible for people to code-switch into a cultural group or ethnicity to which they do not belong? Make a prediction about how this might serve Mrs. Obama in her future position as FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States).

Consider and discuss the following:

[Five Reasons Why People Code-Switch: Code Switch](#)

[The Costs of Code-Switching](#)

## BECOMING US

**1.** How is President Obama different from any other individual Mrs. Obama knows? What characteristics drew her to him? What makes him “like a unicorn—unusual to the point of seeming almost unreal”?

**2.** Compare and contrast Mrs. Obama’s personality as a “box-checker” with President Obama’s personality. How were their upbringings and families different and the same?

**3.** In chapter 9, Mrs. Obama states that “Barack was a unicorn, after all, with his unusual name, heritage, and ethnicity. He was used to having to prove himself, pretty much anywhere he went.” How do you suppose Mrs. Obama could relate to Mr. Obama in this instance?

**4.** How does Mrs. Obama go about changing hiring practices in her law firm so that more minoritized people could be employed there? What are examples of long-held hiring practices that perpetuate systems of exclusion and prevent inclusion?

**5.** What does Mrs. Obama notice about President Obama that shows her the kind of partner he will be? What do these realizations teach her about herself?

**6.** In chapter 9, Mrs. Obama says, “I had always thought that you could work your way out of just about any problem. Suzanne’s cancer was the first real challenge to my way of seeing the world.” How does this loss change her perspective?

**7.** In chapter 10, Mrs. Obama’s brother, Craig, says President Obama is “no ball hog. But he’s got guts.” Who in your life do you trust to confirm your impressions of people? Why do you trust them?

# BOOK CLUB AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- 8.** Mrs. Obama begins journaling early in her relationship with President Obama. What are the benefits of journaling? Do you or anyone you know keep a journal?
- 9.** Compare and contrast the future Mr. and Mrs. Obama's approaches to marriage. How do you feel about the institution of marriage? How is your opinion similar to or different from those in your environment?
- 10.** How does Mrs. Obama's father, Fraser Robinson III, influence her life? How does his death affect her?
- 11.** How is having a job different from having a career? Consider Mrs. Obama's experiences in city hall and the law firm. Which one appealed to her head? Which one appealed to her heart?
- 12.** How is President Obama's "simple, inspiring faith that if you stuck to your principles, things would work out" complementary to Mrs. Obama's approach to life?
- 13.** Why is the Obamas' vacation to Kenya described as "a pilgrimage"?
- 14.** How did Mrs. Obama's work with Public Allies and President Obama's experience with Project VOTE! prepare Mrs. Obama for her role as First Lady?
- 15.** How did Mrs. Obama find comfort and support after her miscarriage?
- 16.** Why doesn't Mrs. Obama want President Obama to enter politics? Does she change her mind?
- 17.** In chapter 14, Mrs. Obama describes some initial responses from Black community members to President Obama's decision to enter politics: "Barack wasn't a real black man, like them—someone who spoke like that, looked like that, and read that many books could never be." What does this reveal about divisions within Black communities and internalized notions of what it means to be Black in America?
- 18.** Compare and contrast expectations of male professionals with those of female professionals. What observations does Mrs. Obama make about professional inequities once she becomes a mother?
- 19.** Why does Mrs. Obama's hospital job work so well for her? Compare this to her first career choice of practicing law. How does her job at a hospital prepare her to work in the public sector?
- 20.** What do you suppose Mrs. Obama meant when she said, "We were swept into a more public life, where other people's expectations could quickly come to define us"? Consider the purposeful choice of the world "could."
- 21.** In Washington, Mrs. Obama became "Mrs. Obama in a way that could feel diminishing, a woman defined by her man." Consider how American politics has been historically dominated by white males in positions of power. How might Mrs. Obama, given what you know of her character, create a life for herself in such a place?
- 22.** How do the Obamas continue to define themselves as individuals while building a family together?
- 23.** Why doesn't Mrs. Obama like questions about how the Obamas are different from others on the campaign trail?

# BOOK CLUB AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

**24.** Describe some of the initial backlash Mrs. Obama faces while living life in the public eye. How does she react to it? What metaphor does she use to describe emotional violence inflicted by the press, critics, and political opponents?

**25.** On the campaign trail, Mrs. Obama makes the observation that “no one from the campaign had bothered to travel with me or show up for my events. I’d never received media training or speech prep. No one . . . was going to look out for me unless I pushed for it.” What can allies do to better support women in public positions?

**26.** What are Mrs. Obama’s emotions on election day and night, and how does her life change after that?

## BECOMING MORE

**1.** The position of First Lady has no official title or description. How did Mrs. Obama look to those who came before her for guidance?

**2.** Who does Mrs. Obama worry about most during the transition to life in the White House? Whom does she count on for support?

**3.** What pressures do the Obamas face that are unique to their family?

**4.** In chapter 19, Mrs. Obama describes her mother moving into the White House and says, “As she always had, my mom did things her own way.” How does Mrs. Obama embody this same approach to life? Look for examples as you read.

**5.** How was President Obama’s inauguration unique? Look beyond his being the first Black president of the United States.

**6.** What changes do the Obamas make to both policies and the physical space to make the White House more uniquely theirs?

**7.** How was Mrs. Obama’s work as the First Lady complementary to and an extension of President Obama’s goals and initiatives?

**8.** When President Obama spoke before a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, Mrs. Obama observed, “The absence of diversity was glaring—honestly, it was embarrassing—for a modern, multicultural country. It was most dramatic among the Republicans. At the time there were just seven nonwhite Republicans in Congress—none of them African American and only one a woman. Overall, four out of five members of Congress were male.” Has the makeup of members of Congress changed since 2009? Do you think it has changed permanently? Why do you think the US government has remained overwhelmingly white and male for so long, even as America becomes more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse?

**9.** How does the White House staff become like an extended family for Mrs. Obama, similar to those she had in Chicago, on the campaign trail, and at Princeton?

**10.** How does Mrs. Obama carry her family values with her as she travels the world to see new places and meet new people?

**11.** How does Mrs. Obama merge her old life as an organizer and activist in Chicago with her new life as First Lady of the United States?

**12.** What does the White House garden that Mrs. Obama began symbolize or represent?

# BOOK CLUB AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

- 13.** What challenges does Mrs. Obama face when deciding to work to combat childhood obesity? How does she decide to meet them?
- 14.** What challenges does Mrs. Obama face regarding the press that President Obama does not? How does she overcome them?
- 15.** What is the Let's Move! initiative? What changes have come about as a result?
- 16.** How does the Obama White House get young people involved in events to make sure they feel included and valued?
- 17.** In chapter 22, Mrs. Obama describes the night Osama bin Laden was captured and killed. How does her retelling compare to your experience or, if you were too young to remember, that of adults in your community?
- 18.** Describe how Mrs. Obama serves as a goodwill ambassador as she travels the world with President Obama.
- 19.** On the presidential campaign trail for the second time, Mrs. Obama says, "With my soft power, I was finding I could be strong." What is soft power? Do you have it? If so, how can you use it to make the world better?
- 20.** Compare the questions and thoughts going through Mrs. Obama's mind before the first and second terms.
- 21.** Does knowing more information about how the Obamas were personally affected by the [Sandy Hook school shooting](#) in Connecticut and the shooting of Hadiya Pendleton in Chicago change your understanding or perception of history? Of the state of gun violence in America?
- 22.** Compare and contrast the young people at Harper High School with the shooting victims in Sandy Hook, as well as society's response to violence in each of these communities. What are some reasons for differing responses by the public and the press?
- 23.** How do the Obamas resolve the problem of public demand for access to their personal lives? How does this solution serve as both a boundary and a reminder of the Obamas' humanity and right to privacy?
- 24.** Mrs. Obama quotes President Obama and says, "You may live in the world as it is, but you can still work to create the world as it should be." Do you believe people can be rooted in the world as it is and still work toward a world they imagine?
- 25.** How does Mrs. Obama "make a little noise for a cause"? What is the impact?
- 26.** What does the motto "When they go low, we go high" mean? What personal attributes does it encourage individuals to develop?
- 27.** According to Mrs. Obama, how can we "keep our feet pointed in the direction of progress"? How are the Obamas continuing to do this work?

## EPILOGUE

- 1.** Mrs. Obama says that becoming is "all a process, steps along a path. Becoming requires equal parts patience and rigor. Becoming is never giving up on the idea that there's more growing to be done." What growing have you already done on the path to becoming who you want to be? What growing is left to do?

Our daughters grew up during our time in the White House. This was Sasha's eleventh birthday, one of the eight birthdays she celebrated during Barack's presidency.



Official White House Photo by Sonya Hebert



Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson

Hugs are my favorite way to simply connect, like here with the girls from London's Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School.



I loved the White House garden because it helped promote nutrition and healthy living, but also because it's where I could get my hands dirty with kids as we rooted around in the soil.



Official White House Photo by Amanda Lucidon

# CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL READING

Use the following questions for reading conversations with young people and adults.

1. In chapter 2, in *Becoming Me*, Mrs. Obama describes herself as a “little black girl who’d found the courage to stand up for herself.” In what ways do you stand up for yourself? Who or what gives you the courage to do so? If you aren’t quite there yet, whom do you admire for doing so? What attributes or personality traits can you work on, or grow, to become more like them?
2. Does your family’s history include a connection to the Great Migration? What is your family’s story? Could you interview an elder in your community or family and find out any information that has been passed down either through written accounts or oral traditions? What have you learned? What surprises you? What information helps you make sense of the relationships you have with people you feel connected to today?
3. Have you ever been confronted with the question Mrs. Obama was asked as a young person, “How come you talk like a white girl?” If so, do you remember who asked you the question and what your response was? How did it make you feel? What are some of the underlying assumptions beneath this question? What are some responses young people can arm themselves with when met with a question like this?
4. Mrs. Obama recounts that “Every move [my mother] made . . . was rooted in the quiet confidence that she’d raised us to be adults.” From what you know, how is Black parenting different from parenting in other racial, cultural, or ethnic groups? What conversations do Black parents need to have with their children that other parents do not have (at least not in the same way)?
5. When Mrs. Obama’s college admissions counselor said, “I’m not sure that you’re Princeton material,” instead of demoralizing her, it made her determined to prove that counselor wrong. Think about a time when someone underestimated you. How did you respond?
6. In chapter 6, Mrs. Obama says, “It takes energy to be the only Black person in a lecture hall or one of a few nonwhite people trying out for a play or joining an intramural team.” Have you ever had this experience? How does it feel? Contrast it with being in a space intended specifically for Black people. How can you create safe spaces for Black girls or women who are experiencing being “the only”?
7. In chapter 7, Mrs. Obama says, “Caring a lot about what others think . . . can put you on the established path—the *my-isn’t-that-impressive?* path—and keep you there for a long time.” Black women are often socialized to seek the approval of others. How does this play a part in your life? If you’ve overcome the need to gain approval from others, what lessons did you learn?
8. In *Becoming Us*, Mrs. Obama describes the way President Obama told her of “a deep weariness in people—especially Black people—a cynicism bred from a thousand small disappointments over time.” Have you felt or witnessed this weariness? If so, what do you do to stay sustained in the work of living in a racially divided society? How do you stay whole?

# CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL READING (CONTINUED)

- 9.** In one of Mrs. Obama's journal entries, she confesses, "If there were not a man in my life constantly questioning me about what drives me and what pains me, would I be doing it on my own?" Think about the role of men in your life. Are there times when you've made important choices about your life thinking primarily about how they would be affected? Do you regret these choices? Why or why not? How can you independently steer the direction of your life?
- 10.** Mrs. Obama describes her mother's even temper as being "like shelter to me, a place to feel safe." Who makes you feel safe? Whom do you shelter from the potential harm of the world?
- 11.** When visiting Kenya, Mrs. Obama says that she "felt Nairobi's foreignness—or really, my own foreignness in relation to it." Have you ever been to Africa? Would you like to go? What was the journey of your people from Africa to your country? What cultural or ethnic influences exist in your life that are a reminder of Africa?
- 12.** In chapter 12, Mrs. Obama says, "I hoped to be exactly like my own mom and at the same time nothing like her at all." If you could pick your favorite attributes of your mother or caregiver, what would they be? How will you depart from the ways you were raised or the modeling you observed? For caregivers, if you could pick your favorite attributes from your daughter or a young person in your life, what would they be? What would you like to be different for them than what you've experienced in your life?
- 13.** Mrs. Obama says in chapter 17, "The more popular you became, the more haters you got." Has this happened to you or anyone you know? How did they handle it? How might you handle it if you become more visible or popular? What will you do to sustain yourself? What advice would you give to someone you love?
- 14.** Mrs. Obama describes how, on the campaign trail, she was often labeled as an "angry Black woman." Have you ever faced this stereotype? How did you respond? From your perspective, what would have to happen in order to rewrite the rules about when women and specifically Black women have a right to feel or express anger?
- 15.** In chapter 19, Mrs. Obama describes learning from the campaign that she "had to be better, faster, smarter, and stronger than ever." Have you ever felt you had to be better, faster, stronger, and smarter than anyone else just to prove you were worthy of the same (or lesser) treatment? How does reading this make you feel? How do you meet such challenges in a way that is both lasting and healthy? What happens if you refuse to?
- 16.** During her first year as First Lady, Mrs. Obama describes feeling "overwhelmed by the pace, unworthy of the glamour, anxious about our children, and uncertain of my purpose." Have you ever experienced similar feelings when much is expected of you? If so, how do you cope? What are some attributes that Mrs. Obama might have relied on to get through these times?

# CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL READING (CONTINUED)

**17.** Mrs. Obama says, “The important parts of my story . . . lay less in my actual accomplishments and more in what held them up—the many small ways I’d been supported over the years, and the people who’d helped build my confidence over time. . . . Each of them did his or her best to prepare me to overcome all the slights and indignities I was certain to encounter in the places I was headed—all those environments built primarily for and by people who were neither Black nor female.” Think of some places that most likely were not built and are not run by or for you. Who is on your team to help you prepare to navigate these spaces? What are some lessons you’ve learned from these people?

**18.** Mrs. Obama regularly asks herself and asks readers to consider the question, “Am I good enough?” Have you ever wondered if you are good enough? What forces or individuals reinforce the idea that you are? How can you be that reassurance for others?

**19.** In telling her story and through her social initiatives and actions, Mrs. Obama has “offered testament to the idea that it was possible, at least in some ways, to overcome invisibility.” Consider the ways Mrs. Obama has experienced both hyper-visibility and invisibility in *Becoming*. How has visibility or perceived invisibility impacted your life? Have you found ways to use visibility to help others?

**20.** Mrs. Obama says in the epilogue, “I continue to keep myself connected to a force that’s larger and more potent than any one election, or leader, or news story—and that’s optimism.” How do you maintain optimism and hope in the face of historical and present-day challenges to racial and gender equality? Who stands as an example of optimism or a beacon of hope for you? How can you be that beacon for others?

Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy



A hug is not always enough. Life can be unfair, like for Cleopatra Cowley-Pendleton, who lost her daughter, Hadiya, to gun violence in Chicago.



I greeted the girls when they came back from school nearly every day.



Official White House Photo by Pete Souza

Official White House Photo by Pete Souza



We usually stayed out of Barack's way at work, but we surprised him in the Oval Office on his birthday.



# JOURNAL PROMPTS

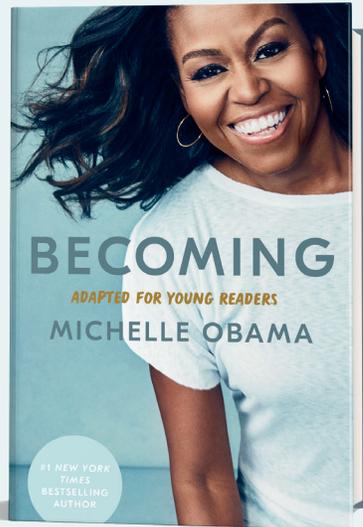
Use the following journal prompts with young readers to think and write about their own life experiences.

1. Mrs. Obama says in the preface, “Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.” What are the key elements of your life story that you would include if retelling the story to someone else? What events are easy to remember? Which are more difficult to recall? Who are the key people you would include?
2. In chapter 2, Mrs. Obama describes the discovery that “Without telling me, [my mother] went over to the school many times to convince them to do something” about the educational incompetence she was experiencing. Have you ever experienced dissatisfaction in school? If so, have your caregivers ever intervened on your behalf? What were the circumstances? How did the experience make you feel? Did anything change as a result? If you could change one thing about the way students in your school experience the education system, what would it be? Why?
3. Mrs. Obama discusses the many ways her parents and extended family members invested in her. Who invests in you? What sacrifices do they make? From your perspective, how has this affected your life?
4. In *Becoming Me*, Mrs. Obama writes about her journey through the school system and into the workforce. She states that “connections and privilege give some people an advantage over others.” How has that manifested in your life? Do you consider yourself to be a person who benefits from connections and privilege or is likely to benefit from connections and privilege in the future? If so, how will you use your privilege to create opportunities for others? If not, what personal skills or attributes do you have or want to attain that might help you make connections or attain privileges?
5. Mrs. Obama says in chapter 5, “The most successful people I know have figured out how to live with criticism, to lean on the people who believe in them, and to push onward with their goals.” Who believes in you? What are your goals? Consider making a list of them [like Octavia Butler did](#), and see what happens.
6. In chapter 7, Mrs. Obama describes taking “the love of [her] parents, the faith of [her] teachers, the music from Southside and Robbie, the meals from Aunt Sis, the vocabulary words drilled into [her] by Dandy—all of it” to help her become an adult who built a beautiful life for herself. What are the ingredients that are creating the person you will become? Who do they come from?
7. In chapter 9, Mrs. Obama says, “It was one thing to get yourself out of a stuck place, I realized. It was another thing entirely to try and get the place itself unstuck.” When have you felt stuck? How did you cope? What are factors about where you live that might make people feel stuck or unable to change their situation in life? How can you help to bring about change?
8. Mrs. Obama experiences the loss of several loved ones in *Becoming*. How does losing a loved one change someone’s perspective? What traits can it bring out in individuals?  
*Educators, please note that loss of an attachment figure is considered an [Adverse Childhood Experience, or ACE](#). Please use best practices for [trauma-informed education](#) before deciding to ask students to think about or engage with the topic.*

# JOURNAL PROMPTS

(CONTINUED)

- 9.** Some of Mrs. Obama's first journal prompts for herself were "What kind of person do I want to be? How do I want to contribute to the world?" Spend some time thinking and writing about your answers to these questions. How have the answers changed for you over time?
- 10.** When Mrs. Obama decided to change jobs, President Obama said to her, "Don't worry. You can do this. We'll figure it out." How might the simple act of having someone believe in you change your ability to believe in yourself? Who believes in you? How do they show it? What impact does this have on you? Who do you believe in? How do you show them?
- 11.** The questions the Obamas continually came back to—"Who were we? What mattered to us? What could we do?"—are good questions for anyone to ask before you are part of a partnership, and once you enter into one. Take some time to consider and journal your thoughts about the answers to these questions.
- 12.** When Mrs. Obama meets Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace, she is criticized by the media for touching the queen, a gesture which, according to the press, "was *not done*." Her response is that, "If I hadn't done the proper thing at Buckingham Palace, I had at least done the human thing." If you could meet a world leader, whom would you pick? What does the world miss or gain when elevating everyday people to iconic status?
- 13.** According to what you've read in *Becoming* so far, can a "free press" also be oppressive? How has social media changed the way people show up in the world? How has it changed politics? You may not remember a time before social media, but you can ask elders around you to hear more about it.
- 14.** Of her time in the White House, Mrs. Obama says, "Life was teaching me that progress and change happen slowly. Not in two years, four years, or even a lifetime. We were planting seeds of change, the fruit of which we might never see. We had to be patient." Do you believe that change takes time? Think of some changes you would like to see in the world. What "seeds of change" can you plant? What actions can you take today?
- 15.** During a [2016 Democratic Convention speech in Charlotte, North Carolina](#), Mrs. Obama remarked that "being president doesn't change who you are; it reveals who you are." What do you think you'd be like as president? Think of your strengths and vulnerabilities. If you have aspirations of becoming president, write the journal entry in the form of a letter to your future self.



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**WINNER OF THE GRAMMY AWARD FOR BEST SPOKEN WORD ALBUM**

This guide was created by JULIA E. TORRES, a veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver public schools. As a teacher and activist committed to education as an expression of freedom, her practice is grounded in the work of empowering students to use language arts to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia was given the 2020 NCTE Colorado Affiliate Teacher of Excellence Award and was elected to the board of directors of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE. Julia facilitates workshops and professional conversations about anti-bias and anti-racist education, social justice, and culturally sustaining pedagogies in language arts, as well as digital literacy and librarianship. Her work has been featured in several publications, including NCTE's *The Council Chronicle*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *School Library Journal*, and Al Jazeera's *The Stream*, as well as on PBS Education, NPR, KQED's *MindShift*, the *New York Times's* Learning Network, ASCD's *Education Update*, *Rethinking Schools*, and elsewhere.

