



A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother

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Barack Obama has written extensively about his father, but little is known about Stanley Ann Dunham, the fiercely independent woman who raised him, the person he credits for, as he says, "what is best in me." Here is the missing piece of the story.

Award-winning reporter Janny Scott interviewed nearly two hundred of Dunham's friends, colleagues, and relatives (including both her children), and combed through boxes of personal and professional papers, letters to friends, and photo albums, to uncover the full breadth of this woman's inspiring and untraditional life, and to show the remarkable extent to which she shaped the man Obama is today.

Dunham's story moves from Kansas and Washington state to Hawaii and Indonesia. It begins in a time when interracial marriage was still a felony in much of the United States, and culminates in the present, with her son as our president- something she never got to see. It is a poignant look at how character is passed from parent to child, and offers insight into how Obama's destiny was created early, by his mother's extraordinary faith in his gifts, and by her unconventional mothering. Finally, it is a heartbreaking story of a woman who died at age fifty-two, before her son would go on to his greatest accomplishments and reflections of what she taught him.

A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother Details

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Joan Snodgrass Callaway says

We heard about Stanley Ann Dunham during Barack Obama's run for President in 2008. We knew that she had been a young single mother in Hawaii in the early 1960s with a black son that she had to support. By emphasizing this part of his mother's history, Barack Obama assured people that, yes, he understood their economic pain. He told us of his determination to provide universal health care stemmed from his mother, fighting with her insurance company to not cut off her coverage while fatally ill with cancer.

What we did not know about was the sophistication and complexity of Ann Dunham's professional life as an anthropologist and pioneer working from the "bottom up" for AID and the Ford Foundation, to help create the whole field of micro-lending in which poor women began creating their own businesses. Dunham worked for the Ford Foundation for four years and Scott's reporting on her sojourn with that international organization is fascinating. She loved the job but in many ways was much more qualified than the Ivy-educated men who ran Ford's Indonesian office. She was fluent in the national language. They were not. She had deep friendships in scores of villages, and was in fact, married for a time, to an Indonesian. Villagers had actually seen her give birth to an Indonesian baby. We did not know of her years long struggle to complete her dissertation for her PhD.

Scott's prodigious, intelligent reporting -- she interviewed more than 200 people who had known Dunham -- has produced a biography rich in detail about a strong-willed, impulsive, often generous, financially stressed woman of the late 20th century who admittedly, made many mistakes in her personal life, but never gave up her dream of doing something that she thought was important, while giving her two children good educations and good values. She succeeded, but her life was rocky, seemingly often lonely and financially difficult. Her parents, living in Honolulu brought up Barack Obama from the age of ten and Scott tells us that Dunham often told friends that "he was brilliant" and that she missed him terribly. No one else has recreated Dunham's life with its exotic intellectual interests, and stormy marriages, the way Scott has. Barack Obama is largely absent physically in this detailed book, and it is only in the epilogue, which brought tears to my eyes that we get a glimpse in her interview with Barack of the deep bond between mother and son. It becomes clear that that bond with his mother even though years spent apart influenced his cool demeanor, his determination to help people. She regularly would write even on her busiest days two paragraphs to him that undoubtedly had influence on his psychological and philosophical development.

Darlene says

Having read *Dreams From My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama, I was very interested to read the story of his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham's life. Ms. Scott does a wonderful job describing the logistics of Ann Dunham's life and I found her to be a fascinating person. She made choices in her life (especially regarding the raising of her children) which I would not be comfortable with but she comes across as an open minded, caring and adventurous spirit. Reading about her life and her choices did provide me with some insight into the life and character of her son, our 44th President. Although I really enjoyed reading this book, I couldn't help but feel that I ended up knowing a lot of facts about Ann Dunham but I

really didn't develop a true sense of what sort of woman and mother she was on a personal level. Perhaps that is because she, like her son, preferred to keep her innermost feelings more to herself. I did come away from this book though feeling very strongly that she would have been thrilled and very proud of the man her son became.

Susan says

The title of this book is perfect, because Stanley Ann Dunham was an utterly unique woman. Janny Scott does an incredible job exhaustively detailing her life, having spoken to hundreds of Ann's colleagues and family.

That exhaustive research contributes to one of the problems I had with this book - there is so much attention to chronicling every aspect of Ann's professional life that it becomes overwhelming at times. The bombardment of technical details of Ann's work and the seemingly hundreds of intimate friends she had become too much after a time. The other flaw I found was that the author seemed to lose her objectivity in her admiration for her subject. Not that that admiration was necessarily misplaced, but it made me question her credibility just a little.

I recommend this book if you're interested in reading about accomplished women or curious about how the President took as his core values such things as education, hard work, intelligence, tolerance for the views of everyone, and working to make the world a better place for the least among us. His mother didn't just teach these values, she lived them all her life.

Mmars says

The author warns the reader that if they are looking for a book about Barack Obama and his mother this is not it. And won't the majority of readers pick this book up out of curiosity about their relationship and what led his mother to Indonesia and why Barack was raised as much by his maternal grandparents as he was by his mother? Of course we will. Other books will undoubtedly address that issue more thoroughly. But this important book lays the groundwork for not yet written biographies of President Obama by examining his mother's life and anthropological work.

In fact, I will say that it takes an interest in anthropology and public affairs to appreciate this book and its intent. It would also be of interest in women's studies and feminism. For that is the substance of who Stanley Ann Dunham was. She married an Indonesian man, but her studies and work always came first – for herself and for her children. Though I, a layman, felt bogged down by the technicalities of her studies, by the end of the book I felt like I knew her very well. The author could hardly have been less thorough in interviewing people who had known her.

Ironically, the most difficult source work surrounded her family and ancestors. Though extensive in tracing her lineage, there was little to no written record and few alive or willing to be interviewed. And even then the author ran into admittedly unreliable information.

Even her young adult years in Hawaii and how she came to meet Obama Sr. and bear his child is largely unknown. But once her college years are done and she begins her fieldwork in Indonesia the book plumps up. And what she accomplished and how her personality shaped her ability to become as Indonesian as a western woman possibly could is highly admirable. This is a laudatory biography. But somehow it feels okay

because she was so human and humane.

Unfortunately, I was not the best audience for this book. I highly recommend it to students interested in the above mentioned fields. I just too frequently had to push my way through.

Michele Weiner says

I thought this biography of Stanley Ann Dunham, the mother of Barack Obama, was interesting on the whole, but ultimately unsatisfying. The professional portion of Ann's life, the well-documented part, is covered in stultifying detail. I put the book aside for six months or more to recover from the endless facts about which villages she went to and what interviews she did. Ann Dunham deserves to have her working life recognized. She was intrepid, thorough, tenacious and successful, ultimately making an impact in both anthropology and the financial health of women in the Third World. She proved in her field work that local tiny businesses like ironworking and fabric weaving are more profitable than agriculture in rural life and a government could support economic and social progress by investing small amounts with the women who were often supervising family business enterprises while husbands farmed. Had she lived longer, she would have attended the Beijing conference at which Hillary Clinton made her famous speech about women's rights. But by that time she had become ill with the cancer that took her life at 52.

Ann Dunham was an unconventional woman from a somewhat dysfunctional family background whose declaration of independence from her midwestern parents included an early pregnancy and marriage to a haughty African student who left her almost immediately. Single motherhood did not prevent her from pursuing her dreams of world travel and study. She relied on her mother, with whom she had a distant relationship, to provide the stability, financial and otherwise, that her young son needed. As Barack Obama has said, when she made her decisions about her employment, considerations such as health care and retirement savings were not a factor. Without her parents' support, she could not have done as she did, and Barack would not have had the firm foundation and superior education that he had.

After marrying an Indonesian man, Ann had a second child, a daughter named Maya. That marriage also ended in divorce, and when Barack was about ten, his mother decided that his future depended on getting a good American education. She sent him home to Hawaii, to her parents, who helped pay his tuition at a private school. He never lived with his mother again, and when he went off the the mainland for college, he did not return to Hawaii to start his career. He had met his future wife by then, and moved to her home, Chicago to make his mark. His mother died just before he ran for office. He was not at her side.

Barack Obama wrote a book about his father, but has said since then that had he known he would lose her so soon, he would have paid more attention to his mother. It seems to me, reading between the lines, that Barack Obama did not have an easy relationship with his mother, though he speaks of her in a mostly complimentary fashion now, recognizing her generosity of spirit and intellect while taking her gently to task for her failure to be practical or organized.

The subject of *A Singular Woman* seems to have been a very private person. She didn't leave a heap of letters explaining herself, and she didn't share her deepest feelings with anyone. I suppose it's hard to write a satisfying biography of such a silent person, so I am sympathetic to the author, but disappointed that I didn't learn more about what made the unconventional Stanley Ann Dunham tick.

Catherine says

Scott reveals many aspects of Stanley Ann Dunham's life, which for the most part have escaped general public knowledge prior to this book.

There's a huge focus on Dunham's career as an anthropologist and her work in Indonesia. I would have liked to have known a bit more about what was really going on in her personal life, but it seems that that information is lost forever with the woman. My tendency is to be judgmental about her choices to leave her children at various points in their lives, but I don't think that's fair given that the book does touch on how difficult it was for her during those separations. However, I did come away with the impression that she definitely always put herself first.

The book was enlightening to a point, but Scott's research was only able to unearth just so much, and the rest of Dunham's personality was reflected through the filter of friends and family interviews. Maybe that really was her full story but I felt there were a few too many missing pieces about who Dunham really was personally. Closer to 3-1/2 stars.

Maggie says

wow. indeed a singular woman, worthy antecedent of our current president barak obama, and a woman of integrity. she had a deeply held conviction to her principles and led her life as seamlessly as possible and instilled in her two children (barry and maya) a deep respect for others and a life of action on behalf of others. i also found a surprising affinity with stanley ann dunham. she was three years older than me and had to make hard decisions and "keep on keeping on" in the face of others seriously not holding up their end of the marriage bargain. yet she raised her children under her singular strength and they benefited from her wisdom and abilities. she was an anthropologist in indonesia (mostly) and was able to "be with" the poor people that she studied AND served. long before anyone won a nobel prize for micro-finance, ms. dunham was doing that very thing for low income women and the crafts they sold. i had the thought while reading this biography that 7th heaven (the highest of the high) might well be a special place filled with WOMEN anthropologists. if so, i have yet another reason for getting to heaven so that i can have access to that outer door and hope that these special women might invite me in for a cup of tea and a chat. a worthy milieu for sure!

the biography is very well written: to take disparate sources and weave a clear picture of this special woman produced, for the reader, a coherence to ms. dunham's life. most excellent. i finished reading this book on mother's day: fortuitous, imo.

a book i highly recommend.

Vikki Marshall says

This is a captivating biography on the unconventional life of Stanley Ann Dunham, President Barack Obama's mother. She is a woman who lived life to the fullest and shunned normal standards in order to

follow her true calling, a profoundly tolerant education. We are allowed a glimpse of an exuberant and joyful woman who cared for the plight of all people, regardless of race or religion. Ann Dunham spent the majority of her life in academic circles in pursuit of a PhD in Cultural Studies. She was a woman who married men from two entirely different cultures and had children who tagged along with her as she immersed herself into Indonesian studies. Through all the diversity she exposed her children to it is obvious how they grew to be such compassionate and charitable adults. Dunham's life was complex and often chaotic but somehow she managed to place education at the forefront of her life. Most impressive was her involvement in some of the first International micro-financing programs to help the underprivileged women she worked so closely with and how in doing so she helped entire communities. She had a love of Indonesian crafts and handiworks and would spend great lengths of time among the craftsmen and women. But it's her small influences that seem so relevant today, her ability to instill intelligence into a new generation and how her enlightened kindness towards all people left an optimistic idealism in her wake. She is a woman I would have loved to have known.

Mikey B. says

As the title depicts, Stanley Ann Dunham (to be referred to subsequently as Ann), was indeed a "singular" individual. It takes a lot of drive and personality force for a woman to remove herself from her cultural roots and go and live in an entirely different country (Indonesia). As the author suggests, Ann found her niche in Indonesia and thrived. She learnt the language (well one of the main languages) and spent close to half her life there. She became part of Indonesia – but never forsook her American roots – the education she insisted on and provided for her two children attests to this.

Even if she was not the mother of a President of the United States this book would still be of interest – and that is its strength. Ann's story and her life passages are of great interest. We come away with a picture of an altruistic and complex person – who to some extent could not fit the mold, but who also kept true to herself.

Both the author and her son qualify her restless and itinerant lifestyle as being made possible by the constant support of Ann's parents. This is a family where there were no recriminations – as in Ann's failed marriages or her career choices – their love and support for each other was a constant.

The last chapter of Ann's death from cancer is poignant where we gain more insight into the American health insurance as a private business.

A few more comments:

There is no index in my paperback edition.

The author tends to skip back and forth chronologically which I found frustrating.

This book is primarily concerned with Ann (not Barack).

The author gives us some speculation as to why she was named "Stanley" Ann.

For those who think that America does nothing but exploit Third World countries this book demonstrates otherwise.

This is very much a highly enjoyable read.

Michelle L says

On the plus side, the impression unveiled of this previous mystery woman is fascinating, even very telling v-a-v her son.

Equally important, this woman's story is very much the story of the 1969s-70s liberated woman who was not burning her bra or marching for rights - thoroughly necessary activities - but the more typical young woman, one who found herself in an immeasurably expanded world and went out into it, with determination, smarts, and considerable personal difficulties. Stanley Ann was very much of her time.

But I do have some problems with the first half of the book. While it's chockful of information, it feels confusing. There is no narrative thrust. Consequently, this spilling cornucopia of so many people, so many locations, so many events - seems to me to demand an index, a family tree, possibly even a timeline, and a photo listing. And it might have had a more fulfilling conclusion.

With all that, it's a rewarding read for all the effort the reader - as well as the fact-oriented author - puts into it.

Andy Miller says

The theme of this biography of Barack Obama's mother is that she was more complex, more interesting and had more depth than the various different perceptions that people have of her today. The book succeeds in that goal, her work in her anthropology studies in Indonesia and her later work with the banking community in providing credit to rural women in 3rd world copies anticipated the development of the microcredit movement.

The author, Jenny Scott, also writes of Obama's mother early life including background of her parents' lives; my favorite chapter may have been her high school years in Mercer Island. She also addresses how Obama's mother changed her first name throughout her life and resolves the issue for the biography by referring to her by the name that she used during the time of her life the biography was looking at the time

Scott also addresses the big issue, Obama's mother's decision to send Barack to Hawaii at age 13 to be with his grandparents and go to school while she returned to Indonesia to work in anthropology. Scott is sympathetic on this issue, she argues that she her professional opportunities were limited by staying in Hawaii and that Obama's educational opportunities would be limited if he went back to Indonesia. Still, I was somewhat unconvinced especially as you read of her some of her travels during that time, there were times it appeared that she chose to make personal travels instead of going to Hawaii to see her son in his high school years.

I finished the book feeling that while I learned about Obama's mother, I did not feel that I "knew" her the way I usually do after reading a biography. I think this is because the biography often felt like a long newspaper article instead of a biography, which of course is consistent with the book starting out as a series of long articles for the New York Times

Nancy says

When I read Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, I came away strangely unsatisfied. (You can see that review here: <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/88...>)

I wanted more about what made him the man he became. This book provides some of that missing information and describes a woman who was very interesting in her own right.

Stanley Ann Dunham was born in Kansas but raised all over the United States, landing in Hawai'i in 1960 with her parents. She met an African exchange student at the University of Hawai'i early in her freshman year, was immediately smitten, got pregnant, married him and set herself on a path much different from what her parents expected for the baby girl they had in 1942.

The marriage to Barack Obama Sr. was very brief. A more profound change in the direction of Ann Dunham's life came through a subsequent marriage to an Indonesian exchange student which produced another child and a life long love affair with Indonesia and its culture.

This is a book about Ann Dunham, but it gives a fascinating peek into the influences that created President Obama. It is well worth reading on both accounts. I discovered an interesting woman who followed a very unusual path and learned more about the family that formed the man who became President Obama.

Diane says

The amazing rating comes more from the subject of the book than writing flash and wizardry. It's a very well-researched and smoothly presented biography of a woman bolder than most, with incredible energy and generosity and vision who died way too young. Can't help but wonder what more she might have contributed beyond what she'd already done - especially to micro-loan banking and improving the lot of women around the world - if she hadn't died at 52. I confess I began reading for insights into her famous and important son, but came away with a new heroine in my personal pantheon. There were times when I got a bit bogged down in names, as there are so many of them, not a few multi-syllabic. But it was worth sorting out. In some ways I see her as bordering on saintly. Not through any kind of pious manner - which she did not seem to have - but through daily, yearly, lifelong hard work on behalf of people who benefitted from her intelligent, wise help. She loved fun, she loved beauty, she loved the particulars of things, she loved people and she loved to figure out how to bring them together to help them help themselves to a better life than industrialization and profit-motive capitalism tend to offer. Good read.

Laura Aquino says

This is a book that contradicts all the negative press about President Obama's mother. She should be highly praised as a champion who actually developed policies that helped the poor progress economically. Through her Anthropological studies in Indonesia, she grew into a highly - skilled and intellectual professional who was sought after and hired by several international non-profit agencies around the world. This book also eliminates the "birthplace" controversy about Obama, as she was 17 and at the University of Hawaii when she met his father, who was a visiting student from Kenya. There is no reason or way she would go to Kenya

to have a baby at age 17, while a student at the University. Her Kenyan husband stayed in Hawaii until Barack was 10 months old, then he abandoned her to study at Harvard. Also to be admired is her mother, whose support enabled her to pursue her dreams. I highly recommend this as a biography of a strong and inspiring woman!! You will also learn tons about anthropology, Indonesia, and Aid organizations!

Louise says

Author Janny Scott spent 2 years in research that spanned the US mainland, Hawaii and Indonesia. She interviewed over 200 friends and colleagues and read Dunham's field reports, letters and research papers. She had the cooperation of the Payne family, Maya Soetoro and even interviewed President Obama.

The result; however, is not as impressive as the effort. I think this is because the approach is that of a reporter and not a biographer. Interviews are dutifully reported. Some say that Ann boasted about her children all the time, but others say they were surprised to learn she had kids. Some friends report that she shunned doctors but her actions contradict this. Some say she was not judgmental but others say she was highly opinionated.... and so it went.

The clearest interview, that with President Obama, is not contradicted since he mentions new points, missed by others, and perhaps Scott too. He says that his mother was disorganized and that his grandparents sheltered him from the chaos of her life. This comes at the end, and is nowhere developed or critiqued in the text.

The reporting style works for the history of the Paynes and the Dunhams and for documenting the saga of Ann's health care claim. These are important biographical pieces. The well reported sections on anthropology, microfinance, Indonesian villages, the people Ann worked with and the 5 pages describing the East-West Center in Honolulu, with the few biographical elements removed could stand as independent articles on these topics.

There are a lot of good pictures. There are good plates and relevant photos printed side by side with the text. The page 27 photo of the President's great-great-grandparents is worth 1000 words. There is no index.

The subject is fascinating. This is the only biography of Stanley Ann Dunham that I know of, and for this alone, it is worth a read. Hopefully, someone more experienced in the biographical writing will take this up in the future. While this review, might dwell on the negative, Scott has made a contribution by providing a blueprint for the next person to try to define this fascinating and indeed, singular, person.
