Barack Obama
The Story
By David Maraniss
(Simon & Schuster; 641 pages; $32.50)

"The story of a life is not a life," novelist and critic John Barth reminds us. "It is a story." Starting from "what happened" and working backward, biographers construct chronological narratives from the (always incomplete and often contradictory) evidence that is available to them. They select, arrange and omit. They fill in gaps. They speculate about influences, motivation and character. They look for - and find - patterns that explain the behavior of their subjects.

Despite the authoritative "the" in the subtitle of his book, David Maraniss, an associate editor at the Washington Post and the biographer of Bill Clinton, Roberto Clemente and Vince Lombardi, understands that biography is not a science. Life, he writes, "is chaotic, a jumble of accidents, ambitions, misconceptions, bold intentions, lazy happenstances, and unintended consequences."

No one can measure, with precision, how genes, family and environment shape individuals or how they shape themselves in responding to the world around them.

Nonetheless, Maraniss believes that biography can identify and illuminate its subjects' most important and enduring tendencies, traits and themes.

His "Barack Obama" is biography at its best. A prodigiously researched and exquisitely written multigenerational account that begins in Kenya and Kansas, the book follows "Barry" from Hawaii (yes, he was born there) to Indonesia (no, he isn't a Muslim), Occidental College, Columbia University and a job as a community organizer in Chicago, and ends before Obama gets a law degree from Harvard and enters politics.

A recurring theme in Obama's early life, grounded in a repetitive cycle of loss and recovery that may help explain his presidency, Maraniss argues, is his determination to escape traps, including the trap of race in America, "with its likelihood of rejection and cynicism."

Although in Chicago he began to embrace his identity as a black man, Maraniss' Obama remains cautious, inclined to hold back, take in life "in all its colors and contradictions," and look past struggle to resolution and unity.

Almost without exception, Maraniss' assessments are judicious and persuasive. He reviews the circumstantial evidence behind his educated guess that Obama's father physically abused his mother.

And he refuses to draw "a straight line" from Obama's assertion in a paper he wrote in his third-grade class in Jakarta, Indonesia ("Someday I want to be president") to his race to the White House 40 years later. For the rest of his adolescence, Maraniss points out, Obama exhibited no signs of "oversize yearning" or, in fact, much interest in politics.

When Simeon Heninger, a friend at Punahou High School in Hawaii, claims that another uncharacteristic declaration, made at a party following weekend exams, that the human race would be better off if people stopped wearing clothes, revealed loneliness and pent-up anger at a society that branded him inferior because he was black, Maraniss opts for "the more plausible likelihood:" Obama may have been "so stoned that he was talking nonsense" or "trying to put the moves on an attractive woman on a Friday night."

And Maraniss notes that as Obama walked across the Columbia University campus, clad in a bomber jacket, he affected a "distinctive, purposeful" stride, only to add "What was going on inside his head - that was the mystery."

With subtlety and sophistication, Maraniss captures and conveys Obama's sensibilities and sensitivities. The experience of leaving and being left, of having a black African father and a white American mother and living with his grandparents, he indicates, taught Obama to adjust to uncertain circumstances, reinforced his sense of himself as an outsider and motivated him to build a more expansive "community" through public engagement.

Throughout his early years, Maraniss demonstrates, Obama made it his business not to be noticed. As a young adult, he retained "his Hawaiian Cool head, main thing sensibility," but began to use it less as a shield from the pain of leaving and being left than "as the
protective armor covering his determination to make a mark in the world.”

Maraniss ends his book with Obama, "his life in relative order, Harvard waiting, Chicago firmly established as home," making a trip to Nairobi to make contact with his African roots. The moment he landed in Kenya, Maraniss tells us, he could no longer be a detached observer.

Shown a registration book his grandfather carried and a letter of recommendation designed to get his father admitted into an American college, Barack Hussein Obama stepped out of a hut and into a yard, walked toward a mango tree, fell to his knees and wept. Although he had some distance to go to integrate the disparate parts of his history into a coherent whole, Obama had found "not only a home but a path, and was driving hard now." Someday he might become America's president.

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