

BOOK REVIEW

by Beryl Clemens Smith

A BOUND MAN – Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win

by Shelby Steele

Published 2007

The NY Times says, "Steele has given eloquent voice to painful truths that are almost always left unspoken in the nation's circumscribed public discourse on race."

Chicago Sun Times says, "Breathtakingly insightful....Anyone concerned with the endless standoff that is black-white relations in this country has a duty to read Shelby Steele."

About Shelby Steele: "I am rather sensitive to all this because I, too, was born to a white mother and a black father..." Steele is a "research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University." His other books: The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America; and White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era.

THE BOOK:

PART I: The Man

Ch. 1 – The High Possibility

"Not only does he (Obama) stand in stark contrast to a black leadership with which Americans of all races have grown exhausted – the likes of Al Sharpton, Jessie Jackson, and Julian Bond – he embodies something that no other presidential candidate possibly can: the idealism that race is but a negligible human difference." (pp.7-8)

Ch. 2 – Plausibility

"Obama must display enough natural talent to be immune to the stigma of affirmative action....Affirmative action has become a stigma of minority inferiority in American life." (p.13)

"Obama has separated himself from the deadly stigmas of black inferiority and white paternalism. He is unstained by the former and in no need of the latter." (p.15)

Ch. 3 – Search for the Father

"Out of an understandable race fatigue, many Americans want to believe that there are people on whom race sits very lightly, people whose very hybridism suggests the possibility of transcending race. But Barack Obama is not such a person." (p.18)

This chapter describes Obama's relationship to his father, who left the family when Barack was 2.

"Barack's father had created several families in Africa and America, and then left them." (p.22)

Ch. 4 – Becoming an Authentic Black

"Did Barack Obama's search for his real father simply fold into his search for a secure black identity?" (p.25)

"...he will likely be trailed by the feeling that he is jerrybuilt where others are naturally solid." (p. 27)

In this chapter, Steele discusses his own struggles with the concepts & realities of "blackness" and "whiteness." He discusses this in the context of "the late sixties and seventies, when the idea of a militant black identity – based on protest politics and a tight cultural/racial unity – took over black America." (p.29). Steele found himself in what he calls "a territory of stark inauthenticity," he, too had a mother who was white. He says, "Whenever collective identities become self-conscious, sharply defined, and highly politicized, people begin to survive them through duplicity. Still, for the mixed-race black, both the need to belong and the inability to believe are likely to be more pronounced. Racial 'authenticity' will require even more duplicity and pretense." (p.30)

This is what faces Barack Obama. Who is he? Where does he belong? Can he bridge the divide between the Jesse Jacksons, Al Sharptons and the white majority?

Ch. 5 – Belonging

"The ache at the center of *Dreams from My Father* (Obama's autobiography) is this seemingly permanent ache of not belonging. From adolescence onward, Barack Obama pursues the elusive grail of belonging as if his legitimacy as a human being depends on it. It is clearly the ongoing drama that frames his life....To be a 'true' black, a 'down' brother or sister, a slight corruption is also called for. One must develop a little habit of self-betrayal." (p.34)

"This is the double blind, the crucible, really, that sets up Barack Obama to become a bound man." (p.38)

Barack is caught between the tug of his "whiteness," knowing how his white mother got him up at 4:30 in the morning to tutor him, when he was attending inferior schools in Indonesia, and the pull of the "black nationalist" mentality that thrives on "victimhood."

Ch. 6 – Two Women

In this chapter, Steele tells about Barack meeting a young lady in college by the name of Joyce. She is of a multiple racial background (Italian, African, French, and Native American). She met Obama on campus as "a young man who has embraced black

alienation as a kind of happiness.” (p. 45) Joyce represents a new opportunity in America. “Racialism, she says, is now the province of blacks who – like the old slave owners – press people to definitively ‘choose.’ Blacks are ‘the ones who are telling me I can’t be who I am’...she trusts mainstream America with her mixed-race background more than she trusts black America. Whites treat her ‘like a person’; blacks ‘make everything racial.’” (p. 45)

Question, should Barack strive to be fully accepted and trusted by the black community, or should he strive to join the more mainstream progress of American society?

“What seems clear is that Barack Obama is a man who truly wants to be black, a man who is determined to *resolve* the ambiguity he was born into....And the terms of this identity are very clear. You must join a politics that keeps alive the idea of white obligation to blacks. Social determinism must be your worldview, so that you can see blacks as ‘systemically’ and ‘structurally’ aggrieved even when no actual oppression is apparent.” (pp.50-51)

That Obama would “join a church this steeped in blackness, with so many other churches available, only underscores his determination to be transparently black.” (p.53)

Let’s face it. Obama is a bound man – bound to seek and cling to his blackness, while seeking to bargain with whites, be accepted by them, and somehow enter the American mainstream without losing the loyalty of opposing racial groups.

“This far, Obama is the very opposite of a Reaganlike conviction politician. Strong convictions seem to be anathema to Barack Obama because he is a bound man.” (p. 55)

PART II – The Society

Ch. 7 - Masking

Here the author describes what he feels is the necessity for Afro-Americans in this country to wear what he calls “masks.” “Masking is as simple as the fashioning of a face for the world – ‘a face to meet the faces we meet.’ as T. S. Elliot once put it.” (p.60)

He then uses Louis Armstrong’s life as an example. “Armstrong’s mask was a small offering of black inferiority. It was something he had to give to whites – at least a slight concurrence with their mythology of white supremacy and black inferiority....The masks that blacks wear in American society are always *strategic*, always based on a *reading* of what is possible in white America.” (p.62)

“Today, racial victimization is the face we blacks want broader America to see because it entitles blacks and obligates whites.” (p.68)

“When Obama joins Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side, with its monochrome focus on blackness, the main theme of the black mask is spelled out for him: he must think and act in the world as if the exaggerated poetic truth of white racism is the literal truth.” (p. 69)

“Barack’s wife, Michelle, wore this mask well in their *60 Minutes* interview: ‘Barack is black. He can be shot on the way to the gas station.’ Here, fitting her mask snugly over her face, she offers poetic truth as literal truth.” (p. 70)

“The problem here for Barack, of course, is that his racial identity commits him to a manipulation of the very society that he seeks to lead. To ‘be black,’ he has to exaggerate black victimization in America.”

Ch. 8 – Bargaining and Challenging

The definitions of these two classes of black leadership in America (including Obama) is herein defined and illustrated. Black **Bargainers**: Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Sidney Poitier, and Barack Obama. Black **Challengers**: Rev. Al Sharpton, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Hewey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Malcomb X, and Rappers. Challengers, unlike bargainers, ride on the back of their ‘otherness’ rather than dispel it. *Difference* is their wedge and their power. So they have no positive bridge to the masses of Americans.” (p.94)

Just reading these names gets your mind going in the right direction. Steele, I think, accurately categorizes and describes both classes of African-Americans very well. This is a very interesting explanation of the worldview of black leadership in America. A must read!

Ch. 9 – The Iconic Negro

This is an extremely interesting and enlightening chapter. The “Iconic Negro” is “someone who embodies the highest and best longings of both races. In such people, both blacks and whites can see the historic shames of their races at last overcome. In loving Oprah or in admiring Sidney, whites can experience themselves shorn of racism – as people capable of complete human identification with a black. ...Iconic Negroes are opportunities for whites to know themselves as people who have simply transcended white racism. For blacks, they represent transcendence of the inferiority stereotype....Iconic Negroes arise only in racially divided societies....Iconic Negroes are absolution for whites and redemption for blacks....The Iconic Negro is someone who dispels the sense of ‘otherness’ between the races and replaces it with a feeling of warmth, human familiarity, and racial goodwill.” (pp. 87-89)

Well, you’re probably getting tired of my writing and comments. Below are listed the final chapters in Shelby Steel’s enlightening book. If you have read this review to this point, you cannot afford not to get enlightened the rest of the way by reading the book.

Ch. 10 – Born to Bargain

Ch. 11 – Bind I: The Discipline

Ch. 12 – Bind II: Is He Black Enough?

Ch. 13 – “The Visible Man”

CONCLUSION:

If you are a Christian in any position of leadership, if you are a Christian – PERIOD – I recommend you purchase and read this book. Race relations in America are a potential tinderbox. This is an area where Satan delights in fostering hatred, division, and conflict. Shelby Steele is a brilliant writer and worth your attention. I think every minister of the Gospel and every concerned citizen should read this book. At only 134 pages, this book is small and easy to read. However, it is brilliantly written and provides a perspective on Barack Obama and the black causes in America that you will not receive from our left-leaning public media or public institutions of higher learning, whose worldview is strictly secular humanism.

I could not help from writing in the back of my copy of this book:

Race in the New Heaven and the New Earth will be what race ought to be in the invisible Church of Jesus Christ here on this earth!

Beryl Clemens Smith