



The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America

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A provocative and lively deep dive into the meaning of America's first black presidency, from "one of the most graceful and lucid intellectuals writing on race and politics today" (*Vanity Fair*).

Michael Eric Dyson explores the powerful, surprising way the politics of race have shaped Barack Obama's identity and groundbreaking presidency. How has President Obama dealt publicly with race—as the national traumas of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and Walter Scott have played out during his tenure? What can we learn from Obama's major race speeches about his approach to racial conflict and the black criticism it provokes?

Dyson explores whether Obama's use of his own biracialism as a radiant symbol has been driven by the president's desire to avoid a painful moral reckoning on race. And he sheds light on identity issues within the black power structure, telling the fascinating story of how Obama has spurned traditional black power brokers, significantly reducing their leverage.

President Obama's own voice—from an Oval Office interview granted to Dyson for this book—along with those of Eric Holder, Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, and Maxine Waters, among others, add unique depth to this profound tour of the nation's first black presidency.

The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America Details

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From Reader Review The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America for online ebook

Mona says

TITLE: The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America

WHY I CHOSE THIS BOOK: It fit my reading challenge criteria being connected to the book before it, The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama, being by or about a president

REVIEW: I had heard a lot about this author who is considered controversial, well maybe to those on the right. I thought he was on point with much of what he said. Certainly much of what he talked about was about Barack Obama and his presidency, but it was all through the lens of race. Not simply related to Obama's race but how he Obama dealt with race. While acknowledging the difficult position Obama was in, in line for criticism no matter what he did - either he was doing too much for blacks in the view point of conservatives or not enough in the view of progressives especially black progressive. Yet even acknowledging that difficult road he rightly holds Obama to task for not saying more on behalf of black people. It has been my experience that not saying things because you worry about negative reactions from the bigots gets you nothing. You don't really appease them with your milder rhetoric, you let them off the hook and piss your allies off in the process. While Obama seems the master of the middle road (like Bill Clinton) meaning he can be very political/diplomatic, I also think some of the more conservative comments - about black people/black youth needing to get their act together and stop blaming others are his true feelings. From the book I read by Obama and now this one about him, I have come to the conclusion that he is by no means that progressive or radical. I think he is willing to learn and change, but at heart he is a bit conservative. Not faulting him for that, at least not a lot, but the way people would talk about him in the 2008 primary and election you would think he was offering a new way forward. I think the thing he offered was let's all not be so angry, be hopeful and work together. Those are nice messages and I a bit radical in a way but by no means close to the socialist label he was given.

If this was just about the man it would be a good book but not have gotten 5 stars from me. What made it a 5 star book was how it made me think about issues of race. One of the things that really struck me was his talking about how even "well meaning whites" have started to get tired of the constant talk about injustice, racism and the need for help. And like MED I cry foul on that attitude. A relative of mine during the 2016 election talked about how she was worried about how the election was going because she knows a lot of liberals who say that while they believe in racial equality are tired of being told what they are doing is not enough. That is it is very discouraging to be fighting and get no appreciation. While I understand the notion of wanting recognition I also say get over yourself. So you aren't a racist asshole and you want a medal for that. So you are working hard to make the world a more justice place but at the end of the day you can both just put the issue of racism out of your head and whether you want to or not you benefit from racism/white privilege - unlike people of color - but you want a pat on the back or you will take your toys and go home. It has also been said that hey as a society have done a lot and things have really changed, so what more do you want. I don't think anyone would argue things have not changed, the issue just is not enough. It is easy for those who are not negatively impacted to say well it's good enough or maybe we will go more later. As to the we given you so much - people who say that obviously don't get that some people start off in negative numbers - so if one person starts off in negative numbers - say negative 50% and another starts of say at 50% of where the really specially people are at with 100%. So if you give everyone a bump because they are behind - and you give the negative 50% person 50% more and the 50% person just 10% the person who was at negative 50% is now at level 0% and the 50% is now at 60% - still way ahead.

The other thing that is so scary is how you can make progress which is great but that seems to piss some people off so much that they are determined not only to stop your progress, not only put you back to where you were before you made the progress but to push you even farther back. So that you never try again. Much

like what is happening now, with the two term presidency of the first black president, being followed by that of the most hateful and disgusting president who is trying to roll back every gain under Obama. How scary and exhausting but what can you do but keep pushing forward.

I am looking forward to listening to another book of his, *Tears We Can Not Stop: A Sermon to White America*.

Wisteria Leigh says

Race discussions in our country are too few and not candid enough. This book gave me insight from a perspective I hadn't considered. The point of view as a black politician regarding the countries perception from Barack Obama's Presidency. Valuable book for all Americans to read.

Bryan Cebulski says

I was half expecting a parade of praise for Obama, but this was, uh, decidedly not that. It turned out to be a much more critical look at Obama's presidency. It wasn't a polemist critique, thankfully. Rather it begins with the notion that both Dyson and Obama both want racial equality in the US, and from there moves through how Dyson perceives Obama's track record on race. Which I found pretty welcome, given how so many have been looking at Obama's politics through rose-tinted goggles at the end of his second term here. It doesn't dig quite as deep into the subject as I would have liked though. A little scattershot.

Susan says

Dyson's primary point with his analysis of Barack Obama's historic term as POTUS centers on a two-fold approach: Obama is revered within the black community, but his accomplishments did not notably improve their experience in the areas of employment, education, and criminal justice, to name but a few. While critical of Obama's seeming fence-balancing as he dealt with the country's issues, Dyson points out that Obama's position as the most powerful man in the world clearly brought to the fore the racism that still exists in the U.S. Thus, the glorious symbolism of a post-racial America in light of the election of our first black Commander-in-Chief is exposed as a myth. Obama's election exposed the hatred and violence of no-longer silent racists; yet, his rise to our highest office gave voice to activists, leaders, and thinkers within the black community. His vision of hope and change remains standing as Barack Obama's legacy.

Emma says

In Dyson's book, race is presented as the 'defining feature' of Obama's two terms in office. He bears the 'burden of representation' (James Baldwin) as a President whose speech and action is always perceived through the lens of his colour. His is 'the black presidency', separated from all who had come before him by this singular characteristic. For some, Obama's black skin makes him a lesser link in a chain of whiteness, yet for others, he is evidence of the successful extension of privilege and opportunity to a minority group who had never before achieved such democratic representation. Either way, Dyson believes that Obama has changed the very nature of the American presidency, but in this vocabulary of difference there is both

positive and negative.

Dyson specifically focuses on Obama's speeches on race, the words that he has used to represent himself and his office, examining how these Presidential addresses respond to current racial and political events and issues. It is clear that Dyson thinks Obama has not pushed hard enough for black rights, that he has had the tendency to refuse to take an assertive or difficult position when it comes to racial issues. At the same time, he does acknowledge the tightrope Obama has had to walk, the incredible opposition he has faced within both the political system and wider society. At one point, Dyson wonders whether the seemingly unstoppable violence of the state apparatus against black bodies over the last years has been the result of the fear racists have felt at the notion of having a black man in the highest office of their country. A redirection of hate from Obama to those men and women who are right in front of them on a daily basis. He likens the situation to Martin Luther King's, who felt guilt for those he inspired to fight, and die, for the cause of black rights. Obama must have experienced at least some of that kind of pressure everyday. Too black for some, too white for others.

I'm neither American, nor black, so perhaps it is just ignorance talking, but it seems to me that Obama was bound to fail. He had so many strings pulling him in so many directions that disappointment was inevitable. The underlying question here is: what does he owe people? Does he owe those who share his skin colour just because they share that characteristic? How can that even work unless you assume that all black people have the same values and wants? Does he owe the people who voted for him, whatever their makeup, with all their myriad of views? Does he owe the people who paid contributions to his campaign? Etc etc, on and on. In all that, what does he owe himself? If anything, this book has made me all the more interested in who Obama is going to be once his term in office is up. I wonder if he will use the greater freedom to address some of the issues Dyson has raised here and if he will feel like he can say more about the challenges faced by being the first black man to hold this office. I wonder most of all, if he feels like it was worth it.

Many thanks to Michael Eric Dyson, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and Netgalley for this copy in exchange for an honest review.

Liz says

Michael Eric Dyson approaches The Black Presidency pretty much through an analysis of President Obama's definition of what his racial identity means to him and how he used that identity (or ignored it) in running for office and as the president of the country. The book makes frequent references to Obama's own writing in *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. In those two books President Obama wrote of his early life and aspirations as he grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia before making his way to Occidental College, Columbia, and Harvard, finally settling in Chicago. Dyson illustrates how Obama, as far back as his first political job in the Illinois Senate, made conscious decisions about how race would figure into his work and his future. Dyson brings the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson into Obama's words and deeds and takes him to task at pivotal points in the young senator's career and ultimately as leader of the country. In the present, Cornel West and Dyson, himself, challenge Obama's stance when it comes to addressing "Black folk's" needs directly.

The criticisms Obama faced were of a kind that few could handle with cool intelligence, grace, and dignity. The question is did he let down the African Americans who voted for him? Could he do more and if so, why

has he not? This book did an excellent job of analyzing how Obama handled different issues, people and crises and posed questions on why Obama did not come down on the side of demanding more for minority groups, especially African Americans. The narrative is razor sharp and challenges the idea of Obama being a president for all the people, not in particular for any one group. The book is a page turner in the sense that after all is said and done what is the answer to the question of how did Barack Obama handle the politics of race in America? The book answers that question quite eloquently.

Sonja says

This is a must read for anyone who wants to understand racism in this country.

Quote:

The problem...is not race; the problem is racism, or the artificial narrowing of racial identity to the size and shape of dominant whiteness.

Ironically, the success of black folk and others in the fight against dominant whiteness has caused race, and eventually racism, to be blamed on them. The very people who turned a liability into an advantage by redefining racial terms, and improving their destinies, have taken the rap for race. One of the privileges of whiteness is the ability not to appear white at all, but to be seen simply as "human." (pp 66-67)

End of quote

Dyson brilliantly examines and analyzes Obama's speeches and the language he uses.

Quote:

Obama's speechmaking and oral signifying reflect the beauty and power of black rhetoric - its peculiar rules and regulations, its sites and sounds, its labyrinth of complicated meanings, its bedazzling linguistic variety, its undulating cadences, and its irreverent challenges to "proper" grammar....Obama's achievement...is about understanding the cultural traditions that feed and shape his linguistic appetites. It is about knowing the racial practices against which that speech is pitched. It is about engaging the racial environments in which speech is formed. It is about knowing that black speech is always about much more than what things are said but about how those things are said. (p77)

end of quote

Dyson digs in to reveal why Obama disturbs the far-right Tea Party and others who consider themselves just conservative.

Quote:

The far-right Tea Party and the conspiracy theorist birthers despise Obama so much that they want to banish him from Americanness. They want metaphoric sovereignty - well, perhaps they really want the sovereignty of metaphor - over Obama's body: they want to unbirth his existence, uproot him from American soil, foreclose against his house of American identity and offer him a subprime loan of American political capital....despite the claim of the right wing that it is pro-life, it wants to retroactively abort Obama's existence, purge him from the record as unofficial and illegitimate, remove his legislation from the books, repeal "Obamacare," and wipe the record clean of his political speech. Wiping away his political words also means wiping away his cultural and racial words, the way his body and mouth have left their mark all over America. (pp. 78-79)

End of quote

Dyson looks at Obama's ability to slide along the scale of blackness.

Quote:

Obama must be heard, and understood, in a broader, blacker context, because that blacker context is both in a

class by itself and American to the core, as American as Louis Armstrong and Michael Jordan, as American as Condoleezza Rice and Toni Morrison. That blackness is not limiting but freeing: not closed but open; not rigid but fluid. Obama fits along a continuum of black expression and, depending on the circumstance, slides easily from one end to the other, from vernacular to "proper" expression, from formal to informal, from high-tone to gutter-dense, from specifying to signifying in the blink of an "I." Obama's "I" is both black and biracial, both American and international. It is not the beginning of isolation but the start of a new quest for national identity joined to the long pilgrimage of global identity that borrows from centuries of speaking and existing. In the process, a lot of switches are being flipped: codes, styles, media, frames, cultures, and races. There are echoes in Obama of the rigors and ecstasies of the black speech of Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and of course Martin Luther King Jr., all of which harken to the black church. But the complex signifying, verbal devices, oratorical talents, and rhetorical mastery taken for granted in the black church, for instance, are largely unknown outside it. Yet there is a linguistic trace in Obama's speech that leads straight to the black pulpit. (pp 79-80)

End of quote

Dyson then goes on to reveal to the white reader (and perhaps blacks who don't know the black church experience) the power of the black pulpit. He gives context to "audacity of hope" and the now famous Jeremiah Wright's "God damn America." He weighs the importance of the Prophets and Politicians, with the prophet usually prevailing, and the passing of the torch from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Barack Obama. Dyson quite brilliantly places Obama's experiences and speeches against the backdrop of so many African American lives taken by police.

Quote:

The terror that black people experience is of two varieties. Slow terror is masked but malignant; it stalks black people in denied opportunities that others take for granted. Slow terror seeps into every nook and cranny of black existence: black boys and girls being expelled from school at higher rates than their white peers; black men and women being harassed by unjust fines from local municipalities; having billions of dollars of their wealth drained off by shady financial instruments sold to blacks during the mortgage crisis; and being imprisoned out of proportion to their percentage of the population....Fast terror is more dynamic, more explicitly lethal, more grossly evident. It is the spectacle of black death in public displays of vengeance and violence directed against defenseless black bodies. Shootings like that of Walter Scott traumatize blacks, too, because they conjure the historic legacy of racial terror: lynching, castration, and drowning. The black body was not safe then and blacks today do not feel safe, or accepted, or wanted, or desired....

The failure to be seen as human unites black people across time in a fellowship of fear as black people share black terror, at both speeds, in common. The way we see race plays a role in these terrors: fast terror is often seen and serves as a warning; slow terror is often not seen and reinforces the invisibility of black suffering. Fast terror scares black people; slow terror scars them. (p. 209)

End of quote

I will leave this remarkable book with one more comment and quote. Dyson is profound in his examination of the assassination of Reverend Clementa Pinckney, pastor of the Emanuel AME church in South Carolina. Quote:

Obama knew the minister, but not well, a fact that had moral utility: Pinckney was a proxy for all those who had lost their lives in the recent siege of racial terror that was sweeping the nation. Dylann Roof claimed in his sick manifesto that black people were taking over, a delusion easily rebutted on the same Internet that fed the gunman's twisted logic. No single person better embodied black progress and therefore scared white terrorists more, than Barack Obama. Could it be that unarmed blacks who were dying across the nation were urban proxies for the black presidency and the change it had brought? Those who can't aim a gun at Obama take whatever black lives they can. Roof is not, therefore, a lone wolf. A better way of saying this is that calling him a lone wolf hardly denies the hatred of the philosophical pack from which he separated; the evil

he reflects is deeply entrenched in our culture. The banner he killed under did not go away when the Confederate flag - which should have come down long ago - was removed. (p. 258)

End of quote

You must read the end of this book to appreciate what Obama said in his eulogy and how he broke into singing "Amazing Grace." (He lay the framework of "grace" by saying

"According to the Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It's not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings. Grace. As a nation, out of this terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we've been blind. He has given us the chance, where we've been lost, to find our best selves." (p 263)

Lindsey Berkowitz says

I can't say that I have enjoyed a book so much in a very long time. Michael Eric Dyson is brilliant, captivating, critical, eloquent, and compassionate. I learned so much from this book, and my hope is that many more will have the curiosity to read it.

Steven Meyers says

It seems appropriate for the reader to know that my wife and I are Caucasian and our two teenage sons are African-Americans. We live in Maine which is the whitest state in the United States. One son is 18 and the other is 16. We've cared for them since they were three-weeks old. Despite being in a supportive community, racism has been a constant companion as we've watched our sweet babies grow into responsible young men. Most racist experiences we have attributed to ignorance and indifference. I gotta tell ya, after almost two decades of our sons encountering various levels of racism, it's made me a less patient man with white people's prejudices towards blacks, especially since racist-panderer rockhead President Orange Tumor succeeded President Barack Obama.

Professor Dyson's 'The Black Presidency' would do a lot of Caucasians some good if they read the friggin' thing. The author correctly states "The election of Barack Obama symbolized the resurrection of hope and the restoration of belief in a country that has often failed to treat its black citizens as kin." It opened up other possibilities for our sons as well as gave them ample examples of covert and overt racism thrown at President Obama and his wife Michelle. President Obama had the goods: a cool demeanor, political maturity, highly intelligent, an expert about our Constitution, a fantastic orator, and overflowing with an immense amount of empathy for the less fortunate. He is the kind of role model that our sons admired. But despite the president being well suited for the job, the very nature of being the first African-American came with more challenges than if he had been just another white dude. Mr. Dyson does a convincing job of dissecting how race factored into such events as the reaction to the Affordable Care Act; recalcitrant Republicans in Congress; the nonsense of conservatives claiming that we were now in a post-racial society; the economic disparity between blacks and whites; the complexities of President Obama being biracial; the Reverend Jeremiah Wright; the birth of the Tea Party; the loony Birthers; the president's public speaking technique; the killing of African-Americans by law enforcement; and blacks in prison.

The author is very fair in his assessment of the president. The book is not just some glowing tribute about

how President Obama is so fantastic that he even farts out rainbows. Mr. Dyson also takes the president to task for not being more of an outspoken advocate for African-Americans. What I found impressive is the author's willingness to print verbatim President Obama's rebuttal to Mr. Dyson's charges. The author's writing is not presented in some dull academic style but it would be better to read large chunks of it per sitting. Reading a few pages now then a few pages later will dilute the book's effectiveness. 'The Black Presidency' is not just a work about President Obama. It is also a plea for Americans to recognize racism is still very much with us. It sure is.

Adam Shields says

Short Review: I thought this was a fascinating book. This is primarily an evaluation of Obama in relation to race. Both how Obama was evaluated based on his race, but even more importantly how Obama's racial identity impacted the way he was president. I was fascinated by the inside politics of black political world and its interaction with the historic and current civil rights movement.

This was not a puff piece. Dyson is quite critical of Obama, but that critique was tempered with the reality of the limitations of both Obama as a person (one person can only do so much) and the limitations of the role (the President has a large bully pulpit, but not a lot of impact on day to day policing for instance.)

There was significant analysis of Obama's speeches and policy as well as a good comparison with the different styles of leadership between Obama and Eric Holder.

And as I explored a bit in my review, a very helpful section on the black leader as prophet or politician. I really liked Dyson's Tears We Cannot Stop and I like this even more.

It is fascinating to get another perspective on Obama and one that is well informed both because he personally knows Obama and because Dyson is himself well connected to a variety of influential leaders within the black community.

My full review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/black-presidency/>

David Anderson says

Dyson's analysis of President Obama's conflicted and often clumsy handling of the politics of race over the course of his career is on the money. He carefully walks the line between being sharply critical and appropriately cognizant of political pressures Obama had to navigate and he takes note of how Obama seemed to shake off his fetters and hit his stride in the latter half of his second term (when he felt free to work on his "bucket list", which rhymes with ...). Dyson's critique is always well-reasoned and he is never strident, as Cornel West has been (bless his heart, love that man, but he seems to have been unreasonable in his expectations; who did he think we were electing, Bobby Seale or Stokley Carmichael?). I especially got big kick out of chapter 7, "Going Bulworth" (Obama could not quite achieve that level in his discourse, of course, but I sure loved Dyson's analysis of Warren Beatty's film) and the book ends on a high note with Chapter 8, "Amazing Grace", Obama's eulogy following the racist massacre at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., without a doubt the rhetorical peak of Obama's career so far. Highly recommended.

Andre says

A worthy analysis

One must admit that Dyson certainly has a way with words. This is one of the reasons I enjoy his writing and speaking. He is very clever when turning a phrase. And so it is with this latest effort from Dyson, the prose is smartly delivered in this book that examines Obama's presidency from the perspective of his public speeches dealing with race. Some may see this as a limited undertaking, but the subtitle is; Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America. The president comes under fire from Dyson, for being too passive when addressing issues of race. Dyson, so often hints, while not being fully throated in this criticism, that Obama is overly concerned with hurting white folks feelings or in drawing their rancor.

"Obama often has been loath to lift his voice on race lest he be relegated to a black box, although his reluctance has kept the nation from his wisdom and starved black folk of the most visible interpreter of their story and plight, an interpreter who also carries the greatest political clout in the nation's history."

He seems to walk a fine line in this book, while saying obviously in response to critics, that I have criticized the president, but he also appears to be saying that he understands that being the first Black president and working with an obstructionist congress is a huge burden to bear and any criticism coming from Black America would do well to keep that in mind.

Dyson does a great job of recounting the more memorable moments of Obama's presidency from the Philadelphia speech on race, the distancing from his pastor, the Trayvon Martin killing, Ferguson and right up to the vile murders in the South Carolina church. He discusses each of these events in the context of what Obama said or didn't say. He also was able to interview Obama for this book, although he said he had to fight for the 20 minutes he was given, which turned into 30. That tidbit will seem a little odd to readers as Dyson talks about his unhindered access to Obama leading up to the first election. Clearly, he fell out of favor at some point, though he does not discuss why. He perhaps may not know and to speculate would seem like sour grapes.

This book does much to illuminate some of the challenges of a black presidency, and as many black people have said, including Obama himself, "I can't be president of Black America, I have to be president of all America." But as a brilliant rebuttal, Dyson chimes, "he may not be the president of black America, but he is the president of black Americans. He owes blacks no more, but certainly no less, than he owes all citizens."

So, for those who say Dyson is being unfair, the scolding that Obama routinely gives Black audiences is offered up as proof of Obama's intellect and his splendid ability to code-switch. The thinking is, if you can be so articulate on black responsibility, how is it you find such difficulty when it comes to voicing the responsibility of the nation.

"Yet Obama energetically peppers his words to blacks with talk of responsibility in one public scolding after another. When Obama upbraids black folk while barely mentioning the flaws of white America, he leaves the impression that race is the concern solely of black people, and that blackness is full of pathology."

This we know to be untrue and in urging Barack to find his voice on race, Dyson does a great service to the reader giving one much to ponder and consider if America can ever move to a more perfect union.

Stan Lanier says

Highly informative analysis/interpretation of how President Obama has come to terms with "blackness" as a cultural concept while serving as the first Afro-American President of the United States of America. Michael Eric Dyson provides an intellectually stimulating account not only of the President, but, also, of our nation during this time. Michael Eric Dyson is a true public intellectual.

Brittany says

I don't even know how to describe this book besides stimulating. I thought I had opinions on so many of these issues, but my lens as a white female is only so capable of seeing the perspective of an esteemed writer and scholar like Dyson.

So, I was going to describe it as enlightening or fascinating, but those words don't seem appropriate when having discussions like these.

It was well written and educational. I suggest it for all sociological, historical or political junkies.

Frances says

This book will never be on a must read list from Oprah. This book is Dyson rant against President Obama and how Obama failed to challenge white American regarding race relations.

Dyson airs his frustration and dissatisfaction that President Obama did not deal with race relations as a number one priority when he became president.

Since Dyson's focus is on race relations he minimizes the job of being president. He does not acknowledge the fact that President Obama had to contend with pulling the country back from a financial crisis during his first term in office. He quotes statements out of context just like the mainstreet media.

Dyson's rant envelops seven chapters and his tone does not change until the eighth chapter of the book. He is so blinded by his own mantra that he is unable to listen to an opposing view when he interviews Eric Holder.

In the eighth chapter of the book President Obama delivers the eulogy for the fallen at the Emmanuel AME church in South Carolina. When President Obama gives this speech to the congregation and the world. Dyson is finally satisfied that Obama has hit the mark and delivered a speech on race relations in America.

This book was described as provocative but I found Dyson analysis of Obama disrespectful and condescending. In my view the book is a waste of paper.
