

# Driven to distraction

**I LOVE BOOKS.** I can never pass a second-hand bookshop without emerging with an armful of them. I am the darling of mail order book companies. There are stacks of them in every corner and crevice in our house, but there is never enough time to read them all. Nonetheless, for three years of my life all that changed and I was able to rattle off the plots of books written by authors I had heard of, whose books I had thumbed on bookshelves and even bought – but which had remained unread.

For those three years I drove 104 miles every day (well, if you want to be nerdish it was 104.6 miles) on the round trip to work on the other side of Norfolk. To survive the boredom of those journeys, I turned to talking books on CD. In nearly 24 hours of driving time a week I was able to absorb scores of books, some of which were so gripping that they made me late for work – the tense plot unravelled before I could pull myself away from the car and do a spot of work. No wonder my former partners made me redundant.

## Memories flooding back

During the summer I came across two books that I would definitely recommend. The first is a poignant book by a black man, telling the story of his unconventional upbringing by a white American mother and a Kenyan father who was absent for most of his life. The book also tells of how he came to terms with the race discrimination that to this day still influences the way life is run in the USA; how he tried to make sense of it all – in his words, “trying to reconcile the world as I’d found it with the terms of my birth”.

Of his father he describes the only real time they spent together – just one month in his whole lifetime:

“There was so much to tell in that single month, so much explaining to do; and yet when I reach back into my memory for the words of my father, the small interactions or conversations we might have had, they seem irretrievably lost. Perhaps they’re imprinted too deeply, his voice the seed of all sorts of tangled arguments that I carry on with myself, as impenetrable now as the pattern of my genes....”

Those words set me thinking deep thoughts of the affectionate and sometimes challenging relationships that fathers have with their sons – mine with my father, me with my son. Fathers expect much of sons; sons want to find out what makes their fathers who they are and have to decide whether they want to be more of the same or something completely different. Even from beyond the grave I sometimes find myself in dispute with my father – angry with him for a particular mannerism, despairing that I have inherited the same one; then sometimes grateful for what he did bequeath me through his genes – like the ability to put together the occasional piece for *Solicitors Journal*.

**“The tense plot unravelled before I could pull myself away and do a spot of work. No wonder my former partners made me redundant”**

That book, in case you have not already guessed, is *Dreams of My Father* by Barack Obama. It gives an astonishing insight into the mind of someone who is arguably the most powerful man in the world. The book was read by Obama and it revealed the development of his philosophy and later his political convictions. It is a deeply human book and to me contains a transparent honesty – something which I have found very much wanting not only in his predecessors but also in the leaders we have had to endure on this side of the Atlantic.

## Time to save the world

The second book, *Flat Earth News* by Nick Davies, is very different. Davies is an investigative reporter who breaks the unwritten ‘dog doesn’t eat dog’ Fleet Street rule and turns his sights on the quality of reporting in newspapers and on television and radio.

The basic theme is that our world is so



governed now by spin and huge, well-organised public relations agencies that it is now very difficult to tease out the truth from what you read in newspapers.

Read it, because, as I have said from time to time on this page, the solicitors’ profession is one of the few havens of honesty and integrity left and we are the best hope for interposing fairness in the dealings between ordinary people and big organisations.

According to Davies, our fearless free press has few teeth these days and can no longer be relied on to root out wrongdoing or

fight for justice. So – guys and girls – it is time for solicitors to save the world, because no one else will.

I actually mean that, even if others do not; like the consultant surgeon who reacted angrily to a letter of claim I had written on behalf of a client. “I think this is a cheap shot at getting money by a group of wide boy solicitors,” he wrote in a letter I found among some medical records; and he concluded: “I think we should let them waste as much money and effort on this case as possible and not concede any liability at all.”

At least he did not say that in a talking book: otherwise I might have been so angry that I drove off the road.

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For more details of the books he refers to log onto [www.solicitorsjournal.com](http://www.solicitorsjournal.com)

# Dreams from My Father / Flat Earth News

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Barack Obama / Nick Davies

Canongate Books, 2008, £8.99 / Vintage, 2009, £8.99

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These books featured in Richard Barr's latest ['tales from practice' article](#).

## ***Dreams from My Father***

This book traces his childhood, adolescence and first tentative steps into politics. It is very candid about his past, and there is no pussyfooting around: he smoked marijuana, got drunk and was occasionally violent. He had moments of apathy and self doubt as he moved towards the goal that he eventually realised.

It is also interesting to learn that the future president worked on a building site, travelled on crowded buses in Kenya and suffered the same shyness with the opposite sex as the rest of us. He is also pretty good at putting on different accents when he reads.

If you want to hear me talking a little about Obama and the president with whom he is often compared (JFK), log on to: [www.bbc.co.uk/cambridgeshire/content/articles/2009/01/22/richard\\_barr\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cambridgeshire/content/articles/2009/01/22/richard_barr_feature.shtml)

## ***Flat Earth News***

This book opens with an exposé of the so-called millennium bug. Remember that? Aircraft were supposed to fall out the sky, electricity generation would stop and civil strife would break out because computers could not cope with the change of millennium. The reality was a complete non-story hyped up by credulous reporters who did not check their facts.

If it were that trivial we could all shrug our shoulders and move on, but the same lack of investigative acumen led to the world's press being fooled into believing that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction – and therefore endorsing the declaration of the second Iraq war.

Davies traces the history of the demise of the true investigative reporter as newspapers have come under the control of a small handful of big businesses established for one purpose only: to make money at whatever cost, forcing reporters to spend minimal time checking sources or going into a subject in any kind of detail.

But it is even worse than that, with the insidious rise of powerful PR companies that, according to Davies, are so good at manipulating the weakened media that they are able directly, on behalf of their clients, to influence the way that issues are treated even in the mainstream press.

And if you do not like what you have read, he is equally depressing about the Press Complaints Commission which, according to his research, received over 28,000 complaints from members of the public in a ten-year period but refused to consider ruling on more than 25,000 of those complaints mainly on technical grounds. In fact they made a formal adjudication on just over 1.5 per cent of the total.

A single page review does not do this book justice. I am afraid you will have to go out and buy your own copy.

Postscript:

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