

Photographs by JP MASCLLET

The page boy

On the night Barack Obama won the US election, there were probably few happier men in London than Jamie Byng. As Byng celebrated at a party in Lord Owen's Greenwich house, he was overcome, he says, by a feeling of 'great joy and possibility'. And who could blame him? Because Byng is Obama's British publisher, and that night was his Harry Potter moment. All of a sudden, everyone wanted to read Obama's books. 'We've had to reprint more than 475,000 copies in two weeks,' he tells me in tones of wonder. 'It's the ultimate dream for a publisher. All we need to do is keep reprinting. People are going to keep reading those books.'

I've met Byng in his London office, which occupies the basement of Damon Albarn's old house off Ladbroke Grove – he and his glamorous American literary agent second wife live above it. At 39, he has got something of the look of Jim Morrison. Chestnut curls tumble to his shoulders and his jeans are tight enough to show every goosebump. A dark-blue blazer is his only visible concession to the sartorial norms of his chosen profession. 'He's seen as the kind of rock star of the publishing world,' admits one rival, 'but only because publishing is so bloody square and his parties actually go beyond 10pm.'

Byng is also looking slightly pleased with himself, which is only to be expected. Obama's two books stand in first and second place on the non-fiction bestseller lists. *Dreams from My Father* is an autobiography up to Obama's entry into Harvard Law School including an account of his relationship with his father, whom he met only once between his parents' divorce in 1964 and his father's death in a car crash in 1982. *The Audacity of Hope* deals with the President-elect's political philosophy.

'*Dreams* is selling more than 2.5 times faster than any other non-fiction paperback in the UK at the moment,' he says. In December, his publishing house, Canongate, will bring out the third Obama opus in hardback, a collection of speeches and plans, entitled *Change We Can Believe In*, which may well be more popular than either.

All of which means a very happy Christmas for Jamie Byng, who estimates that Barack Obama has been responsible for at least £500,000 worth of

What a thriller – a small-time publishing house run by an aristocratic party animal finds itself in the headlines as the UK publisher of the President-elect. Canongate's Jamie Byng tells Lydia Slater his page-turning story

profits this year. 'It's a year that breaks all records for Canongate in terms of turnover,' he says. 'I think we're going to do over £9 million in the UK alone.'

It was in 2006 that Byng was telephoned by the head of Text, Canongate's Australian publishing partner, suggesting he read the works of the young Illinois senator. At the time, Byng says, he was 'dimly aware' of who Barack Obama was. But reading *Dreams from My Father* turned him into a passionate Obama-phile. 'I don't know a single person who reads it who hasn't been bowled over by its quality and its wisdom and its beauty,' Byng says fervently. 'He's got this beautifully generous spirit; he doesn't prejudge people. And it makes you realise how he ended up as President, although it was written 13 years before he became the most powerful man in the world. There's never been a book like it by a political figure.'

At the time, he insists, the decision to publish was made on purely literary grounds. In December 2006, when Canongate started negotiating to buy the rights, Obama hadn't even announced his plans to run as a Democratic candidate.

The American publishers, Crown, held on until February, hoping that Obama's declaration would increase his desirability in the UK, but

according to Byng, this made comparatively little impact in the publishing world, and he secured rights to the two books for 'low five figures' – he thinks around £20,000 each.

'After all, he was just one of several Democratic candidates of whom Hillary Clinton seemed out-and-out the favourite,' says Byng. 'But I thought of him first as a writer, not as a politician. As I told my daughter's school assembly this morning, we now have a President who was a writer before he was a politician. That's unprecedented.'

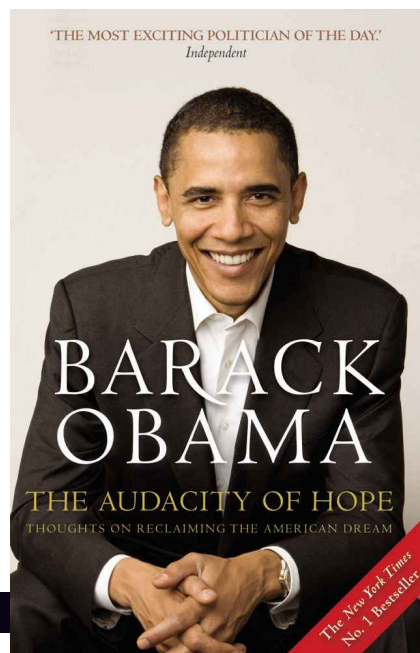
This seems a slightly bizarre attitude when discussing the most influential politician in the world, but Byng sees his own universe in black and white print.

He believes that without those books, Obama wouldn't have made it to the White House. 'Think about it! Four million copies have sold in the US alone, and those books have won him so many votes. Everyone who reads them comes out thinking, what a wise, considered, open-minded man. There's an honesty and integrity about him that comes across.'

The Obama affair adds a fresh layer of lustre to the reputation of Jamie Byng as publishing's Charles Saatchi: a formidably well-connected man with the truffle-hound's instinct for unearthing buried literary treasure.

Byng describes himself as 'unbelievably lucky', and he is certainly luckier than most. But others see him as a visionary, whose luck is mostly self-created. 'He is a success story,' says one, a literary agent. 'In this world of huge conglomerate publishers it's really refreshing that companies like Canongate even survive.'

That they do is down in large part to Byng's nose for a potential hit. His most impressive spot was *Life of Pi*, a novel by the then obscure Yann Martell, which ended up winning the Man Booker Prize. Byng was in New York, discussing the latest book by Michel Faber (*The Fire Gospel*), one →



Byng bought the British rights to Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*