

President Obama says novels taught him how to be a citizen
Alison Flood 28 Oct 2015 The Guardian

Barack Obama has said that novels taught him “the most important” things he has learned about being a citizen.

Interviewing Marilynne Robinson in the second instalment of a two-part interview for the New York Review of Books (also available as audio), the American president asked the author if she was worried about people not reading novels anymore, as they are “overwhelmed by flashier ways to pass the time”. For himself, Obama said, “when I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I’ve learned I think I’ve learned from novels”.

“It has to do with empathy,” Obama told Robinson in a conversation which is published in the 19 November issue of the New York Review of Books. “It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of greys, but there’s still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.

Last November, Obama visited an independent Washington DC bookshop, Politics and Prose, where he bought novels including Richard Flanagan’s Booker winner The Narrow Road to the Deep North, Colm Tóibín’s Nora Webster, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Denis Johnson’s The Laughing Monsters and Anthony Doerr’s All the Light We Cannot See. Robinson, whose novel Gilead won her the Pulitzer prize and Home, which won the Orange, told the president that “literature at present is full to bursting”, and while “no book can sell in that way that Gone with the Wind sold”, there is “an incredible variety of voices in contemporary writing”. “You know people say, is there an American tradition surviving in literature, and yes, our tradition is the incredible variety of voices,” she said.

Obama responded that it isn’t that Americans don’t read; “It’s that everybody is reading [in] their niche, and so often, at least in the media, they’re reading stuff that reinforces their existing point of view. And so you don’t have that phenomenon of ‘here’s a set of great books that everybody is familiar with and everybody is talking about’.”

Television shows can “fill that void”, he felt, but “we don’t have a lot of common reference points”. And in a world where a premium is placed “on the sensational and the most outrageous or a conflict as a way of getting attention and breaking through the noise”, a “pessimism about the country” develops.

“Because all those quiet, sturdy voices that we were talking about at the beginning, they’re not heard,” said Obama. “It’s not interesting to hear a story about some good people in some quiet place that did something sensible and figured out how to get along.”