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Recently a friend gave me *The Uncommon Reader*, a sweet novella by Englishman Alan Bennett that supposes Queen Elizabeth suddenly discovers the pleasure of books in her 70th year. Reading becomes her obsession – from Nancy Mitford to Proust – so much so that she is never without a book, whether in castle or carriage. Through reading, the queen becomes more aware of the human condition. She sees her subjects in a new light, as individuals, but also realizes that she herself has no “voice” of the kind associated with Dickens or Trollope, no words that are hers. And so she begins to write, quietly, out of view of her equerries, who would rather manage royal routine than a creative thinker.

For all its fantasy, or “what if” quality, Bennett’s little book – only 120 pages – reaffirms the joy of reading and the deeper understanding of humanity that reading grants. The latter point cannot be associated with the current head of the United States, who says he does not read and apparently takes little interest in history (except his own) or fiction (except reality television). This lack of literary awareness suggests there is little opportunity for a humanist perspective to develop in the mind of someone who is generally focused on profit margins and his own popularity.

Clearly the president has not read Roberto Bolaño’s epic novel *2666*, part of which occurs in Mexico’s Sonoran Desert. If he had, the administration’s goal to rebuild America’s infrastructure might not include – or should one say, might not be precluded by – a wall along the US-Mexico border. Nor does it seem the president has read Nevil Shute’s 1957 novel *On the Beach*; if he had (or even if he had seen the two movie versions), one imagines there would be no talk of nuclear proliferation, only the containment and decommissioning of such weapons. Sales of George Orwell’s *1984* have skyrocketed since *alternative facts* entered the American vocabulary. Could the president even venture a guess why? Does he know Orwell’s term *newspeak*?

Does it matter if the US president reads, or has read, fiction? Does it matter if architects read fiction, and something other than *The Fountainhead*? Of course, given the libertarian tendencies in Washington today, that too might be worth rereading. One might also (re)read Henry David Thoreau’s meditation on technology, government, and the environment: *On Walden Pond*. This is a stated goal of the developers of *Walden, a Game*, a new video game based on Thoreau’s book that will be released this spring, after 10 years in development at the University of Southern California. That work was partly supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts (two agencies the new administration is threatening to close). If *Walden* players “work” too hard at arrow collecting, foraging for berries, and fishing, the game will say “your inspiration has become low but can be regained by reading,” which reflects the designers’ effort to slow players down in a society always pressured to speed up.

Alternatively, it is better, perhaps, that readers of *Log* simply turn to the essays and observations in this issue, and to fiction and history. Such reading could lead, as Bennett so adroitly alludes, to greater human understanding in our collective actions. – CD



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ISSN: 1547-4690. ISBN: 978-0-9907352-7-4. Printed in USA. *Log* is published three times a year by the Anyone Corporation, a nonprofit corporation in the State of New York with editorial and business offices at 41 West 25th Street, 11th floor, New York, NY 10010. Subscription for 3 issues: \$36 US; \$40 CAN/MEX; \$60 International. Distributed by Idea Books. Single issues are \$15 plus shipping. The opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the protagonists or of the board of the Anyone Corporation. Send inquiries, letters, and submissions to log@anycorp.com.