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**“How do you tell the story of a nation through millions and millions of letters?” Jeanne Marie Laskas at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.**

“I had no idea that the President had been reading ten letters a day for eight years while he was in office. I discovered it by accident at the very end of the Obama administration. So we were all gearing up for a new President at this point. And here I come to find out that the one leaving had this relationship with the citizens that was never really advertised. They didn’t make much of a fuss over it, but he had been receiving about ten thousand letters a day, and every day he would end his day by reading ten of them.” Journalist and writer Jeanne Marie Laskas discussed her book *To Obama: With Love, Joy and Anger* with activist DeRay McKesson at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

When Laskas first started writing about the letters, it was destined to be a New York Times article that allowed the reader to grab a brief insight into the “sweet story” of communication between Obama and everyday Americans, before “moving onto a new President, we thought our first woman.” Instead, it became a compelling story of a reciprocal connection between ten new ordinary people a day and one of the most powerful men in the world.

“So this raised three immediate questions for me. Number one: who writes to the president? Because it’s kinda like writing to Santa Claus. Ten thousand people write to the President every day. I’m like woah, I wanna meet these people. Secondly, ok ten thousand down to ten every day. How did they pick these? What’s the selection? What’s the relationship like between these people who are reading this mail? and every single piece of mail *was* read and they’re calling through them and how do they decide what gets to the President each night? What’s that communication?”

Laskas’s final question was, “Why did Obama do this?”. She soon discovered that the carefully chosen letters to Obama created a chronological story of the country of America during his time as President and how it helped him to quietly recognise issues faced by the citizens via these letters.

“The beginning is desperation. There’s an economic crisis. Everyone's losing faith in the Catholic Church, everything. It seemed like all the systems were collapsing when Obama first took office. Banks are collapsing, people are writing in desperation, so you get that kind of now and if you switch that all the way to the end, which is just overwhelming thanks and legacy and here's what happened to me. My grandfather has been in love with this man for the 17 years he's been living with him. And I got to go to their wedding because of you.

“As we walk through the eight years of the Obama administration, it gives you a portrait of America.”

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The process of researching the letters has changed Laskas, “I think it really awakened for me this notion of, I guess, active citizenship. You know, when you meet all these people who took the time to say something to their leader. To form an actual relationship with whoever it is that you voted for, or didn’t vote for, and to speak up and speak out and speak to them. I would have thought, well who cares what I have to say? And now, I feel a responsibility to speak up. Even in the smallest ways, you know? Be present in a democracy.”