

STATEMENT BY MICHAEL CHABON

The Obama Arts Policy Committee asked committee member and author, Michael Chabon, to describe the critical importance of the arts at this moment of remarkable opportunity and challenge in our nation's history.

Every grand American accomplishment, every innovation that has benefited and enriched our lives, every lasting social transformation, every moment of profound insight any American visionary ever had into a way out of despair, loneliness, fear and violence—everything that has from the start made America the world capital of hope, has been the fruit of the creative imagination, of the ability to reach beyond received ideas and ready-made answers to some new place, some new way of seeing or hearing or moving through the world. Breathtaking solutions, revolutionary inventions, the road through to freedom, reform and change: never in the history of this country have these emerged as pat answers given to us by our institutions, by our government, by our leaders. We have been obliged—to employ Dr. King’s powerful verb—to dream them up for ourselves.

America’s artists are the guardians of the spirit of questioning, of innovation, of reaching across the barriers that fence us off from our neighbors, from our allies and adversaries, from the six billion other people with whom we share this dark and dazzling world. Art increases the sense of our common humanity. The imagination of the artist is, therefore, a profoundly moral imagination: the easier it is for you to imagine walking in someone else’s shoes, the more difficult it then becomes to do that person harm. If you want to make a torturer, first kill his imagination. If you want to create a nation that will stand by and allow torture to be practiced in its name, then go ahead and kill its imagination, too. You could start by cutting school funding for art, music, creative writing and the performing arts.

Our children need training and encouragement and support—they need rehearsal space and tempera paint and bass violins, teachers and tap-shoes; they need constant, passionate exposure to the great artistic heritage of their people, so that even if they don’t grow up to be artists themselves, they will still have been blessed, as Americans have always been blessed, with the artist’s gift for seeing the possible in the impossible, the fellow soul on the other side of the fence. Our artists need freedom to pursue the solitary investigations into which their art inevitably leads them. America needs that untrammelled flow of creativity, of the willingness and ability to innovate, to skylark, to tinker, to daydream out loud: over the course of two and a half centuries now, our creative flow has filled the world’s libraries, museums, theaters and recital halls, its academies, movie houses and marketplaces, with works of genius to break the heart and boggle the mind. And the people of the world--our world--need an America that remains in full, confident possession of its mighty gift of imagination, not merely to meet the global demand for our entertainment and art and literature, but so that they--and we--need never fear the brutality, the arrogance and the inhumanity to which a nation in want of imagination must, inevitably, descend.

Michael Chabon is the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN’S UNION and THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY. His other books include THE MYSTERIES OF PITTSBURGH and WONDER BOYS. His work has appeared in The New Yorker, Harper’s, and in a number of anthologies, among them Best American Short Stories 2001 and Prize Stories 1999: The O. Henry Awards. He lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife, Ayelet Waldman, also a novelist, and their four children.