

The writers' pen

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Novelist and English professor Zachary Lazar brings his Tulane creative writing students to prisons, grounding fiction in reality. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

No place locks up, imprisons or incarcerates more people than Louisiana—not any other state in the United States, not China, not Iran, not Germany, not anywhere else on Earth. Louisiana leads the world, per capita, in jailing people.

From this soul-crushing reality, deep behind the concrete walls of Louisiana prisons, Tulane [English](#) professor, acclaimed writer and novelist [Zachary Lazar](#) has found a way to mine something positive, something profoundly creative and cathartic and use it to inform his own writing and in a writing course he teaches.

The idea for Lazar's latest novel and his creative writing course, which is also a Tulane service learning class, came from a 2013 trip to Louisiana State Penitentiary

(better known as “Angola”).

“I met a lot of people in prison who were doing a lot of incredible, creative stuff,” he said, in a calm, almost soothing tone. “A lot of them arrive in prison with creativity in their background, and once they are there it is a release, a way to pass the time.”

While Lazar said the confinement of a person in a cell for hours on end and being behind the walls of a prison for decades might stimulate some level of creativity as an escape, that is not all he found in the inmates he met.

“What I’ve come to think,” he said, “is that a lot of people who are in prison already are creative people and that there’s a somewhat mysterious, although not completely mysterious, relationship between being a creative person and winding up incarcerated. A lot of these folks I encounter are musicians, rappers, Cajun and zydeco musicians, punk rockers, artists, tattoo artists—creative people who are mostly from environments where’s there no economic way to make money through creativity.”

Angola is the state’s prison farm that is surrounded by its own levee, wrapped in chain-link fence, crowned in barbed wire and overseen by armed guards in towers. It’s an infamous and brutal prison—home to 5,000-plus inmates and built on the grounds of an old plantation in central Louisiana in West Feliciana Parish. Ninety percent of the men who walk in, most likely in shackles, will never walk out again alive. It may take years, or even decades, but a sentence to Angola is a death sentence in almost every sense.

Outside of the Angola Prison Rodeo, held twice a year and open to the public, it is otherwise relatively closed off to the outside world.

But Lazar was able to get a view that few see—the inside of Angola—working as a journalist with the help of Deborah Luster, who was going there as a photographer. Lazar also wrote a letter to get permission from then-assistant Cathy Fontenot, who was “open to it because of my father,” he said.

Luster and Lazar went to Angola to cover an inmate performance of a Passion Play, the dramatic representation of the trial, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The photographer and the writer have something profound in common beyond spending time inside Angola together: Both lost a parent to violence under similar

circumstances.

In his novel *Vengeance* (Catapult, 2018), where fact and fiction are hard to tell apart, Lazar writes this about Luster:

“I’ve come to Angola this week because of an unlikely bond I share with a photographer, Deborah Luster, who has been photographing inmates here and elsewhere in Louisiana for many years. Both of us had a parent who was murdered. Both murders happened in Phoenix, Arizona. They were both contract killings. All these years later, we find ourselves living in the same city, New Orleans, which at the time we met had the highest per capita murder rate in the country. We live two blocks away from each other—you can see my house from Deborah’s roof. When I tell this story to an inmate named Elton Thomas, who calls himself Solomon after the wise king, he tells me it’s not just a coincidence. He says it’s fate, an act of God.”

Vengeance centers around Kendrick King—a composite of people Lazar met at Angola, an inmate serving life in the prison for a murder he may or may not have committed in Jefferson Parish—and a narrator, who is Lazar in many ways and words. There is doubt as to whether King was there at the scene of the murder, whether he pulled the trigger, or if he was coerced by detectives to confess to a crime he didn’t actually commit.

Drawn from some real-life events and real people, along with court transcripts and witness interview tapes, *Vengeance* is a novel but King’s story has a reality that many prisoners in Louisiana face.

“The main things that are pressing on people who are incarcerated at Angola are the long sentences,” said Lazar.

His impression of inmates that he’s met at Angola is that they are thinking, “I’m never going to get out of here. I did something when I was 19 and I’m never going to get out of here, and now I’m 45.”

In *Vengeance*, inmates describe life imprisonment like this:

“Imagine you’re trapped in a barn. Now imagine that the barn is on fire. You will do anything you can to get out of that barn.

“A life sentence comes with an exclamation point and a question mark. ‘Wow!’ And then, ‘When this gonna end?’ ”

When Lazar met the inmates who were doing the Passion Play, he said, they “were philosophical and spiritual. All of these big philosophical questions were very much in the foreground. Hearing how reflective and thoughtful of it people were was an eye-opener to me. It defied all the stereotypes you might have of people who have been convicted of violent crimes.”

Lazar said he was struck by “the ordinariness of most of the people I spoke to, how much we had in common. When I talked to them about why I was there, about my father, that would shift the dynamic and opened things up.”

Inmates were often surprised to learn about the murder of his father, he said. “But I think the thing we had in common was this firsthand experience with the consequences of violence. I could talk about that in a way that was more comfortable to me than with talking with other people.”

In *Vengeance*, a novel that feels like journalism but in which it’s hard to tell where the nonfiction ends and the fiction begins, Lazar writes: “I write about violence and its ramifications—that’s my subject. There’s a simple reason for this, which is that when I was six years old, my father was murdered. When I tell people this story, I’m always oversharing. It’s always awkward. There’s a temptation to apologize or make light of it somehow, but I’m telling this story now for a reason: It’s a story about the importance of stories. I show the students another prop, another book I wrote, *Evening’s Empire: The Story of My Father’s Murder*. The book as a prop is a way of defusing the subject’s shock value, also of deflecting sympathy, which I don’t want. The murder happened. I didn’t choose my father’s story, his story chose me. By writing it, I gained a measure of control over it as well as a deeper understanding.”

The murder of Lazar’s father is something you quickly learn after meeting him. It hovers about him in a way. And he’s not shy about talking about it.

Besides gaining him access to Angola, Cathy Fontenot was also the force behind Lazar’s prison-based creative writing class. When she changed jobs from assistant warden at Angola to warden at Lafayette Parish Correctional Center, she asked if he was interested in teaching a joint class with inmates and Tulane students at the facility in Scott, Louisiana.

“Cathy is a very enlightened prison administrator,” said Lazar. “I don’t think there’s very many like that.”

During a semester, Lazar's Tulane students and incarcerated students read the same literary works and ultimately collaborate together. The students produce *Ink*—an anthology rich with intensely personal outpourings of material, ranging from fiction to memoirs to poetry. The stories deal with themes like loss, love, rage, regret, mistakes made in the course of a life, and lessons learned.

"Always in my class, I start with nonfiction and move further away from it," he said. "We move in that direction—further and further from the facts—but I want them to be rooted in something that is real, so that their writing has some texture." The result? Writing produced by all of the students tends to be confessional.

His Tulane students make the trip by bus to the prison three times a semester to work with the inmates.

During the first trip on which Lazar took his Tulane students, as they rode on the bus together, he was filled with doubts if this would work at all, worrying about how the interactions would work. "This is going to be terrible. This is a terrible mistake," he described the thoughts going through his mind on the bus.

"And it just wasn't like that."

He said the two groups were initially physically separated inside the jail, but after getting the guards to agree to let them sit together the walls came down instantly. "They immediately got along in a way that totally shocked me. They didn't freeze up, and that's been true every time. I think everyone is curious about each other. I think the folks in prison are very excited, especially in the first week, for people to come see them from the outside world. I think they (the inmates) are the ones that make it possible to have that sense of ease, which you wouldn't think because they are in their orange or black-and-white jumpsuits. The first visual of them is really pretty intense. And they aren't smiling when we first come in," he said with a laugh.

For each of the service-learning creative writing courses that he's taught at the prison, on the first two-hour bus ride that he and his Tulane students make to Lafayette, Lazar lays out the story of his father's murder and his time at Angola as a journalist.

"I want them to know why I am doing it. Also, I want to start things with me confessing this type of thing," he said, and that telling them about his father may play a role in the flood of personal material that he often gets from the students.

“They’re surprised,” he said of the Tulane students’ reaction to the story of his father. “I think sometimes a little puzzled why someone whose father was murdered would be reaching out to people in prison, rather than wanting them all to rot away, throw away the key. But I talk about that, though, that’s part of why I became a writer. I say, ‘When you’re 6 years old and your father is murdered, it’s very confusing and disorienting and you need to recreate a new vision of what the world is actually like because whatever your vision about what the world was actually like is completely wrong.’”

Lazar said one of the ways he coped with his father’s murder was to read. He wanted to explore and investigate why it happened, but in a larger sense why people commit evil acts.

“You start to read about it. Reading leads to writing, and that’s always how I always try to frame the classes,” he said. “It’s unsatisfying if the only value of the class is, let’s get better as writers. Let’s use writing to think about the world. Let’s use writing to think about who we are. Let’s use writing to ask questions and to reflect.

“I say this to them, ‘Here you are in a prison, we’re all together in a prison right now. What happened?’ ”

“There’s a somewhat mysterious, although not completely mysterious, relationship between being a creative person and winding up incarcerated.”

— Zachary Lazar, novelist and English professor