

English professor leads prison-based creative writing class

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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."

Editor's note: This story was originally published in the [June 2018 issue](#) of Tulane magazine. Continue to [full article](#).

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— Zachary Lazar, novelist and English professor