

BOOK REVIEWS

**The Sentences That Create Us:
Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison
by Caitis Meissner (2022)
Chicago: Haymarket Books, 339 pp.
*Reviewed by David Morales Zenquis***

To some, the art of writing is not new. To others, it is an unfathomable being. People within the system attempting to pursue the craft know that in a volatile environment like prison, there is no effective way to achieve this unless there is an instructor available or a mailroom-approved piece of literature – and this is where Caitis Meissner's book comes in.

The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison is the latest installment from PEN America, one of the nation's largest organizations that advocates for literature, free expression and human rights. It is an overhaul of its revered predecessor, *Handbook for Writers in Prison* (PEN America, 2010). This new 2022 version bares the same creative writing concepts along with their imperative theoretical foundations – poetry, fiction, nonfiction screen writing, drama, rewriting /revision, grammar/punctuation, and resources – while bringing its own concepts to the mix such as a chapter on journalism that contains its own writing techniques and guidance on pitching ideas to magazines and other outlets, as well as a chapter on graphics narrative detailing the art of comics as a storytelling medium. These chapters are a valuable addition to the existing entourage of lessons, giving insight to the reader on a visual art medium that can be used for self-expression and an ever-growing field in the writing world that can become a working opportunity if the reader gives it dedication.

Where this book really thrives, though, is in Meissner's ability to ensure that each section is weaved with the power of storytelling – the same power she wants the reader to learn. Each chapter is composed by a dedicated author who has interacted with the Criminal Justice System in some way (e.g. formerly incarcerated, currently incarcerated, or outside volunteer/advocate), and they describe their selected writing category in an easy-to-understand step-by-step process, allowing readers of any educational background to participate and give hope a chance. Yet the second part of the book, *Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*, is the heart (and title) of this innovative work. This section contains detailed accounts on how the authors managed to be published inside prison, outside of prison, how they battle

the stigma of a criminal record, how to compose manuscripts, how to use writing for grieving and advocacy, and more. This is where *The Sentences That Create Us* excels – in showing incarcerated readers the triumphs of those similarly situated and how creative writing can become a lifeline.

Overall, this latest installment goes beyond the scope of its predecessor. It demonstrates the basics (and then some) of creative writing affluently, with various examples and exercises along the way, all from the voices of the oppressed and sympathizers – it details how these people made their success possible through the art of writing. If there is anything it lacks, is the demand and usage by the free community. For instance, upon reading the “Editor’s Note” we discover that Spoon Jackson – one of the authors – directed a poetry class to school students via his prison’s telephone system. This is no small feat. Spoon had to acquire funds to make the call; he had to coordinate when to call; he had to ensure a phone was available at that time; and solve any other predicament he faced while incarcerated. Despite this, the students and Spoon were willing to sustain any obstacles. This is how *The Sentences That Create Us* should be used – to conjoin the free community and the oppressed so we can heal, learn, and grow together through the craft of writing. This is a book I highly recommend to incarcerated individuals, but even more so to the broader public, for this is an era in dire need of restorative justice and rehabilitation – so should we not we read together?

REFERENCE

PEN America (2010) *Handbook for Writers in Prison*, New York.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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