



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE SENTENCES THAT CREATE US: CRAFTING A WRITER'S LIFE IN PRISON BY PEN AMERICA (ED)

1. Many contributors describe writing not as a hobby, but as a "tether to sanity." Does writing in prison change the definition of what "successful" writing looks like? Is the goal publication, or is it the internal transformation?
2. The title suggests that sentences "create us." How do the writers in this collection use their prose to dismantle the "sentences" handed down by judges and the legal system?
3. How does the act of writing allow an incarcerated person to shed the identity of a "number" or an "inmate" and step into the identity of an artist?
4. The book discusses writing on napkins, hiding drafts, and limited access to research. How does extreme limitation—physical, temporal, and sensory—actually fuel creativity? Does a "lack of freedom" sometimes lead to a "freedom of thought"?
5. In prison, there is no true privacy. How does the threat of a cell search or the oversight of a corrections officer affect what a writer is willing to put on the page?
6. Several essays highlight the importance of "writing circles" or workshops behind bars. How does finding a "literary community" in an environment designed for isolation change the writers' perspectives?
7. Who is the intended audience for these pieces? When writing for those of us on the "outside," do these authors have a responsibility to be educators, or should they be allowed to simply be artists?
8. Does a writer in prison have a moral obligation to document the conditions of their confinement? Is it possible to write "pure fiction" or "escapism" when surrounded by the reality of a cell?
9. After reading these essays, has your perception of the American carceral system shifted? How does hearing the *voice* of the incarcerated person humanize the statistics we often see in the news?
10. Writers are often told to "show, don't tell" using sensory details. How do these writers manage to create vivid imagery when their physical environment is intentionally drab and repetitive?
11. Why might some writers choose poetry or memoir over fiction? How does the "genre" of a life sentence dictate the "genre" of the writing?

Discussion questions generated by Gemini AI.



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