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The Handwritten Letter, an Art All but Lost, Thrives in Prison

By **JEREMY W. PETERS**

To the Georgia Department of Corrections he is inmate No. 544319, in prison on a five-year sentence for drug possession. But to the editors of Maxim, he is Mike Bolick, a faithful reader and regular letter writer who has loopy penmanship and an eye for beautiful cover models.

Mr. Bolick has become known at Maxim over the years for sending cover girls letters through the magazine with the hope that they will agree to be his pen pals. He is gracious and self-effacing, complimenting their beauty while asking them to please excuse his poor spelling and punctuation. He has plans to get his G.E.D. to remedy that, he explained in a recent letter to the pin-up girl Rachelle Leah.

On occasion he asks for a few pictures — just not nude ones. Those would surely be confiscated by the guards.

In prisons across the country, with their artificial pre-Internet worlds where magazines are one of the few connections to the outside and handwritten correspondence is the primary form of communication, the art of the pen-to-paper letter to the editor is thriving. Magazine editors see so much of it that they have even coined a term for these letters: jail mail.

At magazines like Maxim, with its male-heavy readership and sexy spreads that feature women in just enough clothing to avoid running afoul of prison standards, mail from inmates can easily make up three-quarters of the handwritten letters that come in. Maxim says it receives 10 to 30 such letters each week. Rolling Stone says it receives at least one a day. And at Esquire, editors receive about 15 to 20 a month, about a quarter of the magazine's mailed letters. The rest come mainly from older readers.

Many letters are like the ones Mr. Bolick sends: from inmates with plenty of free time asking to meet famous people featured in profiles and photo spreads. But they take on all forms. Some are as simple as an inmate complaining about not receiving his subscription or writing with a change of address. Others are personal reflections on a recent article. Country Weekly

regularly receives songs from a prisoner in Texas who has ambitions of being a country star.

Some letters arrive censored by prison staff, with strokes of black marker obscuring certain sentences.

A common type comes from inmates who claim they were **wrongfully convicted** and would like a journalist to investigate. “It turns out every person in jail is innocent. Imagine that!” said Will Dana, managing editor of Rolling Stone. “It seems every day there are a couple” of letters, he said. “And they’re usually requests for help or to look into the incredible miscarriage of justice that landed them in jail.”

Jail mail comes to magazines of all stripes and socioeconomic demographic. Even Vanity Fair, with its glossy photo spreads of black-tie galas and articles on high society travails, used to receive about one letter a month from prisoners seeking to get in touch with the investigative reporter **Dominick Dunne** before he died in 2009. It seems to be a mostly male phenomenon. Women’s magazines like Glamour, Self and O, the Oprah Magazine, said they did not typically get mail from female inmates.

Ebony receives about 25 prison letters a month — a quarter of all the written mail that comes to the magazine’s offices in Chicago. Terry Glover, the managing editor, said she was often surprised by how serious and introspective some of the prison letters could be. “You come to these letters with a certain expectation like, ‘O.K., what is it that they want?’ Because often they are looking for financial support or an address for a hot celebrity.” But more often than not, Ms. Glover said, it is apparent to her that prisoners have used their ample time alone to consider why they are incarcerated.

“They say, ‘This is what happened to me, don’t let this happen to any other kids,’ ” she said, adding that Ebony has occasionally printed letters from prisoners.

The letters are usually recognizable as jail mail even before they are opened. In the space for the return address, an inmate number follows the writer’s name. A return address with words like “United States Penitentiary” or “correctional center” is a dead giveaway.

Magazines these days receive the bulk of their reader correspondence through e-mail. Esquire, for example, will get 100 to 150 e-mails in any given month, compared with only about 60 mailed letters. Sports Illustrated stopped soliciting reader letters entirely after the anthrax scare of 2001.

Prisoners send handwritten letters not out of any romantic attachment to the old-fashioned craft of letter writing but out of necessity. Many prisons do not allow inmates access to computers. And prisons that do hardly ever allow inmates access to the Internet or to

conventional e-mail systems. In California, for example, prisoners are not permitted e-mail contact.

But in the federal prison system and in states like Oregon and Pennsylvania, inmates can receive e-mail through a third-party system that allows prisons to review messages for words like “escape” and “drugs.” Family members and friends of the imprisoned can send messages through this system. And after they are read and approved, prison staff members can print the messages out and deliver them to inmates.

Just like any correspondence, magazines are censored inside prisons. While an inmate may have a subscription, not every issue makes it through. Prisons typically block ones that contain articles and images they would prefer inmates not see: risqué photos or other overtly sexually provocative content, references to drugs, weapons and — a definite deal-breaker — anything to do with breaking out of prison.

Sometimes the prisons just destroy the magazines, other times they are stamped “return to sender.”

“Every once in a while we’ll just get a huge envelope of issues and a letter saying, ‘These were rejected by the prison,’ ” said Peter Martin, an associate editor at Esquire.

One magazine that failed to get past censors was the August 2008 issue of Esquire, which featured an article that rehashed in detail how a group of inmates plotted an escape from a Michigan prison.

Magazines as G-rated as Popular Mechanics have been denied for articles that explain subjects like bombs or weapons.

As editors at American Media found out, prisoners can be rather fussy about their magazines. American Media, which publishes Country Weekly, Men’s Fitness, The National Enquirer and Star, was sued by a prisoner for \$25,000 plus damages. Why? He claimed he was deceived and defrauded after Country Weekly reformatted.

For American Media, no stranger to lawsuits from celebrities, a prisoner lawsuit was a first.

In an environment where people are stripped of almost all individual possessions, magazines are one of the few things that prisoners get to experience as their own. And that helps explain why many write in so frequently and passionately, said Joe Levy, Maxim’s editor.

“Magazines are one of their primary sources of contact with the world outside,” Mr. Levy said. “Certainly there’s television. But there’s a difference between television, which many of the

guys have to watch communally, and a magazine that's theirs.”