



Prison and Justice Writing Program
PEN America

2024 PEN America/L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship Mentee Letter

Named for the 10-year written friendship of the late acclaimed author Madeleine L'Engle and scholar, writer, and former Black Party leader Ahmad Rahman, the PEN America/L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship honors mentor/mentee pairs in PEN America's longstanding PEN Prison Writing Mentorship Program, which connects incarcerated writers with correspondence-based mentorship and other resources. Recipients of the award receive \$250.

The prize was generously endowed by L'Engle's family and memorializes L'Engle's participation as one of the program's very first mentors, along with Rahman's extraordinary journey from serving 21 years in prison—framed in an FBI sting of the Panthers—to a celebrated and beloved assistant professor of African and African-American History at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The pair began writing in the early 1970s, establishing a rigorous working rapport that informed both of their works.

From the first exchange with my mentor I knew this experience would be special: he sent me one of his pieces for critique. Allow me to put this into perspective, please. In prison trust is a dangerous commodity. In the myriad of ways you can be hurt it all begins with trust. Guards are trained to mistrust us, volunteers are told to be wary of our intentions, and even our families may be leery of requests. Yet, this man offered me a portion of his deepest self. Writing, the best writing we do, offers a glimpse into our bared souls and my mentor trusted me to sift through a portion of his.

This has never happened to me before.

No one outside of these walls has bequeathed me with such an honor. In all my previous mentorships the trust has, at least in the beginning, been a one-sided affair-me to them. They asked me to trust them with a portion of myself as a matter of course, not necessarily understanding how insidiously dangerous this request was. My mentor was the first, and only that I know of, mentor to break this cycle. The effect was both immediate and immense. I trusted my mentor implicitly with my work. I know, no matter what else, that little snippet into my unvarnished self will be safe in his hands. In his second response to me he solidified this by saying, "I believe that as long as we practice empathy and honesty with each other, we'll both grow from this experience. And based on the notes you've given me on my last story, I feel like the growth is already underway." That last couldn't be truer.

My mentor's critiques, comments, and notes are insightful and eye-opening. Our backgrounds are so similar that, except for a few years and a thousand miles or so, we could've been bosom buddies from childhood. This helps because he understands a portion of my thought process, the part that is impossible to explain without using a torrent of metaphors that would serve to only confuse most, without me saying a word about it. He tells me that "this is probably one of the first horror/suspense pieces I've ever read" and yet his notes on it couldn't have been more accurate. It was like my mentor sat down with me one afternoon, and over a few cups of coffee I explained what I wanted to showcase in the work, where I wanted the reader to be on the edge of their seats, and when I wanted the reader to

leap out of that same seat. He understands what I intend to say and knows how to bring it out in my writing-I only hope I can do the same for him, or someone else, one day.

My mentor's trust, expertise, and friendship allows me to access the portions of self that make me who I am as a writer and a human being. Writing allows me to connect with that deeper self, the self that has been buried deep these many years, accessible only through writing, and people like my mentor are integral to that experience. My mentor's guidance, especially his trust in me, is one of the keys to unlocking the humanity I've been forced to imprison behind these bars.

I have always loved words; they have allowed me to express myself in a myriad of ways, and it is the rare time when the written word fails me. Expressing my gratitude to the wonderful people of PEN for all they've done and continue to do, especially introducing me to my mentor as his mentee, is one of those times. When such a circumstance presents itself, I can only bow my head, acknowledge the incredible debt I vow to one day pay forward, and say with all my heart thank you.

Mark Altenhofen