



Prison and Justice Writing Program
PEN America

2024 PEN America/L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship Mentor 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.

I've never met anyone quite like Jerry. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that he is the most open-hearted person I know. At every turn, he fills our correspondence with passion, gratitude, determination, and hope. I've lost track of how many years he and I have written to one another, because it stopped feeling like a conversation with an expiration date a long time ago. I write to Jerry because I enjoy writing to Jerry. We have work to do, he and I: books to read and discuss, manuscripts to revise, queries to send.

As Jerry observed in his beautiful letter, we have come together as a pair to create a small but mighty writing community, and that is so very meaningful to me. Writing is a solitary business most of the time. It is rare to find someone to share such a rich process with, to discuss both literary narrative and literary industry honestly, with deep curiosity about what it means to be a writer. Awards are very nice, and I'm touched by the origin story of this one, but it is an honor unto itself to share this kind of sprawling exchange with Jerry, to open up my inbox, see a new message alert from JPay, and be reminded that he has been hard at work on his manuscript.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the PEN Prison Writing Program for facilitating connections like ours, and for doing so much to amplify and nurture voices that might otherwise be swallowed up by a carceral system that does not seem to recognize the commonality of humanity.

And to Jerry, my friend, I'm honored by all you've shared with me. This is a sweet opportunity to look at how far we've come together in our work, but there is more for us to do, discuss, create. What a privilege it is to share this tether. Onward!

Lily Brooks Dalton