



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.*

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I write to nominate Lily Brooks-Dalton (author of *Motorcycles I've Loved*, and *Good Morning, Midnight*) for the 2024 PEN America/L'Engle-Rahman Prize for Mentorship.

Over the past few decades, I've read hundreds of articles and books on the subject of writing, and one common thread throughout all was the importance of new authors having access to a writing community.

I've never had a writing community, though I've longed for one with all my being. Writing is my life. It's the magic that keeps my heart pumping and my mind crisp on this corrupt, evil, and inept modern-day-plantation I currently (and for the past 29 years) call home.

I've taken a few courses with University of Michigan and Oakland University volunteers, and I've often received feedback from the various journals and writing contests I've submitted to over the years. I've even been blessed to write for Prison Writers, the Marshall Project, and the Prison Journalism Project. And while my editors with all three often offered me wonderfully constructive feedback, I've just never felt like we shared in the same community. They and all the others from the universities and whatnot still felt separate. Not in a bad way, I doubt any of the condescending things they said or did were intentional, but I never felt equal. I felt beneath them. And this often left a concoction of frustration and humiliation brewing in my belly.

I deeply wanted to fit in, but I had problems shaking the feeling that I was invited inside the "writing club" as a charity case.

Then PEN America introduced Lily into my life. Right off she treated me like a normal human being. Screw the idea that I was some ignorant, less-than criminal locked in a cage. To Lily, I was a writer and was to be treated as such.

No kid's gloves.

No flowery ass-kissing praise.

No allowing me to wallow in my own self pity.

Lily stole time from her busy life to read my 900 page fantasy manuscript (*Blood & Steel*). She then forced me to rewrite the entire thing, though I kicked and screamed and offered excuses. And when I say rewrite, I mean actually re-type the entire damn tome from beginning to end, weaving in all the many changes she and I had discussed.

Not only am I a better writer because of that rewrite, I'm also a better human. And I've expressed this to Lily many times. She inspires me in more ways than she'll ever know. She always responds to my questions no matter how lame they may be, even when she's swamped promoting and writing her own books, even when she's sick and bedridden, or, I'm sure, when she's having one of those days where life feels like a flock of frenzied, squawking seagulls just won't stop shitting on you no matter how much you scream at them to go away.

After the *Blood & Steel* rewrite, Lily helped me perfect my literary agent query letter, which turned out to be more challenging than writing the damn book. She then clobbered me over the head with the biggest and most pleasant surprise of my life. She offered to aid me in my quest to submit said query letter to literary agents, going so far as to vouch for me with an agent at her own agent's agency. How frickin' awesome and brave and selfless was that?

Her confidence in me cracked the granite shell that entombed my heart thanks to three decades of incarceration and all that entails.

I sprinted to my cell, slammed the door behind me, then broke down and wept. Tears of joy. Tears of sadness. Tears that someone finally gave a fuck about all the hard work I pump into scribbling words on notepads, or napkins, or toilet paper, or whatever paper-like product is at hand.

I might not have a lot of things in my life, but thanks to PEN America and Lily Brooks-Dalton, I now have a writing community to call my own, and a friend whom I trust to always tell me the truth.

Thank you, Lily, from the depths of my soul. You're the best mentor anyone ever could have asked for. I hope I've also somehow helped you in your journey, but, if not, you've my word that I'll keep trying.

**Jerry Metcalf #251141**

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