



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.

Since the beginning of my writing journey nearly a decade ago now, I have had several mentors that have educated me, inspired me, and helped me grow as a writer in this creative endeavor that has been a light in the darkness of my daily existence. I began writing with PEN in 2019 with the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) initiative. I was paired with my first of three mentors over the next few years. Each of my mentors pushed me in different ways to explore various methods, styles and genres of writing. As a fledgling author they each helped give me direction and develop a writing practice that has become as necessary to my existence as breathing oxygen.

I began working with my third mentor, Tashya, for NaNoWriMo in November of 2021. We moved beyond a strict mentor/mentee relationship to a literary and literal friendship that helped me open up to different ways of thinking about others and more importantly, about myself. It takes time and genuine concern on the part of a mentor to help someone open up to the process of writing, especially an incarcerated person, that, hopefully, one day becomes deeply personal. Even when I hit a long writing slump as I struggled with some of those deeply personal issues, Tashya stayed in contact.

Each of my relationships with my mentors built on the last. I credit the writing practice they helped me develop, in large part, for finally accepting myself and living my truth. After a lot of mental and emotional struggles, a lifetime of hiding and eighteen years in prison, I came out as a transgender woman in June of 2023. I eventually shared that story with my mentor. For the first time in my life I could write freely as the person I had only written through in shadow before. But that was also a very scary prospect. With my new sense of being and lived experience came new questions and challenges, especially in a male prison. What kind of writing did I want to engage in? I felt a need to address issues concerning my identity and newly forming position in the LGBTQ community in my writing, but how?

PEN has done a wonderful job of pairing me with mentors that really fit my needs. In late January, 2024, Jess, the Mentorship Coordinator for the Prison and Justice Writing Team contacted me after speaking with Tashya. I believe, as a good mentor would, Jess and Tashya recognized my need to connect with a writing community beyond her personal experiences. A month later, Jess paired me with my current mentor, Ash.

From the start Ash has exemplified the qualities necessary in a mentor to form the type of relationship the LEngle-Rahman award espouses. Opening with her Greetings from Portland, Maine!, I knew, despite her frigid location in comparison to my southern climate, we would have a warm and inviting literary relationship. I could tell right away that I was not a project to her but a person to collaborate with through her introductory words saying, "It's such a joy to be working with you, learning from you, and writing alongside you. Thank you for hanging out with me and for giving me a glimpse into your world." I knew immediately that this would be a partnership in writing with an exchange of ideas to help me grow as an author and hopefully become a genuine friendship as well.

Of course I was impressed by her credentials with a PhD in literature and her careers as an editor, a college English professor and an entrepreneur (She has a traveling bookstore. How cool is that!). It is very validating and inspiring to have someone with such an illustrious resume take an interest in your writing. But more importantly she allowed me to see her as a person. She gave me a glimpse into her personal world that showed me a level of trust that society and even my friends and family have told me I no longer deserve. Little details like her studies of queer comics and their impact on social movements, legislation and culture revealed a person who looked outside of the spaces society says is normal for writers that can have a profound impact on our lives. That openness allowed me to reveal myself more fully as a queer trans woman and my desire to speak to those issues in our community.

She offered real interest in my writing samples provided by PEN and genuine, constructive critiques. Poems that I believed were hopeless and lacked focus, she found the thread in the words I was trying to weave together saying, "This is what I love about writing: the ability to hold multiple truths at once. And you capture that so well... It not only captured the essence of my writing but who I am as a religious and queer person." The warmth of those words rekindled in me a true desire to write again.

After those insightful and inspiring takes on my writings she then shared a couple of poems with me. One was a poem entitled Blue she wrote to someone very dear to her. The poem was beautiful in itself. But the intimate sharing with me, with someone like me, who had not experienced knowing someone as my true self in the way it was depicted in this poem moved me. It made my heart yearn for this honest ability to let the storm of emotions within me rain on the page in a rainbow of words. It showed me what was possible for me as a writer and gave me hope that someone, someday, may yet see the blue in me too.

Now that I had the desire, I needed the direction. I've had some success as a playwright in a short ten minute format, having had several plays performed in local theaters and read in New York venues. I really like essay writing, and have now been awarded an honorable mention for one in PENs annual contest. But I find it difficult to stay with those genres on a consistent basis. Poems are one of my favorites, but I'm a moody writer and they come in waves of inspiration. So, what to do?

With that first letter Ash had made me feel comfortable and invited me to share a bit of my personal story with her. As I had hoped, there was genuine acceptance. She wrote, "I also wanted to thank you for trusting me with your story about coming out as transgender...I know that coming out is a continual process that always involves a bit of risk." It is so important for a mentor working with incarcerated people to first and foremost connect on a personal level. Shared experiences reconnects us to an environment beyond the fences that confine not only our bodies, but in many ways, our hearts and minds. She seamlessly intertwined writing and relating, saying, "I'm of the belief that it's impossible to remove oneself from their writing...It's the magic of queer writing, the ability to infuse queerness in all of its variation and glory into every sentence." Giving me the freedom to write with an open heart and mind has helped me reach beyond the penitential barriers of steel and razor wire and of my own making. She has helped me find the confidence within myself to want to publish my work someday.

Ash has never made the personal part of our correspondence feel perfunctory or something to get out of the way before the real mentoring of writing begins. But the advice for writing is always there. When I

told her I was stuck on what genre to write in, she said, "Remove the form as much as possible. Think about what's on your mind or in your heart, and just start writing. Dumping ideas onto a sheet of paper without any guardrails is the best way I know how to get to an idea that I love." And so I did. In between college work and my job, I'm writing every day again.

Ash has shared poems, short stories and authors of novels with me to broaden my literary horizons. The authors she suggested reminded me how much I love reading. It also reminded me of my passion for novel writing. With help from Ash and those authors' books, I've learned the art of speaking to issues through story without speaking about them directly. I recently dusted off my second novel with NaNoWriMo and am now very excited about a rewrite I'm working on with Ash.

An exceptional mentor like Ash, above all else, gives us a safe space to be human again: to feel and express, to cry and to laugh, to hurt and to love. And if we're lucky, we'll find someone to share that with in our writing. I already have. Thank you Ash.

And thank you Jess for finding me such a wonderful mentor!

Jeanne Bossier