



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.

When I first started working with PEN as a writing contest committee member several years ago, I initially foregrounded one core tenet: value each person's right to creative expression, no matter their identity, politics, actions, or background. While the first half of that principle has remained steady over the years, I've come to realize that the second half is just simply incorrect. Writing is personal, and the personal *is* political. It's a reflection of our identities and how we walk through the world—which is what makes it so powerful.

Jeanne Bossier's writing exemplifies this idea perfectly. Her work is introspective, vulnerable, and visceral. She's one of those rare writers brave enough to really expose herself in her writing, and she explores her life, her identity, and her journey through incarceration with an interrogative perspective. I consider myself privileged to get to read Jeanne's writing and learn about her life through our letters.

Jeanne is kind, thoughtful, smart, and an excellent writer. But what has truly impressed me is her versatility. Together, we've worked on poems, plays, memoir excerpts, and beginnings of novels—each piece more reflective than the last. She toys with form and structure, but never wavers on her dedication to deep thinking and expression. Whether she's using color as a metaphor for exploring the inside/outside divide in her poem, "Painted Skies," or expertly bending genres in her longer-form, "La Chassaressse," Jeanne fully commits herself to her writing and allows her courage to guide her through each piece. It's an admirable quality in any writer—and one that's encouraged me to be a bit braver in my own writing.

I'd be remiss to not mention a thread that unites Jeanne and me. As members of the LGBTQ+ community, Jeanne and I had an affinity nearly right away. And while we've led different lives and claim different identities, it's a deep joy to find someone safe to discuss such a core part of our lives with. I'm honored that Jeanne trusts me enough to share her reflections on this aspect of herself with me, and I'm grateful that she treats my identity with equal respect. Together, we've bonded over our love of writing and have made considerable progress on individual pieces, but this connection transcends the words on the page. My greatest hope is that as Jeanne navigates being a queer trans woman in a male prison, she

knows she has someone on the outside who understands and values her and a safe place to explore these things in her writing.

For these reasons—and so many more—I was incredibly moved to hear that Jeanne nominated our partnership for the PEN America/L’Engle Rahman award. As life becomes increasingly stressful and the larger social context increasingly distressing, writing back and forth with Jeanne has become a true bright spot. In her nomination letter, Jeanne writes that working with me has given her “a safe space to be human again: to feel and express, to cry and to laugh, to hurt and to love.” But it’s me who’s found a space to feel human in our correspondence, a space to focus exclusively on human and creative connection. I’m eternally grateful to both Jeanne and PEN America for making that possible.

Keep writing, Jeanne. Your voice matters.

Ash Holland