



2025 PEN America / L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship Prison and Justice Writing Program

The PEN America/L'Engle–Rahman Prize for Mentorship was created to honor the extraordinary, decade-long written correspondence between acclaimed author Madeleine L'Engle and scholar, writer, and former Black Panther Party leader Ahmad Rahman. Beginning in the early 1970s, their exchange evolved into a rigorous intellectual and creative partnership that shaped both of their work, reflecting a shared commitment to mentorship, literary exchange, and mutual learning. The prize also recognizes Rahman's journey from incarceration to becoming a respected professor of African and African American History at the University of Michigan–Dearborn, as well as L'Engle's role as one of the earliest mentors in PEN America's Prison Writing Program; generously endowed by L'Engle's family, it memorializes their enduring connection.

Established in 2020, the prize is awarded annually to four mentor–mentee pairs in PEN America's Prison Writing Mentorship Program, which connects incarcerated writers with correspondence-based mentorship. Recipients are selected through a collaborative process centered on two letters: a nomination letter written by the mentee and a response from the mentor. Together, these letters reflect on the impact of the mentorship experience and underscore the program's emphasis on reciprocal growth, dialogue, and creative development. Each winner receives a \$250 award and is invited to participate in a book exchange.

Lawson Strickland - Mentee

I've always been a writer. As a child, I climbed inside books to reemerge with pencils and paper and my own ideas. I wrote in solitary rooms, an only child in a family of solitary people until, moving out into the wider world, I forgot those things. But waking one morning in a slim concrete cell the morning after my own worst moment, it was in many ways a return.

I spent seven years on Louisiana's death row and in that time, I returned to that which sustained me, disappearing into books—sometimes for days, for weeks without a spoken word—until slowly, what also returned was the pen to my hand.

In those seven years, I wrote one story. Full of anguish and pain. Full of recriminations for others, for myself. Full of loss. An attempt to confront on paper what could not be said. I poured everything into 16,000 words and when finished, placed it in the bottom of my locker box and slid it under my bed like something buried. I have not read it in over 20 years, though I've carried it with me everywhere. From one solitary lock down to the next, cell to cell, until I awoke on another morning to find myself resentenced to LIFE, and with questions: What's next? What to do? How to attempt to move beyond the past?

In 2016, I was awarded second place by PEN for a piece of short fiction, “September,” submitted under the name Ellis Acton Currer—the nom de plume a shield against the recriminations of my past. I had begun to write again but what I truly longed for was community and PEN appeared as a lifeline that seemed to open a door. That even here, I might craft a writer’s life. A life that would require other doors to be opened, to which I did not have the keys. Placed in PEN’s Mentorship Program, I considered the possibility of such a future.

Paired with a mentor, we exchanged the three obligatory letters, with stories, snippets of flash fiction, a poem. All finished work I hoped might find its way outside of my own confinement but the connection between us was never made and shortly thereafter our communication withered and died, leaving me to wonder if my work was unable to connect with anyone. If I was just wasting my time. I contemplated the futility of writing in silence.

In response, I sought to create inside prison what I desired outside of it. I began to teach a small creative writing class, in my own insufficient ways. Attempting to pull together a community with shared interests and goals. A community of words and ideas. A community that rarely amounted to more than four or five men in an empty classroom, sitting in fold-up chairs, attempting to discuss a book, or a line of poetry.

On many a night, I was often the only one present. Alone again in a solitary room, the solitary writer with those few things that are ever the constants in a writer’s life: my thoughts, a pen, and a blank piece of paper.

And here, I have used so much of the space allotted, to tell this story—and it is a story, where we find ourselves now high along the Freytag line of rising action just before what may be the climax or, a climax—a point where one story begins to end while another begins. Where the denouement becomes the fractal inciting incident of the next story one has to tell. So that only now can one truly understand the full impact of what is to come.

In 2023, I was awarded First Place by PEN for the short story, “In the Cemetery Where My Sins Are Buried.” Again, I was placed in PEN’s Mentorship Program. I entered with no expectations. I signed up just as prisoners seem to sign up for all things that hold out the promise of some thing, a thing that more often than not never (fully) materializes.

In this I was wrong.

PEN’s pairing of me with N. West Moss has had the most profound effect, more than any other I’ve experienced since being incarcerated. Her willingness to stand in the door of possibility on my behalf as a writer, reader, mentor, and member of the wider literary community has been both selfless and extraordinary. Her willingness to share her own work, her struggles as a writer, and her profound dedication to her craft has had a tremendous impact upon myself. In how I see myself not just as a writer, but as an individual who has something of value to be said, that needs to be heard.

Working with West, I was again awarded First Place by PEN in 2024 for the short story, “Wait.” A piece of fiction dissimilar in style to anything I had written before. Encouraged, I mailed her a one act play, “Losing Hart,” and a short piece of personal memoir, “Whitefish.” A playwright and essayist herself,

West critiqued each piece line-by-line, offering her opinions on what worked, what did not...but more profoundly, she asked the question, "Why?" Why did I make the choices I made, so that her goal was not to force her art on me as she would have it, but to help me strip away my own layers to uncover the truest expression of my own.

To further challenge me, West invited me in to a practice she shares with other writers, of exchanging an essay each month. A free floating, random selection of essay topics that serves to compel the ritual of daily writing necessary for a healthy writing life, while also allowing us to come to know each other. Our homes, our parents, our childhoods.

But West's greatest contribution to me as a writer has been her willingness to extend herself into areas of my life to help others. Individuals she has never met. A professor of literature at Montclair State University and creative writing instructor at Gotham Writers Workshop, she has become a mentor to the students in the small creative writing class I began, accepting me as a fellow teacher by supporting my curriculum with her expertise, producing video lectures that enhance each chapter, providing close readings of the works of short fiction we study, offering to read each student's work.

As a result, what I once felt was an exercise in futility has grown into a legitimate writers community that meets each week to study the art and craft of writing. Working writers reading each other's efforts, providing feedback, and submitting completed pieces to outside journals and competitions, including PEN's.

To acknowledge this growing community, the Big Muddy Short Fiction Contest was created at Angola in 2024. In its inaugural year, the contest received 16 submissions, this year 28 writers submitted, including one from death row. In support of this cause, West agreed to serve as a judge, bringing along fellow writers and teachers, Kelly Caldwell of Gotham Writers Workshop and Novelist Gary Eldon Peter—enhancing the quality and legitimacy of the contest far beyond what could have ever been hoped for.

Not satisfied with this alone, West reached out to her wider arts community to raise the funds necessary to print the winners of this small prison writing contest in a chapbook. To provide them with an experience they themselves never thought possible. To be acknowledged as writers and to see their work in print.

I do not know how I have affected West. What I have given her in return. She says that she honestly feels she gets more out of our relationship than I do, in being able to help others, to talk about books and art and writing, to feel that she is making a difference. Whether that be with me, the students in her own classroom, or those in mine. But I feel she is being kind. It is to her world that we all gravitate, not she ours. Never have I seen a room full of inmates clap for a classroom lecture as I did the first time she completed a close reading of Salinger's "A Good Day For Bananafish," recorded on DVD a thousand miles away in the attic of her New Jersey home. A lecture she began by saying, "Hi, guys," as if she had known us all from years before.

What West has offered me supersedes mere techniques for developing sustainable writing habits or new techniques, different perspectives or innovative storytelling methods. We discuss the Great American Writers and Plato and Shakespeare in the Park. Debate the real, tangible, invisible,

illusionary boundaries between literature and popular fiction. Evaluate Salman Rushdie and the lives of praying mantises. Contemplate the death of a mother and birth of a daughter.

But what she has truly offered are those deeper questions, beyond what any diligent writer might find in a book, questions on the craft of *being*. What she has offered to me, and so many others around me, is the weight of possibility.

A possibility of becoming, that I hope I am worthy of.

West Moss - Mentor

I can't carry heavy things. I'm bad at math, awful on committees, and I'm not particularly athletic or stylish. I am awkward socially. I bite my nails.

The only thing I'm good at is WORDS. My happiness comes from reading, writing, and talking about reading and writing—period.

Like Lawson, I was first part of a mentor/mentee pairing at PEN that didn't work out. Communication between us was sporadic, and before we were able to find a rhythm for our work together, she stopped corresponding. I'll likely never know why.

In 2023 I was paired with Lawson, and it has turned into one of my most fulfilling writing relationships. I read the first piece Lawson sent, "In the Cemetery Where My Sins Are Buried," and was blown away by this gorgeous, evocative piece that introduced me to a writer with a distinct voice and point of view. Reading it generated two connected thoughts. One was that Lawson might well be the best writer I've worked with, and two that I already envisioned him as a colleague. My hope was that we would become part of one another's extended writing communities.

After about a year of interacting via PEN, Lawson and I moved our correspondence to JPay, where we could more easily and immediately share questions, work, and ideas. We began the practice of choosing a topic once a month, and each writing and sending the first, unedited draft of a 1000-word essay to one another. The first prompt was simply "Home". The second prompt was "Home Away from Home." Lawson picks the prompt one month. I pick the prompt the next. In this way we share work that is not about publication per se, but about drafting, thinking on paper, and sharing our unedited ideas, as well as generating new work. It has also allowed us to get to know one another better.

When Lawson wants feedback, he sends me work, letting me know what questions he has. His work often reminds me of a piece of writing that might be "in conversation" with what Lawson's working on, so I get it to him. Sometimes it's an essay (Wole Soyinka's essay "Why Do I Fast?" was one such example). Other times, it's a book (George Saunders' *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*). What usually follows are emails back and forth, explaining to one another how that piece pertains to our own work, or what we found perplexing about it. We correspond about what did and didn't work about it, etc. Because he is also interested in learning more about the current publishing market, I look for ways to get him subscriptions to, for example, Kenyon Review.

Lawson's writing often takes me to worlds I would not otherwise have access to (one of the great gifts of literature). He sent me a piece he'd submitted to PEN called "Whitefish". I was stunned by this piece, which explored Lawson's musings about freedom while in solitary. The Whitefish in question was an imaginary boat he built on which he sailed metaphorically for many years. It was a piece I felt editors would be moved by. Because it won 2nd place with PEN, we are discussing ways he might reimagine the piece for publication elsewhere.

Lawson and I speak frequently about his writing goals, and I'm urging him now to think about writing goals for 2026. He is busy, and I fear that his own writing tends to get relegated to the back burner. I see one of my tasks as helping him to develop actionable goals, and then helping him to

keep them front and center.

A while after we began working together, Lawson told me about a writing group he had created, as well as a writing contest he was launching, and a book club he hoped to begin. I asked him how I might help him realize his vision for these projects.

WRITING GROUP: Lawson mailed me his curriculum and asked for lectures on specific topics. He has access to a dvd player, and as a test run, he asked if I could do a close reading of Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." I filmed 2 half-hour lectures. A neighbor burned them onto a dvd, which I then mailed to Faye Talbot, the librarian at Angola, who got them to Lawson. He tested them and they worked! We were all so thrilled to have found a new mode of communicating.

I've now made and sent two batches of videos where I'm either doing a close reading of a text Lawson is teaching, or discussing craft issues he's asked me to address (drafting, revision, 'muscular' writing, what an agent does, how to push writing away from cliché territory, etc.). I've gotten him lists of journals (with PEN's help) that accept mail-in submissions. I've sent copies of short stories he wanted to use in his class, and I've read and responded to pieces of work from others in his writing group.

BIG MUDDY: I asked Lawson what his vision for the Big Muddy contest was. He said he felt it was important to have outside judges, and also that he wanted to create a printed booklet that made the winners and runners-up feel that their work had been published. I felt I could help on both counts.

I enlisted 2 friends (both published authors) to judge the contest with me. We completed the judging and offered written feedback to every entrant. Then I approached a friend at the Fertel Foundation in Louisiana who gave us the funds to publish this year's Big Muddy Chapbook. I am eagerly awaiting my copy. I've already begun fundraising in the hope that we will be able to have a full-color cover next year, using an incarcerated artist's work (of Lawson's choosing).

BOOK CLUB: The first book the club requested was *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak. I partnered with Books 2 Prisoners: Louisiana, who accepted donations for The Angola Book Club and got 20 copies of the book that launched the club. Lawson asked for discussion questions, which I provided, and their first meeting went for 2.5 hours! They have since read something like 10 books including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, and others, all of their choosing.

I was an isolated kid. Books kind of saved me, so the idea of getting books to other isolated people resonates for me.

So what do I get out of this mentorship? First, we are mentor/mentee in title only. I can't imagine a more gratifying collaboration than the one we have. My work with him is some of my favorite work. He is creating a world for himself and many others in a place that makes such endeavors profoundly complicated. It just so happens that I am uniquely suited to get him some of the things he's looking for. A lecture on a Salinger story? That's pretty easy for me to accomplish. To have my small contributions make a difference for Lawson and his fellow readers and writers is, as they say in Louisiana, a 'lagniappe'—an unexpected bonus.

Through Lawson, I have also made friends. Dr. G, a retired criminal justice professor who now volunteers at Angola and knows Lawson, took me to lunch at Mandina's last time I was in New Orleans. Faye Talbot, the librarian at Angola is a regular correspondent, acting as a liaison for Books 2 Prisoners. She wrote to describe what it was like to see the 20 men in the first book club walking through Angola Prison carrying their copies of *The Book Thief* (and yes, the club was successful enough that they've started a second group of 20 readers). Susannah at Books 2 Prisoners is also a new friend.

My husband and I are travelling to Angola for their rodeo in April. I will get to meet Lawson! Faye and Dr. G. are working to set things up so that I might visit his writing group while I'm there. I have my lesson plan ready, just in case we can make it work.

I am certain that I get at least as much out of our work together as Lawson does. Again, what do I get out of it all? Just a profoundly enriched life, new writing and reading friends, broadened horizons, and a sense that what I have to offer the world is of actual value, and may just make someone's life a little bit richer.

West Moss