



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.

Franklin Lee - Mentee

Coming to prison, we become lost people. We lose our freedom and the sense of who we are. Our dignity is stripped naked, possessions confiscated, finances dwindled and sanity befuddled by the professionals and legal system. For twelve years, I have witnessed the horrors of being a “non-citizen” to be number in the system and my identity erased, just another statistic.

As a writer, I have concentrated all my experiences onto the keys of a typewriter, to express my emotions and share the incarceration nightmare. It has been cathartic, allowing myself to be human once more.

My PEN America Mentor is more than just a one-on-one expert, helping me hone my skills, but someone who genuinely cares about my well-being. In prison, the administration does not care about you. Human kindness is a rarity. Anyone who shows any kind of emotions is considered weak and preyed upon. Men "DO NOT" cry, physical compassion and acts of sharing are exploited, misunderstood, and banned.

Working with my mentor has given me an opportunity to explore more than just my writing, but challenged my thinking. Besides the grammatical and writing styles, proof reading, I have been able to share my testimonials about incarceration, about myself and criminal history. Through writing, I share

about the inhuman living situations of prisons, the dehumanization from the correctional officers, and the complete disregard by the government. I have explored the more gentler side of incarceration as well, seeing how people will help one another in need. My mentor encouraged me to express through writing my personal struggles of my sexual identity, my heritage and my criminal label as a sex offender. She saw past all of this and sees me for who I am.

My mentor has had me write about my deep emotions through various genres of essays, poetry, and fiction, providing topics, historical information of Asian-American struggles (something we both share), and in-depth essays from prominent writers. She walks with me every step, though she is hundreds of miles away; working, re-working, editing, re-editing each project as I become more human again.

As the issues of contraband inflow through the mail system has administration implementing a more restrictive process by scanning and giving out copied mail, this led to postal delays and misplaced letters. No one receives any notification of lost or returned mail, so I was lost to the system again.

My mentor has not once given up on me. During my transfer from State to Federal prison, I was bounced around from several transit stops for the three months with zero contact with the outside world. My mentor has kept track of where I was. She did not allow the carceral system to allow me to disappear. Instead of waiting for my letter, she tracked my entire ordeal via the Federal website, eventually knowing where I would be confined. I may have been alone in limbo, but I was never really alone.

My mentor continued to reach out to me, even if our letters never made it to its destinations. At times letters would cross, but she reminded me that I was not forgotten. She continues to help me explore my Asian heritage, adding my struggles to theirs. I am part of a greater story than just incarceration and I am someone with an identity.

Rosann Tung - Mentor

Dear Franklin,

What a surprise and an honor to learn that our mentor-mentee relationship has meant so much to you! Thank you for the sentiments in your nomination letter! I'm grateful to PEN America staff as well, for their role in keeping us connected through your moves and mail delays.

I applied to be a mentor in 2019, but due to the pandemic, did not receive my first letter and writing sample, "Taught to Hate Myself," from you until 2023. I yelped in surprise and delight when I realized we are both American born Chinese (ABC). As much as no one likes to have assumptions made about them, the fact that we are both ABCs meant that we could understand certain realities without needing to spell them out. It meant we both straddle two cultures and use different languages inside and outside the home. It meant you just didn't tell your parents certain things. It meant that despite our differences in gender, sexuality, geography, and life circumstances, we are familiar with how conforming to the dominant culture leads to erasure and self-loathing behaviors. It means that our similarities are greater than our differences.

We both reflect on invisibility, hypervisibility, and longing to belong, which originate from growing up racially isolated with assimilation as the goal. We both came from home cultures that err towards silence and shame. We both "count" the numbers of Asians in whatever space we're in. We both write from legacies of war, family separation, silences, aspiring to whiteness, erasure, and exotification. We both write to heal, and to share windows and mirrors with our readers.

You're an inspiration to me. Your writing is honest, raw, and unflinching. I've learned about the challenges of incarceration for each label of your identity. You've had to decipher how to liberate yourself from the boxes both prisoners and officers confine you in. For example, as the only Chinese person in your federal penitentiary, figuring out your "assigned seating" at chow is with Native Americans. Navigating a four-person cell with a bunkmate nicknamed "Hitler's Youth." Writing creative nonfiction with zero access to the books and articles from outside that would give you examples or craft advice.

And yet, the predominant mood of your letters is optimistic. Finding no publication by incarcerated, you started a newsletter. Desiring to enroll in a writing class, you created one. Needing critical feedback, you convened a writing group with readings and workshopping each others' writing. Wanting to stay busy to ward off demoralization, you join many classes and work in the law library. Realizing accountability leads to productivity, you participated in NaPoWriMo 2025 and now one of your excellent poems, "Heart, Body, and Soul" is getting published!

I'm not sure exactly how my prompts, sharing of essays, and writing feedback have helped you. That would require quicker dialogue than our letters through PEN America travel. But collecting and sending writing advice to you benefits me! I try to emulate your vulnerability. My suggestions often come from things I should be paying more attention to in my own writing. Editing your drafts helps me to edit mine.

I searched for a good quote about mentorship, but I think I'll close by saying that I feel connected to you and am confident that if lost, we will find each other "Again...and Again," as your nomination letter is titled, thanks to PEN America.

Sincerely,

Rosann