



## 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.*

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### **Elizabeth Hawes - Mentee**

I had a big ask. I wanted a successful script-writer well-versed in all aspects of theatre and theatrical production, who was connected to the theatre community, and had musical experience.

PEN America paired me with Anderson Cook.<sup>1</sup>

And as it turns out, Anderson Cook is a superstar.

Anderson has had international success as a playwright and composer. He's written off-Broadway musicals, and won screenwriting awards in cool places like the Tribeca Film Fest. And yeah, he makes award-winning fiction podcasts.

He also has been working with PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program for about seven years.

Our correspondence began in August 2024. Over the past year, Anderson has consistently given me

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<sup>1</sup> Even though he assured me that he doesn't look like Anderson Cooper, when I read his correspondence, I always hear it in an Anderson Cooper voice.

positive feedback on my play, *Supernova*:

“You have an incredibly strong, confident voice. The perspectives you represent in this piece are unique, devastating, funny, infuriating, and depressing... It stirred a lot of feeling in me as I read. That’s the hardest part of any writing and you’ve obviously got that in spades.”

He has also given me solid technical advice on how to improve my work:

“Make your play a blueprint so specific that nobody could mess it up if they tried... The more specific you can be, and the more you can match the established conventions and formatting of playwriting, the easier it will be for a theatre to agree to take on your work and invest resources in it despite having limited contact with you.”

Even though our partnership is focused on works for stage, Anderson keeps abreast on my accomplishments in other genres:

“I recently enjoyed your article in *Defector*... I’m so thrilled to hear about your fellowship! ... I read ‘blue river’ in *Zócalo Public Square*—as usual, it is so specific, surprising, and delicate...”

Who doesn’t want to hear that from a winner at Tribeca?

Anderson’s advice serves me well beyond a particular play. For instance, he helped me with writing dance notation. He told me that while it was not essential to spell out specific steps, it is necessary to write in the vibe of the dance. I need to state the level of intensity and pace. I must write how the dance feels.

That is helpful.

Anderson is helpful.

He sent me the application requirements for a Jerome Fellowship, and information about the Eugene O’Neill New Play Conference and the Bay Area Playwrights Festival.

Anderson has broadened my theatrical possibilities.

I worked as a comic actor for 25 years. I now write comedy into activist content. Much of my current writing for stage revolves around women’s healthcare, immigrant rights, and prison reform. This requires a discerning ear to write, and a delicate touch to produce. Anderson is connected with a director who specializes in staging this kind of work.

Anderson’s mentorship has shown me there is space and an audience in the world for my vision. He affirms that I have something valuable to say.

An impactful writing mentor makes you feel seen, appreciated, and inspires you to create your best new work. My partnership with Anderson Cook has shown me a bigger stage to set my sights.

## Anderson Cook - Mentor

I've been working with the PEN America Prison Writing Program for almost a decade now, first introduced to the program through Gary Winter, a playwright who spoke in my graduate program and inspired me with all he did to promote access to theatre, literature, and learning. Since then, I've been a working playwright, librettist, screenwriter, podcaster, and general script writer for all manner of performance. Like most working playwrights, I've been a teacher for many years—in high schools and the City University of New York, in correctional facilities on Rikers Island, and in correspondence with the PEN America Prison Writing Program. I am a true believer in the power of education to transform and uplift people, and PEN America is a shining beacon of incredibly hardworking, organized and dedicated individuals who are committed to doing the work of liberation and ending the injustices of the carceral system.

All that is to say that I'm pretty experienced with this program, and I've worked with all kinds of writers with all levels of experience, confidence, and knowledge of the conventions and practices of theatre. Some folks are working on their first or second play—others are intermediate writers of prose or fiction who are new to the theatrical space, and some are experienced scribes. But nobody I have worked with has surprised me like Elizabeth Hawes.

Elizabeth's writing feels like seeing an egret glide over the surface of a very still lake. It feels like coming into a clearing and seeing the jagged scar of lightning on a burned tree trunk. It reminds me of being in a museum and being wrapped up in my own world, and then noticing someone else being moved by a sculpture or painting—and the feeling where my perception expands to not just the art in front of me, but all of the human lives kneeling in front of this art, searching for meaning and purpose.

I say that somewhat poetically (in a cheap imitation of Elizabeth's writing) because her writing is pure poetry—there is such clear control, intention, specificity, surety in every line she writes. I am very happy that I can help share the conventions, best practices, and craft of writing theatre, because there is very little I have to offer Elizabeth in terms of improving the clarity of her voice—she is a phenomenal writer.

Elizabeth's approach to artmaking is fundamentally ambitious. She wants to plant an enormous forest of trees, one for each incarcerated person in the state of Minnesota. With extremely limited resources, and every institutional force pushing against her, Elizabeth manages to get her writing published in all sorts of magazines and prestigious publications—and I genuinely enjoy reading everything she produces, and would continue to read all of her output regardless of our partnership.

Elizabeth's writing deserves to be on stages seen by audiences across the country, and I want to help her make that happen. But getting a new play or musical produced while incarcerated is several degrees more challenging than getting a written piece published; developing new theatre is a living, breathing, constantly morphing practice that is heavily influenced by the exchange of information between actors, directors, writers, and designers who are together in a physical space. To not have the playwright in the room when developing new work is very challenging and requires the playwright to have an extraordinarily confident vision; and if anybody is capable of pulling it off, it is Elizabeth.

Elizabeth (deservedly) has won many grants and fellowships, most recently a fellowship that came

with a cash prize to produce her work. But that's just square one—now she needs to find a producing partner who can bring it into the world. I've connected her to an old friend, Rachel Gita Karp, who is an incredible director and specializes in the kind of work that Elizabeth is writing. I'm hopeful that their partnership will be fruitful and beneficial for everyone involved.

Elizabeth notices things. She is curious, inquisitive, and unflinching in her conviction. She readily conjures up a memory from thirty years ago with such lyricism that I can smell it, feel the sunshine. She is funny—I usually laugh out loud at least once in each of her letters. Elizabeth works very, very hard and has no illusions about anything coming easy. Elizabeth makes me want to be a better, more dedicated writer.

The best partnerships are a mutually beneficial exchange. I'm about to send Elizabeth a musical that I'm working on to get her feedback, and I can't wait to hear what she thinks. I'm also about to send her a long list of theatres that can send query letters to in order to get her play produced—her grind never, ever stops.

I don't know any writer more deserving of this recognition than Elizabeth. She will make the best possible use of the resources provided and pour it back into the world in the form of more honest, wholly original, and excellent writing. I am very grateful for our partnership, and can't wait to continue to see her grow as a playwright.

Sincerely,

Anderson Cook

P.S. Elizabeth has not had access to a computer lab for over a year long, and it slows down the pace of her writing and correspondence with outside entities even more – if anyone has any strings to pull at the Minnesota Correctional Facility at Shakopee and can help me get her a word processor or basic typewriter, please let me know!