



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.

Ken Meyers - Mentee

When I got the call for essays for the L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship, my first thought was that I didn't have the time—after all, the Prison and Justice Writing Program deadline was only seven weeks away. Between lockdowns, cell moves, and the eternal joy of cellie roulette (each with his own schedule and quirks), I was already well behind on my writing goals for the year. But Christine, the mentor PEN paired me with after winning the 2024 Fielding Dawson Prize for Poetry, also has a busy schedule (far busier than mine, I'm sure), and yet she makes the time to reply to my long letters with equally long responses (her last: 25 pages). She always takes the time to read my work carefully and give considered, detailed critiques, to which she adds poems from poets I've never heard of and some of her own work as well. So no, this essay isn't an interruption; it's an opportunity to thank her for being a true mentor.

I began by reading through the file of our correspondence, realizing how that alone speaks to the importance I put on our working relationship. Before incarceration, I was the sort of person who archived everything, but here, where I share a 12 ft. x 7 ft. concrete box with another man and his property, I struggle constantly as I decide what I must keep, what I can trash, what I should mail home. So, being able to move my battered Swintec typewriter from atop the file box and reach in and grab the thickest folder says a lot about how much I value Christine's letters.

The first is dated September 28, 2023 and begins with the same sort of awkwardness I also feel in new social situations: “Ken(eth),” Christine unsure of how to address me and giving me the opportunity to tell her how I prefer to be called—a tiny gesture so alien to my day-to-day life. In that tentative first letter, she not only quoted from and commented on my poems that PEN had already sent her, she closed with one of her own. There's nothing more vulnerable for a writer than that—sharing a bit of one's own work with a total stranger, but as she'd note later, “I send poems of mine each time because it feels weird to me to see so much of your work without sharing mine.” From the start, I could tell that she was open to seeing how our partnership would develop.

There was no guarantee it would be thus. I've been in prison for fifteen years; I was homeless for six. These are worlds of false promises and ulterior motives where good acts often cloak far less benign intentions and even honestly good intentions can quickly wither. Resist as I may, I can't help being cautious, even cynical when I'm offered something good, and it's a little embarrassing to admit that I had pretty limited expectations as I awaited the first mentor letter. Sure, there are good people who want to do good and help incarcerated writers, but what would this mentor's other motives be? A good deed to earn a line on a resume? A bit of voyeuristic curiosity, the chance to get a glimpse into America's human zoos? Or perhaps the concern was genuine, so genuine that I wouldn't be so much a person as a cause.

Christine's first letter put me at ease. It was clear she wants to treat me with the respect due an equal, that we are two writers working to support and encourage each other. Over the course of our two-year correspondence, I've learned about some of her other social justice work and a little about the personal history that brought her to it. In return, I share details about my life, both in prison and before it. Despite my initial concern about being objectified, I've come to embrace the opportunities to share facets of my life that are alien to her. While she may ask questions as a follow up to what I have told her, she doesn't probe and never makes me feel pressured to answer. It's a delicate balance she maintains. In turn, I, always uncomfortable taking more than I give, feel like this can be part of my contribution to the partnership. By sharing my prison experiences, not only does she understand me better, she has more ammunition to use in her fight for reform of the criminal legal system.

Christine's greatest interest, though, has always been in how I approach my craft. My background gives her insight into my subjects and themes, but she is also curious about the challenges I face with institutional obstacles and especially how I manage without a computer, relying on my Swintec and its 16,000 character memory that limits my writing to six-page chunks before I have to delete what I've done to type any more.

Reading back through her letters, I see my annotations—points I want to respond to, ideas that came to me as I read, my dialogue with her critiques of my poems, sometimes just check marks indicating that I'd transferred each of her suggestions to my working drafts to see how they'd look. Those check marks are especially significant. They indicate a poem or short story where her reading was so careful and thorough and her engagement so detailed that often I have to retype the work from scratch. She has a knack for seeing potential and weaknesses (my term, not hers; her comments are much gentler than mine) that I missed in something I thought was finished. She encourages me to never stop exploring a piece's possibilities, and never to be afraid “to write big.”

I appreciate her insights and suggestions, not that I always take her advice. This is where she really shines as a mentor. She doesn't dictate. Rather, every comment is an opening to a potential conversation as she explains her reasoning and listens to my responses. I also share my critiques of her work. Perhaps I took a risk in assuming that by including her poems she was asking for my feedback, but from the start I told her what I think works, what doesn't, and what I don't understand. She is as open to my comments as I am to hers, and discussions of a single poem might carry through several exchanges of letters as we explore ways to improve our writing.

Composing tight, solid poems isn't my only goal, though. After years of hiding my work away in notebooks and boxes, I'm finally ready for an audience broader than just family and friends. Christine has been a great help here as well, showing me the basics of what it takes to get published—how to write an effective cover letter, how to format poems for submission, where and how to send those submissions. She has also encouraged me to think of a poem not as a discreet piece of writing but as part of a longer conversation between poems. I certainly noticed recurring themes in my work, but I hadn't really thought that my poems could form a coherent body or what it would take to develop the internal logic that a chapbook or longer collection needs because I hadn't ever seriously considered trying to assemble, let alone publish, one. Now I am.

Christine has inspired me to expand my horizons, to write big and to think big as well. What more could one ask for from a mentor than that?

Ken Meyers
SCI Albion, Pennsylvania
November 20, 2025

Christine Davis - Mentor

I applied to be a PEN mentor years before I was matched with Ken(neth) Meyers in the fall of 2023. While I waited, I evaluated PEN contest submissions and accepted the fact that I must not be a good fit for mentoring someone in the program. Without this slow ramp, I might otherwise have missed the chance to be partnered with Ken; our mentorship was well worth the wait.

In my letter of introduction, I told Ken, “I walk into someone else’s writing like I’m visiting a foreign land – bent on learning your customs, language, etc., not focused on imposing mine.” A time or two Ken has written something along the lines of “now you are anticipating/tracking my style better than I am.” That is highly motivating feedback for me. It means that I’m keeping the first promise I made to him. That our work centers Ken matters to me.

Of course, I didn’t know how (or if) the relationship would flourish. What could I offer a writer whose trajectory seemed to be so different from my own? I would learn we had some of the most important things in common. Would we skim the surface? Could I handle what he wrote about? Would trust grow? Would we circle, wary of one another? Would momentum build, wobble? Would *my* work have value for him? One thing that honestly never occurred to me was that Ken had any motivation beyond developing as a writer. That has proven true.

Others in my circle seemed quick to frame the mentorship with cynicism. What might this guy’s angle be, they asked. Be careful, they cautioned. To his credit, Ken was mindful of not being “that guy” and wanted to be sure from the first letter, very sure, that he wasn’t a burden to me (and then with his wry wit, added, “of course that’s exactly what someone trying to take advantage would say”). I laughed out loud and that has been one of the most surprising elements of this relationship—the range of emotions I travel as I read Ken’s narratives, thought experiments, and the poems and fiction he has shared. His intellect and his wit are never absent from our lengthy exchanges, nor the fact that he extends trust and risks sharing his work with me, including work he considers complete and work that is emergent.

At the outset, Ken was under the impression that we’d have three exchanges and the mentorship would end. I doublechecked with Jess Abolafia and assured him, “I’ll travel with you as long as we both feel fed.” And travel we have, not only as writers but as fellow humans.

The work that Ken shares, moves and challenges me both as a fellow writer and as his mentor. His writing about homelessness stretches (and strengthens) me in ways I couldn’t have imagined. After our first couple of exchanges, I began to see fruitful patterns in Ken’s poems and named them for him so that he could see, and if he wished, capitalize on the synergy and emerging themes in his growing body of work. And I do see Ken as building a compelling body of work. One example is his knack for building a relatable moment in a poem, only to reveal in the final lines in some subtle way that this thing the reader is connecting so powerfully with is happening inside and that creates a profound level of understanding of Ken’s humanity and its juxtaposition with the inhumanity of incarceration. I have no doubt that he will continue to submit and publish work, to fully inhabit his identity as a talented writer. Of course I sometimes see mannerisms that may hamper his intentions (or his readers’

understanding) and with his very early permission to be direct, I deliver professional and pointed feedback as seems warranted.

Ken's letters are long and his musings are complex and often delightful. Like the packets I shipped to my mentors as an MFA student, I consider what he shares with me to be exposing, hard-won and worthy of my careful reading and response. Knowing some of the barriers he faces when drafting and revising, I've tried to pay close attention to how I indicate what I think is working and where small changes might strengthen a line. I want to be sure my annotations leave him with a clear path forward. This takes time but given the slow progress of mail through the carceral system, Ken already has to wait overlong for my responses. He is gracious and appreciative about that, but I don't want to add vague responses to the mix for him!

When Ken showed interest in submitting more work outside of PEN publications, I was determined to learn about and share other promising outlets. My attendance at the AWP conference in 2024 enabled me to connect directly with publishers that accept the work of incarcerated writers, and I had the chance to attend a panel on *American Precariat* that included several former PEN winners who were at different stages of rebuilding their lives on the outside. Not only was I proud to share with them after the panel that I was a PEN mentor, but they were able to connect me with the Minnesota Prison Writing program and especially their list of journals friendly to writers inside. I shared the list with Ken, annotated with which journals I had submitted my work to. It is important to me that Ken is reminded in all the ways possible that he is "in play" as a writer and that, as his mentor, I am committed to his continued growth.

And that growth, his receptiveness to my feedback, his curiosity about literary gaps that result from our different journeys or from the limitations of his incarceration is on-going. There are other things a writer needs though: courage, humility, self-awareness, forgiveness, confidence, humanity, integrity, and all these things are everywhere evident in his letters to me.

I share at least one piece of my own published work (or sometimes a poem in progress) with Ken in every packet. I did not know whether he would, but I love that he responds to them. I consider all writing to be dialogic and what one reader finds (or misses) can guide the writer in helpful ways. This mutuality in our mentorship is one of the ways that I feel we lower the walls that separate us as writers. His insights are thoughtful and sometimes shed light on ways I can make a piece more effective. In other words, we exchange and learn from each other.

The work with Ken has further motivated my social justice engagement. His candor about life inside has surprised me and informs the work I do locally to expand pre-trial diversion in order to disrupt the criminal injustice system in ways available to me and keep more people from entering prison. Thanks to Ken I know better what awaits them and it does keep the fire lit. With his permission, I respectfully share with others some of the challenges incarcerated writers face.

There is nothing self-pitying in Ken's work or in his narrative exchange. Never. That has struck me from the start because it speaks to a remarkable boundary he seems able to maintain between who he is as a writer in the world and the context in which he produces his work. The dehumanizing mess that is incarceration, is no reflection on him and whatever landed him in prison (which I may never know). In turn, I have never approached our partnership through a lens of pity or charity. We have built a robust

relationship strong enough that I wrote to ask him if he thought it was weird that I wanted to make sure each of us had a way to be informed if something dire happened to either of us. He did not think it was weird at all!

The final thing I want to touch on is that mentoring Ken has impacted me as a writer. It was Ken who drew my attention to the PBS Poetry series which I was able to add to my own enrichment! I have devoted more time to my own writing life, been more intentional about craft and process. I have to keep my game on to be the resource that Ken seeks and deserves. I began taking time off work to participate in all-day writing retreats at a local writing center. Before the work with Ken began, I relegated my writing life to “leftover” time. As I see Ken make it a priority in his context, I challenge myself to make it one in mine.

I am proud to be Ken’s mentor and hope to continue, “as long as we both feel fed.” I am grateful to PEN for our opportunity to grow together. Sometimes when you stop searching, something lovely lands in your lap.