



Prison and Justice Writing Program  
PEN America

## 2023 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.*

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December 14, 2023

I volunteered for the PEN America's Prison Writing Mentor Program because I hoped to engage deeply with a writer's work outside of my fiction workshop and graduate school community. I also come from a journalism background, where I've interviewed people who are incarcerated about their experiences in prison and jail. Because of that background, I felt optimistic and perhaps overconfident when I was paired with Michael, thinking it wouldn't be that difficult to squeeze in a mentorship between my other responsibilities! I was immediately impressed with all of the accomplished writing samples Michael submitted. But I found myself gravitating towards his fiction piece, with its lyrical language and a keen eye for the natural world, rather than his intense, vividly drawn memoir. I felt that memoir was not a genre I had expertise in. Still, looking back, I think I was drawing a boundary that I wasn't aware of, like if we communicated only through fiction, then the mentorship wouldn't feel as vulnerable—which, as any fiction writer knows, is bull.

From the beginning, Michael showed up with unflagging curiosity, vulnerability, work ethic, and craft questions that I was also exploring in my writing. In no time, we were discussing scales of surrealism, folklore, character arcs, and anti-heroes. Oh no, I thought. Michael is not the sort of writer whose work I can cram on a Sunday night! Far from dreading another obligation, I increasingly enjoyed carving out time to sit with his new work and his thoughtful revisions, not only as a reader but as a writer learning from him. I liked how, when I asked questions about a particular piece, Michael said that he wanted readers to ask those questions, even if it wasn't what we were "supposed" to do in prose. Leaving space for the unknown is something I'm working on in my writing. When I found myself enmeshed in a conversation with Michael about using "extreme" language, I had to question my assumptions about how we use language to represent our experiences. I realized that I was still approaching our mentorship as a journalist—where I could hide behind questions instead of opening up myself.

One of the gifts of the mentorship program is an opportunity to challenge the structural barriers inherent in the literary world and learn from writers you might not have the chance to otherwise. That it was a success for me is a credit to Michael: He has written about his apprehension, but in truth, his bravery inspired me to share both a piece of my work and a book of short stories from a former mentor of mine. Michael's analysis of those stories was one of the high points of our mentorship for me. But looking back, the highest point was a period where, at the time, I was feeling low about how long it was taking me to revise my novel. I received a letter on a gloomy fall day from Michael apologizing for being behind. He hadn't been writing lately, and though he faced far more challenging circumstances than me, the questions he raised were familiar ones. "All too often, I find myself asking, 'why bother'?" he wrote. At that moment, we were just writers encouraging each other to get back to work—and we did.

Michael is already talented, but I most admire the seriousness and dedication with which he approaches his writing, and I am grateful to the PEN America Prison Writing Program for the opportunity to spend time with his work. The experience has inspired me to brainstorm other ways to share writing from people who are incarcerated with my wider literary community, such as having volunteers read work at my local reading series, which I hope to organize this year. Thank you again to everyone who dedicates so much time to this transformative program.