



Prison and Justice Writing Program
PEN America

2023 PEN America/L'Engle Rahman Prize for Mentorship Mentee 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.

A Space to Think
By Steven Perez, O.P.

Seventy-four days ago, we went on a statewide lockdown here in Texas prisons. Prison authorities said the cause for the lockdown was murders and contraband. They said that drugs like K2, methamphetamines, fentanyl, and PCP were being liquified and sprayed onto incoming mail and smuggled into the prisons at an alarming rate. People were losing their minds in here and placed in cells alone until they hung themselves, until they killed themselves. To make matters worse, prison authorities halted all incoming mail.

Meanwhile, we writers did what we do. We wrote. We typed. What were we supposed to do?

We asked each other questions. Questions like, How are we supposed to receive mail from PEN America? Questions like, How are we supposed to correspond with our mentors?

It had been almost three years of working with my mentor Alison, and getting to know her. She had told me about her mother, her husband, her children, her neighbors, her birds, her house, her work, her fears, and her writing. I had told her about my life in prison and in the free, my murder trial, my sixty-year sentence, and my nineteen years of incarceration.

When the lockdown was lifted, I was invited to nominate Alison for the L'Engle-Rahman Prize for Mentorship.

Right away, I knew that Alison deserved the prize. But how could I express it in words? Moreover, how could I compete with winning essays like those written by Benjamin Frandsen, Elizabeth Hawes, Derek

Trumbo, and Seth Wittner? These writers were masters of their craft. Could I create such perfection? I had to give it a try. Not for me, but for Alison.

The PEN America Mentorship Program connected me with Alison in 2021, when one of my memoirs, "Mom's Still Sick," won an honorable mention award in the PEN Prison Writing Contest. Alison's comments still echo in my ears. She said, "I absolutely love hearing people tell about their lives.... It is very important that you are writing these experiences down and I hope you never doubt that."

"Mom's Still Sick" is an excerpt from a larger work about the Covid-19 experience from an inmate's perspective. The larger work consists of 800 pages of manuscripts. Alison and I have been working on those 800 pages for the last three years, cutting, revising, and rewriting. Pushing for an agent, a publisher, a book deal.

I have to say that Alison has put in \$8,000 of work on my manuscripts, from exporting my PDFs to Word, to developmental editing, to keeping her eyes open for agents and publishers. And she doesn't expect to gain anything. All she wants is to see me succeed as both a writer and a human being.

One of the things I enjoy most about my relationship with Alison is her letters. Her letters are intense and filled with insight. The exchange of ideas and worldviews stimulates my mind. I'm a devout Catholic and a Third Order Dominican. She was raised Episcopalian and studies Buddhism and Taoism. I write memoir like Fielding A. Dawson. She writes poetry like Gwendolyn Brooks. I fight for prisoners' rights. She was heartbroken by the overturning of Roe v. Wade. We both lamented over the school shooting in Uvalde. I'm certain she's worried about all the people suffering in war-torn Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine.

Our correspondence is way more than an exchange of ideas and worldviews. Her letters exhibit a genuine love for others in that she wills the good of others for their own sake. That type of love is rarely found in prison, or anywhere else for that matter.

On top of that, she's always trying to learn as much as she can from me. She wants to know all about my experiences in life and what led to them. She wants to know how my incarceration is affecting my daughter and my mother and the rest of my family. She wants to know what goes on in prison. She wants to know how I feel about the violence in the world today. What are my thoughts about young people heading this way? How can we change their course of events? What is driving people into a life of crime and incarceration? How can we change this? How can we end mass incarceration?

So I answer. Crime, violence, and drugs are a form of expression. Our children are not being taught how to think right. They're not being taught how to properly reason within their minds. They're not being taught how to properly express themselves. Emphasis on grammar, logic, and rhetoric is a thing of the past. A secret for the rich to manipulate people in our politics, our courtrooms, our legislature, our voting booths, on television, and on the internet.

In her response, Alison says, "I found the line about the human mind losing its capacity to think before acting particularly interesting. We do have such a fast-moving culture especially with media, so jagged and disordered, as you said, and I had thought about this affecting attention spans, but I hadn't thought about how it actually prevents those pauses, that space, to think. To simply think a moment before we act. Profound."

These types of conversations show me that in spite of all the lockdowns and all the other obstacles that come my way, my writing really does matter. It really does have the power to change people's perspectives. It really does have the power to make changes for the better. These types of conversations show me that no matter what happens, I gotta keep writing.

The statewide lockdown that started seventy-four days ago ended a month after it began. While most of our mail is now required to be sent to a digital mail processing center, where it takes months to get scanned and sent to us on our tablets, the Texas prison system has made some exceptions. PEN America is one of those exceptions. I will be receiving Alison's packages directly, three to five days after they're mailed to me.

Although I don't know if I'll ever be as good a writer as Benjamin Frandsen, Elizabeth Hawes, Derek Trumbo, and Seth Wittner, and I don't know what the future holds for me, I do know that I won't make it very far as a writer without Alison guiding me. Thank you PEN America. And God bless you.