



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.

I'm so honored by Larry's nomination. I was introduced to the PEN Prison Writing program by Jeffrey James Keyes, a previous winner of the PEN America/L'Engle-Rahman Prize for Mentorship, so this is particularly exciting for me.

When I first read Larry's letter about his work and his plays, I was impressed with his commitment to his craft. His desire to write authentically and to tell stories about mental health struggles and the challenges of living with a sentence of Death by Incarceration were palpable.

I distinctly remember a line from one of his plays about just wanting to be able to see the ocean again. What a simple desire for a person to have and one that distilled the inhumanity of the carceral state into one line. The poetry of it made an impact and strengthened my desire to provide structured feedback and editorial suggestions and to do right by Larry no matter what.

I approach mentorship from a place of determining the needs of the writer and the work. I do not impose. I do not judge. It is not my job to tell a writer what to write or even how to write it. I point out inconsistencies, I make suggestions, I ask questions.

Larry's play *Running with the Devil* is a stark work that is very different from my own writing, but we both share a desire to write from within ourselves, from our own experience. I am so pleased that my notes and questions were helpful to Larry and also that the play was strengthened by his response to them.

I'm very grateful for PEN America for this program, for introducing me to Larry and for this nomination which came at a time when I have been busy, stressed and tired. To be reminded of the impact that

Larry's work made on my own writing and the impact that my suggestions could make to his play and his craft as a writer was a real joy.

Wishing you a happy and healthy holiday season and new year!

Kate