



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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I started this mentorship with a lot of questions: could I talk with a stranger about writing over email? Would my mentee and I have anything in common when it comes to writing? Would I be any good at this?

Writing, especially if you try to publish, invites rejection which feeds insecurity. So when I didn't hear back from Terry, my mentee, I thought it was a sure sign I failed at making a connection.

It turned out that there was a mix-up and Terry was initially connected with another mentor, which slowed the process. When I finally read my first letter from Terry I became excited about the process. Terry wanted to talk about sentences—how to know if they're overwritten. What to leave in and what to leave out? He wanted to talk about drafts—how to know when one's finished. The same things I wonder about and talk with other writers about.

Terry and I both write nonfiction, but so far our conversations have been about fiction. I was immediately impressed with the novel excerpt I read. He created a lot of tension and tied different characters with different story arcs together seamlessly. He's written for some online journals and published a novel on Amazon. He's an accomplished writer and like every bright person, eager to learn more.

I subscribe to a few Substack newsletters about writing. Sometimes they pile up in my inbox. Sometimes I read them, and then want to talk about the ideas with someone else. I've found the perfect person to process these craft lessons with. I can also process what I learn in online workshops. In one of my early letters to Terry, I was in the middle of taking a flash fiction workshop. I wrote to Terry about how some of the brief stories we read in class didn't feel like stories to me. They didn't have the typical story arch. This felt tied to Terry's questions about what to leave in and what to leave out. In the remainder of our correspondence, I hope we can read a book on the craft of writing together.

Terry has a subtle sense of humor—or maybe it's artful metaphors—that fill his letters with life. When we connected after the mix-up, he said at one point he felt like neglected spinach. In describing his inability to know when a piece of writing is finished, he compared it to the fact that he doesn't like to eat his own cooking. I can't think of a more apt description of reading your own writing and wondering what's missing.

He's also an optimistic person. When his job as a braille typist was eliminated (or centralized by the state prison system), Terry took it as an opportunity to focus more on his studies. He didn't let it make him feel like a piece of neglected spinach. I'm honored to have this moment in time together with Terry, as a peer and as a friend.

Lori