



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.*

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When I received notice in December of 2021 that I'd been selected as a candidate for the Mentorship Program, I felt rewarded. I was being offered an opportunity to learn, to grow, and possibly become productive with my writing. I was also afraid. Would I waste this chance? Was this too something I would ruin?

I opened that first letter from my new mentor in February of 2022. Her initial introduction was pleasant and helped to ease my anxiety. I honestly didn't know what to expect from a mentor. The only "mentors" I've really ever known were just negative-influencers. Faced with someone with seemingly good intentions, I had to make a conscious decision to chisel a small crack in my wall in order to allow my mentor in. Shouldn't be hard, right?

As a writer, I am open to new ideas and growth, but as an incarcerated human being, I am almost forced to believe that kindness can be dangerous. Yet, the interest that my mentor expressed concerning my writing seemed genuine. She said she "particularly liked the parts where you (I) explored family relationships." She was also honest in admitting she was less confident in providing feedback in the area of poetry. I was immediately appreciative of her candidness.

My mentor shared with me a piece of flash-fiction she'd written called "Zoom Shiva." She asked for my thoughts and encouraged me to explore this particular writing style. She thought that I might enjoy experimenting with it myself.

I do.

Over the course of our connection, my mentor taught me to ask questions of my characters.

How does this experience lead to...  
How can these details tell us something about...  
What changes for her at the end?

My mentor also pointed out the intensity I bring to life in certain passages. In my attempts to make words explode on the page, certain extreme language might take away from that energy. She helped remedy this by sending helpful books. One such book was titled *Last Days of the Dog-men* by Brad Watson. She believed that this professor who'd helped her was someone I would benefit from, also.

She was correct.

Another of her gifts was a terrific craftbook by George Saunders. Having had no formal training in Language Arts or Literature, this book, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*, has helped me immensely! My mentor identified my need to learn to read as a writer, and Mr. Saunders's uncanny ability to teach this so simplistically has been extremely beneficial. It is in large part due to a very perceptive mentor and this craftbook that I have spent the past year learning more about writing as a craft, rather than just something I do to pass the years.

It can be hard to be a writer in any stressful environment, let alone a prison setting. Couple that with not knowing how to be a productive writer, and a lot of beautiful words may never know the intimacy of union with paper. They'll stay locked in a mind afraid of being free.

Writing stories, memoir, and poetry allows me to be free. It gives me a voice.  
My voice.

Although our time together was brief, the instruction and knowledge my mentor provided is now embedded. In retrospect, I do wish I'd have spent more time establishing and cultivating a meaningful friendship with my mentor. My own apprehension was most likely the culprit. I'm not very accustomed to the notion of "community." If ever again should I be gifted an opportunity such as this, I will embrace that aspect of the mentor/mentee relationship. It will not pass me by. Not again.

In closing, I believe the most precious gift my mentor imparted to me was one of confidence. As an incarcerated human being, it is my mind that they cannot take from me. My ever-expanding, exceedingly hungry, and demandingly expressive mind will always be free. And, in my opinion, confidence rooted in positive self-esteem is a most beneficial trait any writer can embrace. Especially a writer who aspires to publish.

My mentor helped me find my confidence, and I am grateful.