



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 honored that Larry Stromberg, a talented writer I worked with in Pen America's Prison Writing Program, has nominated me and Kate—another one of his mentors—for the America/L'Engle-Rahman Prize. As I write this, I'm sitting with a copy of *As I Hear the Rain* by my side, where Larry's play, "I'm Here for You" (which won third place in the 2019 Prison Writing Awards) is anthologized. This is the play Larry and I corresponded about. Having a piece in *As I Hear the Rain* is a great accomplishment—each of the works included are fabulous and were selected from 1,000 entries—but more importantly, this book serves as a means of getting these works out to a wider audience.

In 2017, while I was working on my MFA in Canada—where I'm a playwright and educator—I was invited to mentor a writer in Pen America's Prison Writing Program. This is something I've always wanted to do. I don't support North America's prison-industrial complex and want to hear from the people confined there. I've had to face my own challenges with psychiatric incarceration, and I'm very aware of how lucky I am to have found my way out of some very dangerous situations at different times in my life.

During the period we were corresponding, Larry was in SCI Graterford working on "I'm Here for You," a reimagining of the parable of "The Prodigal Son." In the play, a man called Joey finally arrives home from prison, only to find his father, Old Louey, disabled by Alzheimer's and unable to recognize him. Joey's grief at this impasse is terrible, and he desperately tries to rouse his father using different strategies. He reminds his father of how proud he once was of Joey's athletic accomplishments, of the good times they had. Then, Joey talks about the crime that put him behind bars. He weeps with regret and begs for forgiveness, but Old Louey only looks on, "with the eyes of a doll." Finally, Joey remembers a song called, "I'm here for you," and Old Louey rouses briefly and sings along, "You're never alone...you're never ever alone." In the final moment of the play, a Male Voice shouts, "Keep it down! You'll wake up the whole damn block," and the reader/audience realizes that this is all a scene in Joey's free, unfettered imagination.

When I saw early drafts of the play, I was immediately struck by the powerful insight Larry had in choosing this particular story to explore themes of remorse and loss and the desire for redemption. In his essay for this award, Larry comments that he believes “we all endure and relive past failures” and I agree. Facing events that are irrevocable is part of the human condition.

During the time I was corresponding with Larry he was incarcerated in SCI Graterford. In his last letter he told me that Graterford was being shut down and everyone was being moved to SCI Phoenix, a new eight-million-dollar facility. This is when we lost touch. I wasn’t sure what had happened. Because of the prison process, there were always long gaps between our correspondences. Each time, I waited for that moment when a manila envelope would appear in my mail and Larry’s latest draft would be folded into it. One day this stopped.

In an essay I found on-line called, “Shakespeare in Prison Changed My Life,” Larry has more to say about what happened. He explains that the two prison cultures were different, and the move to a new “high tech” prison meant they had to wait a long time to have access to former opportunities.

SCI Graterford was closer to life out in society with all its movements, programs, education and activities. Everything was there, including all the bad things prison has to offer. SCI Phoenix moves slowly. There’s cameras everywhere. Buttons to push to get from one location to another. Without patience, one could end up in a world of misery. One’s mindset has to be changed. With that, things will go so much better. I guess, smooth as ice.

It took about a year for much needed programs to begin at SCI Phoenix.

I’m so glad Larry found a new mentor in Kate. I know how important writing and performing is to him, how he wants to be more than what prison is designed to reduce him to. “People are so much more than their worst moment,” Andrea Armstrong, an incarceration law scholar and a 2023 MacArthur fellow says, “They are caretakers. They are artists. They are musicians. They are brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts.”

I’m thinking now of the hot patience of imprisoned writers, of how extraordinary their effort is. Larry writes about being “freed from within” when he’s able to get focused on creative work and of his eagerness to share his work with others. I find his commitment inspiring and I’m grateful for his example.

Larry Stromberg is an artist who works from a place of integrity and excitement. He takes risks by staying honest and being vulnerable, even though there’s a guard in the hall yelling at him to keep it down, and that gives me courage. He believes in redemption through the arts, and he looks for that faith in others.

I hope I was one of those people.

Sincerely,

Rose