



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.

Terry Little
Nomination Essay
November 7, 2023
Pen America

The literary encounter between Madeleine L'Engle and Ahmad Rahman is an inspirational story, two lives connected by a strand of hope. Their relationship embodied the epitome of what this program stands for. That hope was infused in the pair's belief in humanity and their genuine critiques derived from nowhere other than the belief in unlimited possibilities. This is a connection I found when I met my mentor, Lori, a person who introduced me to a new paradigm of hope.

That's the funny thing about hope: it possesses an existential disposition irrespective of its abstract origins. It emerges from anywhere, at any time, and from any person. 1% of my hope is found in the human population, and of course 99.9% of my hope is found in God, because "with God all things are possible" (Mat. 19:26). This is a verse that isn't always on the tip of my tongue, or a consonant recital in my mind, but in my heart it exists. It reminds me to continue to move forward, and for seven years, I've sought to do just that trying to become a better me through writing.

Five years ago is when I learned of PEN America, an organization that has remained consistent in understanding the needs of the prisoner, but more importantly, the needs of a writer. Entry after entry into the PEN America Prison Writing Contest, I would receive feedback, positive and negative, and though I have never placed, not once did I consider the rejections as denials. Rather, I was elated that someone finally was listening.

With the positive feedback, I would seek further opportunities of growth and validation to determine if writing was the path for me by exploring other writing avenues by submitting pieces to magazines, websites, newspapers, and other contests outside and inside of prison. With the negative feedback, I would fold it up and ignore it. And the negative feedback was never wrong by such standards; a stubborn part of me was just unwilling to accept the constructive criticism, not knowing such feedback was a pertinent part of literary growth. Instead, my attitude expected to be infected with the successful writing bug with little push back—that success never came. And so like a homesick student, I submitted another piece of writing to the PEN America Prison Writing Contest, an excerpt from a novel I'd written, called *Puppets*. Notification of winners in the contest was to be released the following year, and so in the meantime, I wrote-essays, articles and fictional stories. I wrote to keep my mind off of my chances of winning, and as a little affirmation.

In the middle of the following year, PEN sent a letter informing me that my excerpt did not place. My insides felt a bit mushy and slightly exhausted. In that instance, I questioned the feasibility of my aspirations as the sordid taste of defeat had become sour. Despite the challenges of these thoughts, it was those final few words that frequented the end of the organization's letters — "with warmth and gratitude," "with excitement" and "proud"— that provided me the strength to continue.

A week later, the organization sent me another letter dated February 9, 2023 with an application attached, offering me an opportunity to take part in the PEN America's Prison Writing Mentorship Program. And there it was— well, I didn't know exactly what it was at the time, but I was open to find out. I submitted my application, and several months later, my mentor wrote to me. Her name was Brianna, and out of the gate, she challenged me to write a story, if I chose, so that she could gauge where I was as a writer. And so I tried to write a story.

As days began to pass and fleeting ideas came and went, an overwhelming case of uncertainty postured me. There was something wrong with the in-organic introduction between my mentor Brianna and I. Sure I was excited, and from the energy Brianna's words emitted from the pages of her letter, there was no doubt the feeling was mutual, if not more. But something was off with our connection. It was as if it wasn't *our* connection.

It was a week later that that prophetic feeling was confirmed. On June 21, 2023, I was transparently notified of a mix up. As it was told to me, another mentee and I shared the same first name, and so it happens, Brianna was actually his mentor.

It was not long after I knew my actual mentor's name, Lori: a daughter, a teacher, a journalist, and a writer. She shared with me that she read my file, saw that I was interested in fiction, nonfiction, and journalism. This just so happened to be her interest, too. Lori's response was from a place of compassion and openness to the process. She would also tell me she read essays I published on a website, and how the essays made her feel. I was amazed. Her genuine words provided me a comfort with my writing I had never felt before, and in that moment, she was like a senescent book favoring its many loose strands and at the top of the book there was a single strand she cherished most. That was it, I discovered my strand.

Lori's Mary Poppin abilities were sharp. She would later ask me what elements of my craft did I want to discuss. I shared with her my biggest struggle was creating a rhythm in my sentences. They seemed lifeless at times. In response, she attached an essay by Mike Goodwin, called "On Not Tracking Movement." Despite the ambiguity in the description of my struggle, she deciphered it perfectly. The essay alluded to a detriment writers face when imitating the sentences of their favorite authors. I was

speechless, because this I was guilty of. She had known exactly what I had been struggling with and pointed me in the right direction. Her instinctual support gifted me the self-realization that I was not working hard enough to just be myself, that all I had to do was dig a little deeper and hope a little greater.

"And yet, though you could not actually hear what the man was saying, you could not be in any doubt about its general nature." -George Orwell