

A Los Angeles resident, **John Mattson** wrote “Milk Money,” “Free Willy 2,” and “Free Willy 3.” He has sold scripts to Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros., Universal, DreamWorks, Imagine and ABC. He is a former HBO executive and winner of the 2018 R. M. Kinder Award for Realistic Fiction. He is an alumnus of UCR Palm Desert’s Low Residency MFA program in creative writing and writing for the performing arts and is currently an adjunct professor at Chapman University.

UCR PALM DESERT: Why after a successful career did you go back to school?

JOHN MATTSON: My joke answer is, after a few decades of screenwriting, I thought I should learn how to do it.

The real answer, though, is that I wanted to teach. Also I wanted to reconnect to the enthusiasm that brought me to this business in the first place: a love of storytelling and of writing. And I felt like I needed interaction with people who cared about what I care about.

UCR PD: Was it weird returning to school?

JM: New things are weird until they're not, I guess. The program was very welcoming and inclusive. That made it less weird.

It was nice to have a reason to talk to people you wouldn't normally talk to.

UCR PD: Why did you decide to attend UCR Palm Desert for your MFA?

JM: I was impressed that the faculty was so accomplished, had thriving careers as writers, and represented a wide variety of disciplines and genres.

UCR PD: What’s one lesson you learned at UCR Palm Desert that you've been able to apply to your personal or professional life now?

JM: I learned the value of letting others into your process while the work is still in a raw state. In Hollywood, you build up defenses against this. But there is value in letting down your armor.

Another UCR lesson: the best teachers seem to be able to put themselves aside, to inhabit the point of view of their students, to realize the work's potential according to the student's own vision, rather than according to how they (the teacher) might do it themselves. This is some kind of teacher magic, and I think about it a lot now that I am a teacher.

UCR PD: What advice would you give someone considering an MFA?

JM: Do your homework. Read the work of the teachers. Check out the alumni. Visit if you can. And once you're there, try not to leave. Like, ever.

(By homework, I mean research your prospective schools. Although obviously doing your actual literal homework is good, too.)