

# Q&A: Fawaz Al-Matrouk (CW '21) Six-Week Workshop Alum



Did you do the 2021 virtual Six-Week Workshop from your usual home environment or from a different environment? What worked best for you in creating a setting that helped you participate as fully as possible in the Workshop?

I had a separate workspace at the time, so I put a bed in there and treated it like a getaway. Well, it was one of those armchairs that turns into a bed, not the most comfortable! But it was nice to isolate my attention on creative work. That was a luxury I never had before, or since, but I found it helpful. I would wake up, work out briefly, do the morning sessions, read all afternoon, write in the evening, then try to watch a movie. I was usually too tired by then, but I did make a dent on my movie list!

How was your class able to bond and form community with each other, instructors, and staff despite being in a virtual setup?

The core of our bond (I think) was in reading each other's works. There is something beautiful and vulnerable about seeing other writers explore their ideas on the page. Most of us wrote author's notes, which was an insight into our process and intentions. So just by reading the works, I felt like I was getting to know my peers. There were also co-writing sessions, virtual parties, and Discord chats. There were a few times where we connected for one-on-ones, to talk through a question or struggle. I think it worked well. I had the good fortune to meet some of my mentors and peers in person, and it felt like any other reunion, except there is a moment where you realize you never saw them outside a tiny square box on a screen!

## What were the biggest challenges to forming community given the virtual setup?

It's hard for me to say; I have nothing to compare it to, since the workshop is so unique and I never did it in person! I imagine it would be easier to have serendipitous conversations when you exist in the same space, we had to be more intentional about connection. We also had different experiences of the weather, environment, daily rituals. There were no shared meals. But my takeaway, two years later, is how connected I feel to the writers I met, how moved I was by their explorations, how much we supported and inspired each other. A lot of that is credit to the team, Jae, Rashida, Izzy, Jane. They solved a lot of those challenges and made a wonderful space for community and imagination.

## How did you take care of your self-care and other needs during the virtual Workshop? e.g. screen time breaks, healthy food, alone time vs. social time, juggling family/friends, sleep, etc.

I set a few important boundaries. One was the rhythm of creative work. We had to write a story every week, so I broke down the days into stages of writing, and I would commit (as best I could) to only that one stage. As I remember, it was: sketch ideas Wednesday, research Thursday, outline Friday, ruminate doing something else on Saturday, draft Sunday and Monday, then edit and submit Tuesday. There were weeks where I was too exhausted, or I lost motivation — the regular ebb and flow of creative work. But having these boundaries helped me contain the terror of the blank page. The most important, I think, was the day to ruminate. I would not look at a screen or write that day. I would go outside and do something active, often something that scared me, then spend the evening with my wife, Julia, and have a lazy Sunday morning. I tried to workout every morning and sleep eight hours a night, though often it was one or the other. As for balancing family and friends ... I set an auto-responder and let everyone know I was gone for six weeks!

## Do you have a favorite memory from the Workshop that you'd like to share?

Goodness, there are so many ... There are moments where I was moved or inspired by a story I read, moments where I felt proud of something I wrote, moments that became inside jokes, like: I don't remember how it started, but we all tried to work bats into our stories and laughed about it.

## Favorite memory, cont.

But my favorite moment, if I had to pick, was my one-on-one with Nalo Hopkinson. I came into it very discouraged from some of the feedback on my second story. I considered leaving the workshop, honestly, but Nalo made so much space for those feelings and encouraged me to keep going. I wrote my favorite stories next — a good reminder to be gentle with yourself and find the pleasure in exploration.

## Any words of wisdom or advice for the incoming 2023 Clarion West class?

Take it as a space for self-discovery. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Be gentle with yourself, explore what works for your process, and write where the spirit leads you.

## Anything else you'd like to share about your Clarion West Six-Week Workshop experience?

Clarion West was a sandbox for me, I miss it like those childhood days of play and imagination. I hope you have the most wonderful time!

## Where can people find you and your work online?

Instagram and Twitter @fawazam.

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Fawaz Al-Matrouk is a writer, director, sometimes both, always either. His short stories explore our power to confront the unknown, throughout history and into the future. His most recent in F&SF is an epistolary horror set in Napoleon-occupied Egypt. A filmmaker by trade, he recently directed a short film based on his Clarion West story, Anwar, about a mother who chose to live forever and a son who longs for heaven. Fawaz was born in Kuwait, grew up in Toronto, and now lives in San Francisco, with his partner and three Sir Kittens of the Round Table.