

# Justin Matott: Inspiring Kids to Read

By Thomas Kimball



Justin Matott has just one goal: to make kids laugh. And not just by watching a sitcom or telling a joke, but, to elicit those chuckles, giggles, guffaws and cackles by encouraging kids to do something that even most adults don't do enough of in this modern age...read.

The fact that both of Matott's adoptive parents were English professors at Colorado State University had little to do with him becoming a writer. The Highlands Ranch resident's rise as one of Colorado's premiere—and arguably most prolific—children's authors has more to do with an obsession to tell stories to his sons.

"I suppose because I was adopted I have a passion to reach out to children. I know how weird and lonely it can be out there," Matott said, reflecting on his own life. "It's why I write."

In addition to writing for children, Matott reaches out to other adopted kids, too. When he's not writing, he's reading to kids who are blind or severely disabled. He also devotes time to The Adoption Exchange, The Children's Hospital in Denver, and the Mountain Area Pregnancy Center.

Before he became an author, Matott was mired in corporate America; pulling in a healthy six-figure income as a senior sales manager for MCI during the '90s. "It just wasn't satisfying. I had bigger dreams," Matott mused. "I've always been a writer but I made my living selling. I wanted a career as an author."

Though Matott's first book, *My Garden Visits*, was a self-published stab at bringing that dream to life, it was also about healing after his adoptive mother passed away. "*My Garden Visits* was really written for me," he said. "I didn't know how else to reach readers so I published it myself just before Mother's Day in 1997. I thought, 'If Charles Dickens can self-publish, so can I.'"

The Tattered Cover agreed to sell Matott's book, and an editor from Random House chanced upon the book on a visit through Denver. "This woman called me and placed a floor bid on my book. When it was all over, I had an once-in-a-lifetime lucrative two-book deal with a huge publisher," Matott recalls. "Needless to say, I quit MCI and became a fulltime author."

Although he had hit the author's mother lode with his first book, his real passion was writing for kids. "My boys, J.J. and Ethan, were constantly asking me to make up stories at



bedtime. It was one of those tales that ultimately became my first children's picture book, *Ol' Lady Grizelda*." Matott teamed up with illustrator, John Woods, Jr., to create the crazy, but loveable, character that has secured him a place in children's hearts as one of their favorite authors.

But this writer is not your typical bespectacled scribe hunched over his laptop in the back of a coffee shop, smashing furiously away at the keyboard between sips of his double espresso Americana light. "I'm a gym rat," Matott confesses. And machismo seems to have an appeal to students and teachers alike when Justin comes calling. "I love visiting schools to get kids excited about reading and writing."

So where does Justin Matott find the energy to wake up every morning before the sun to craft another book for young readers? It isn't the 12 titles he has in print, or the four new books due to be released this year (check it out at [www.justinmatott.com](http://www.justinmatott.com)). "It's about bringing parents and kids together," Matott said. "I want to encourage parents to read to their kids. I want to see those kids dive into books with the same energy that they dive into video games and sports."

In the process, all this wordsmith wants to do is "have a positive influence in my corner of the world by spreading a little love through laughter within families...that's what my life is about." ■

