

# Interview (Part 2): Haley Bartels

My interview with the 2021 Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting winner.

[Scott Myers](#)



Haley Bartels wrote the original screenplay “Pumping Black” which won a 2021 Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting. Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with Haley about her creative background, her award-winning script, the craft of screenwriting, and what winning the Nicholl Award has meant to her.

Today in Part 2 of a 6 part series to run each day through Saturday, Haley talks about her experience at the AFI film school and the inspiration for her Nicholl-winning

## screenplay "Pumping Black."

**Scott:** *What was your experience like AFI?*

**Haley:** *AFI was a two year program. There are six different disciplines. There's screenwriting, directing, producing, cinematography, production design, and editing.*

*In your first year, you pick little groups, and you make three cycle films. You're actually making films the whole time, which is really cool, but they're also simultaneously putting you through screenwriter boot camp.*

*Your first year, you write one feature and two specs, and your second year, you write two features and a pilot.*

**Scott:** *I'm assuming that's where you did the majority of, up to that point, of learning the craft of screenwriting?*

**Haley:** *Yes, definitely.*

**Scott:** *There's a lot of scuttlebutt about the value — or not — of film schools. I'm curious what your thoughts are on the subject having attended AFI.*

**Haley:** *For me, it was the best thing I've ever done in my life. Not just for the education I received, but more so for the network of friends and colleagues that I*

*made along the way. Some of my best friends in Los Angeles went to AFI. My partner, my boyfriend went to AFI.*

*I'm doing my first indie feature this summer with a director and a cinematographer that I went to AFI with. My first pilot in development, one of my AFI professors helped me land it. One of the agents I'm talking to, another AFI connection. The network is so incredible.*

*That being said, I'm very privileged in that I was in the position to do that. I know that it's not an achievable goal for everybody.*

*I've heard so many success stories that have nothing to do with film school, but you have to make your own film school. No matter what you do, whether that's the Tarantino thing of...I think he worked in a video store where he watched a million movies and has said, "That was my film school."*

*There are some fantastic free YouTube programs. "Lessons from the Screenplay" is phenomenal. I learn so much from every single video that he puts out. And of course, there's your blog, which is great.*

*There are so many resources for learning how to write. As long as you're doing that, I don't think that not being able to go to film school should discourage anyone from pursuing a career in filmmaking.*

**Scott:** *But like you were saying, the pilot, the agent, possibly the film you're going to be making, so those people you went to school with, that community of people, that's been important for you.*

**Haley:** *Absolutely. But I also think a lot of the connections that I've made have come through just scrapping for them, knowing a friend of a friend, who has a friend, who is an assistant.*

*During the pandemic, when I wasn't represented, when I wasn't getting meetings, I would be like, "Hey, I'm trying to meet assistants. Will they sit and speak with me? And can we just have a really casual conversation?"*

*Now those are coming back and paying off. Those assistants move up really quickly. That was a really valuable thing, just trying to network with people who were on my level.*

**Scott:** *That's a really good point because you're right, assistants become the people that hire you later on. Before we get into your script, in doing my research for this conversation, I found an interview with you in which you talked about going back up north to help with the family. The fires that have been up in the wine country's horrible, and some other things. I'm aware the world is in a pretty sad state right now. A lot of things going on.*

You had this quote, which I thought was terrific. You said this:

*"Stories give us hope. There's a moment in 'The Two Towers' where Samwise waxes poetic about the great stories, the stories that stayed with you, folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding onto something.*

*Frodo: What are we holding on to, Sam?*

*Sam: There's some good in the world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.*

*"In our stories, and in each other, always there's hope."*

*That's what you said. I was struck by that. Maybe you can unpack that a little bit. Is that an inspirational thing for you, that storytelling again, can elevate hope in people?*

**Haley:** *Absolutely. It was really important for me to reconnect with that during the pandemic because... We'll talk about this one when we get into the script a little bit more as well, but I was going through something where I felt I was working hard at my career. I had this education. I felt I was just as talented as all of my peers who were getting what seemed like all of this success and nothing was happening for me. Nothing was happening. I was sad and I was frustrated. It took reconnecting with... Well, I went to therapy during the*

*pandemic. I can't recommend it enough. All writers, all people, should get therapy.*

*Talking to my therapist, I was able to reconnect with, "Why do I do this thing?" I don't do this thing because I want to make a million dollars. I don't do this thing because I want everybody to know my name. In fact, I actively do not want that. Fame seems terrible.*

*I do it because whenever I have been sad, scared, or feel like I am losing hope, stories have been the things that I have turned to, to make me feel less alone. Once I reconnected with that, everything got so much easier. Making peace with the fact that ever if I never sell a script, even if I never "make it" in Hollywood, I'm still going to keep writing.*

*I can go to an old folk's home and stage a play, and make people happy. I can write a little short story and submit it somewhere, and someone can read it and feel less alone. I really do believe in the power of stories, and especially cinema to accomplish that, to make people see the world both as it is and as it can be.*

**Scott:** *That's a wonderful sentiment and I concur one hundred percent. Let's jump into your Nicholl-winning script, "Pumping Black," which is as I mentioned to you in an email, it's one of the most intense scripts I've read in a long time. Plot summary:*

*"After a desperate cycle takes up a team doctor's*

*dangerous offer, he seems on course to win the Tour de France, but as the race progresses and jealous teammates, suspicious authorities, and his paranoia close in, he must take increasingly dark measures to protect both his secrets and his lead."*

*Quite literally, my stomach was churning when I was reading this script. As soon as I met the Protagonist, Taylor Mace, and his precarious position in life, and his obsession with professional cycling, by the end of the opening, we're like off to the races and it's a breathless ride.*

*So, let's start at the beginning. What was the inspiration for "Pumping Black?"*

**Haley:** *It's three things all working in concert. The first thing is, I'm a cyclist. I'll go and I'll ride my bike in Griffith Park 30 miles by myself, nothing competitive, but I come from a family of very competitive cyclists. My mom, actually both my parents are triathletes. My dad actually took third in the world championship for mountain biking, back in the '90s. Really intense.*

*When I was a kid, my dad befriended a professional road cyclist. This rider rode with Lance. He podiumed at the Tour de France, podiumed at the Olympics, won the Tour of California a bunch of times. We got really, really close with him and his family. We visited them in Girona, in Spain, where part of the script takes place*

*because that really is the hallowed training grounds of the tour. He came to Thanksgiving at our house.*

*I and my family looked up to him as a hero and this proof that if you worked hard and set your mind to something, you could do anything. Then, it all came out that he, along with that whole generation of cyclists, was doping.*

*As a kid, I don't think that I really processed it completely, but what I do remember, what I do take away from that time is watching my dad wrestle with it.*

*My dad is a good Midwestern boy with a strong moral compass, and a love for the sport, and to look at this person that he considered to be not just a friend but a hero and see that he had made this decision to poison the sport that he thought they both loved and respected, that's something that I took away from that time, and which planted the seeds of the story.*

*The second part is "Macbeth." The way that came about, this is like a lightning strike, key writer moment. In Griffith Park, there is a section of the bike route that's called the Three Bastards. It's these three horrible, nasty switchbacks. You're swearing under your breath the whole time because it's so steep.*

*For whatever reason, as I was riding up, instead of Three Bastards, I called them in my brain the Three Witches. I got to the top of the hill. I caught my breath. I*



*was like, "Oh, Three Witches, Macbeth, cycling. Maybe there's something there." For the rest of the two hours of the ride, I was churning on what that might look like.*

*That's the meditative beauty of riding your bike, running, or even sometimes doing something like playing a video game where your brain is focused on one thing, but still free to do the writing work. That's the thing that I love the most about cycling, actually.*

*The third piece, as I mentioned before, was writing it in the pandemic and having all those feelings of spinning my wheels, so to speak. I have the same education as all these successful people. I have the same work ethic. I have the same talent. Why isn't anything happening?*

*That little nasty voice in your head of perfectionism and obsession, it's driven by a sense of mortality and a sense fear. Luckily, as I said, I got therapy. My protagonist, Taylor, doesn't. His perfectionism and obsession consume him. That's why the story is a tragedy.*

Tomorrow in Part 3, Haley delves into the key characters in her screenplay "Pumping Black" including the harrowing journey its Protagonist takes.

For Part 1 of the interview, go [here](#).

For my interviews with every Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting winner since 2012, go [here](#).

For my interviews with Black List writers, go here.