

Interview (Part 3): Daniel Hanna

[Scott Myers](#)

My interview with the 2021 Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting winner.



Daniel Hanna

Daniel Hanna wrote the original screenplay "Shelter Animal" which won a 2021 Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting. Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with Daniel about his creative background, his award-winning script, the craft of screenwriting, and what winning the

Nicholl Award has meant to him.

Today in Part 3 of a 6 part series to run each day through Saturday, Daniel talks about the Protagonist in his Nicholl-winning screenplay "Shelter Animal."

Scott: *Let's talk about Petra a little bit more. She's got a lot of rage and a lot of anger. In fact, on page two, she's in prison, and she's taking an anger management class. Right there, you say we see this is going to be part of her journey.*

I thought that was interesting that the title of this script is not animal shelter. It's "Shelter Animal." It's almost like in a way, and correct me if I'm wrong, maybe I'm overthinking it, but it's like a metaphor for her, where she's trying to sequester her, shelter her anger or rage. Is that a fair take on that at all?

Daniel: *Totally! Yeah, absolutely.*

Scott: *Two points for me...*

[laughter]

Scott: *...for being in alignment with you. She does have this anger.*

Another key character, probably the most important character, there's a lot of great characters, but there's this dog, Midnight, that she discovers completely serendipitously. That dog is so prominent. Maybe you

could talk about how the dog, Midnight, emerged and what you were thinking in terms of those two characters and that relationship.

Daniel: Most of the dogs are in some way based on elements of foster dogs that we had taken in. A lot of times, we had to learn how to get these dogs to not be afraid to be with us, not be afraid of the cats or aggressive towards the cats or anything like that. There was a socialization process we always had to go through, and there were always some bumps along the way. It came from that and research into how they handle more aggressive dogs, if you were to take what we had to do to a more extreme level.

Definitely, the dog is the mirror image of Petra in the sense of she's closed off. She wants to protect herself. She's a little bit aggressive towards anyone getting too close. That comes from past trauma you don't exactly know the details of but you get hints of. So she's Petra's spirit animal in a way.

Scott: It's like fate brought them together. The dog's name is Midnight. Petra names the dog, right? The dog is unnamed when she meets the dog.

Daniel: Right.

Scott: She names him Midnight, which is an interesting choice. Again, if you think shelter animal, midnight, darkness, we associate that with the potential for fear,

scary type stuff. It's also, a minute after midnight, it's a new day. I don't know. Was any of that going on there with dog? Almost like redemptive story of some sort?

Daniel: There's definitely an element of that. It's a funny thing where...It comes from writing the way I mentioned too, writing instinctively and then later I go back and think, "What's the dog's real name?" Then you put your editing hat on. Sometimes in that process, you go, "Actually, there's a reason why this is maybe the right name."

To be honest, Petra is like "pet." It's almost too stupid to keep in the final script, but then it's a harsh name. It's a name that has strength and has a little bit of a punch to it too. It feels like her, and so you keep it.

Scott: I studied Greek when I was at graduate school. Petra is rock, stone.

Daniel: Exactly.

Scott: She's got that stony personality at first. She's going to be broken down. You've got to achieve a sense of realism. If this were a Disney movie, Petra and Midnight would bond pretty quickly, but their relationship is problematic. You said bumps on the road. It takes a long time for them to bond. That's based on your own experience and whatnot.

Let me ask you, was it more like a feeling type thing?

I'm going to feel my way through the relationship between these two characters. I suspect you're going to say that it wasn't like, "I needed to have this happen by 60 and this happen by 75," but more of a feeling type of approach?

Daniel: *It is during the course of it, but I would say in that case that it's a situation where probably everything up until — maybe it's 80. I forget exactly what page it is — you are feeling the back and forth of how it works, and feeling it out and what seems right and what seems too fast.*

That was an area where, in a big-picture way, you know Petra earning this dog's trust is going to be a big moment for her. It's going to be a moment that reinforces for her that things can work out and people can change, and animals can change, and that there can be a brighter future. There could be that minute after midnight, if you will.

There are different ways you could structure it. You could structure it so that her bonding with Midnight and Midnight being healed is the thing that sets her on her journey. "I healed this dog. What else can I do?" It could happen by 35 or 40. But that's a different kind of story.

Scott: *There's a pairing there. I can't remember exactly what the order of it is, but she does have that*

wonderful moment with the dog. They're playing catch outside and everything. At some point, I think it's after that if I'm not mistaken, where she does convey what happened, the specifics of the crime to someone.

It's like she's empowered at that point. If the dog can reveal this aspect of itself to me — that it can be a friendly, warm, beyond the fear-based thing that I... She's not saying this consciously. This is all subconscious. She can do that. That's how I took that. I don't know if that was where you were going.

Daniel: Absolutely. It's like both of them opening up, becoming more open. It is an organic process where they become comfortable with each other and feel safe with each other. That's similar to her and Ruth. Petra is like the wounded dog in Ruth's world too. Those relationships move in parallel.

Tomorrow in Part 4, Daniel discusses some of the other key characters in the script "Shelter Animal."

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

For Part 2, 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](#).