

# Interview (Part 6): Karin delaPeña Collison

My interview with the 2021 Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting winner.

[Scott Myers](#)



Karin delaPeña Collison

Karin delaPeña Collison wrote the original screenplay "Coming of Age" which won a 2021 Nicholl Fellowship in

Screenwriting. Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with Karin 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 6 of a 6 part series, Karin advises writers on why they should find a coach they can trust.

**Scott:** *There is a theatricality to Catholicism compared to the Protestants.*

**Karin:** *Very much so. Especially before they started saying the mass in English. I don't remember exactly when that was ... sometime in the '60s.*

**Scott:** *In the '60s.*

**Karin:** *It was, wasn't it? But, for the early part of my childhood the mass was performed in Latin. It made it terribly theatrical and mystical. And, of course, there was the incense.*

**Scott:** *That's why the ending was so great. I could see the structure of the story. There's such specificity, love, and affection for these characters. This writer clearly knows this world. Yet, there are these things that happen.*

*Every so often, the major plotline points happen, they move things along every 10 to 15 pages. There is this structure to it that you recognize as being conventional*

*in a good way.*

**Karin:** *Pilar will have guided me in that sense.*

**Scott:** *I think I know who you're talking about with your screenwriting coach ...Pilar Alessandro, is that who you're talking about? Yes. We met in London Screenwriters' Festival years ago.*

**Karin:** *Yes, she's terrific. I have a natural sense for structure. As I said, I was an actress from a very young age. I was learning Shakespeare, and classical structure from a very young age. It's in my bones. But, I couldn't teach it. I don't understand structure according to screenwriting rules. But my instinct was always good, structurally.*

*Pilar put my instinct for structure into language for me. She'll say, "Oh, yes. Now we come to the end of Act 2B," and I'll say, "Oh, OK. That's good." I just knew the balance felt right somehow.*

**Scott:** *You've got that in the story where here's this young woman. She's in this theater group, learning all this stuff, having this sexual experience or this moment with Edward. And this goes back to your own experience. "I got into acting because we needed the money." That's exactly what happens with Trish.*

*Trish goes, "Hey, Charlotte. Here you go. You're going to be in the play. And you'll get paid and we need the*

money." And it turns out that not only does Charlotte end up in the play, but she wears a French maid's outfit, and the person she interacts with is the very guy with whom she had that moment. And Charlotte gets to slap him on stage every night.

*I just thought that was so perfect. Was that there? Was that something that came out of the Pilar session?*

**Karin:** *Again, I don't remember exactly. It came about pretty organically. I will say that one of my mates with whom I worked as an actress — he directed me in a couple of his films. Wyatt Rockefeller. He's an absolute sweetie pie and a lovely filmmaker. And I sent him an earlier draft of the script and he got back to me and he said, "Oh, I love this." He said, "But give Charlotte more agency. Why don't you have her smack Edward around or something."*

*I thought, "Hmmm, now that's a fun idea." I was happy to take his suggestion and run with it. A lot of actors and a lot of writers are very protective and defensive about their work. But I'm very sure of my truth, of what jives with the direction I'm going in.*

*If somebody comes up with something that feels just completely dissonant with my script, I'm fine about saying, "You know what? Thank you, but that isn't for this script." But I have a very open door for other people's ideas. Bring it on. I will take it and run with it if*

*it works for my character or my plot.*

**Scott:** *What's the status of the script at this point?*

**Karin:** *It's in various industry peoples' hands, but in the meantime I'm getting on with other work. When I get representation, they're going to want to know what other work I have. So I'm building a bank of screenplays. The Nicholl Fellowship incentivizes you to write a screenplay within the first year after you're named a Fellow. It's a great idea. The Nicholl metes out the prize money in five fractions. The first fraction is for winning. Then each subsequent fraction is tied to a stage of the Fellowship screenplay.*

*I've already started on the Fellowship feature, so there'll be that to add to my bank of screenplays. And I'm not short of ideas. Two or three of my short stories are very visual, and would work well as movies. I will just continue to plug along and write.*

**Scott:** *Maybe one day, once everything's done, you'll direct this thing.*

**Karin:** *I don't know. When you sell a movie, it becomes the director's. So if somebody wants to direct the movie, I would probably have to say bye-bye.*

*I would certainly want them to know that I would be available for any input that they would like me to give, any questions they had, etc. I'd be happy as a clam to*

*be around for that.*

*If I was fortunate enough to get traction on the pilot and the series, though, that would be a different thing. I would want that to be negotiated such that I could be involved.*

**Scott:** *Who knows? Anyway, congratulations on the Nicholl. A few questions for you. Let's talk about your writing and what you bring to it as an actor. Are there specific aspects about the process that you feel benefit you because you have an acting background? Actually, the psychotherapy background, too. There's a lot of that in there. Do you bring any of that to bear when you're writing?*

**Karin:** *Of course. Acting-wise, I'm sure that that helps with dialogue. I'm sure it does. With developing the characters, and with the pace and the structure, too. My acting life has been about inhabiting characters, which I'm sure contributes to the specificity of my characters.*

*Although I am not what people think of as an improviser because the term improvisation has come to mean the kind of sketch comedy done by Second City, The Groundlings, or that sort of thing. I never approached improvisation just for comedy. I've always approached it as a way of exploring character. I love to do that. Sometimes it ends up being funny.*

*Improvisation helps in writing and acting; having an unfettered mind. Being willing to think out of the box. I love to stretch characters' thinking.*

*I've always had a huge curiosity, which has made me quite intrepid in my life. And given me a huge appetite to explore different worlds. I used to travel much more than I do now, but right now, and for the past decade at least, I've been an absolutely voracious (to the point of addictive) audio book listener. And my literary appetites are omnivorous. So I'm constantly learning about different worlds. Definitely been a boon during the pandemic, when you can't be out in the world.*

**Scott:** *That curiosity, that's so key.*

**Karin:** *And allowing my curiosity to keep me pretty fearless about, and open to, a vast array of subjects has been crucial. I think it's the life blood of an artist. And it's probably what led me into being a psychotherapist too. I am fascinated. I want to go deeply inside whatever and whomever I'm exploring.*

**Scott:** *Finally, what advice do you have for someone who wants to learn the craft of screenwriting?*

**Karin:** *Find a good coach you trust. And be willing to put your hand in your pocket to do that. Don't shortchange your creative growth and process. And it's great if you can find a writing group made up of people whose work you respect from whom you can*

*get strong feedback. But without my coach (and I now work with two people, because Pilar is so busy that she's not always available), I wouldn't have continued writing, and I definitely wouldn't have won The Nicholl.*

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

For Part 2, go [here](#).

For Part 3, go [here](#).

For Part 4, go [here](#).

For Part 5, go [here](#).

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