

Episode 76 - Craig Heller

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SPEAKERS

Moira McCullough, Craig Heller



Moira McCullough 00:07

This is the College Scoops podcast and I'm your host Moira McCullough, we focus on everything college related from the admissions process to where to eat, stay and explore on and round campuses. Our guests include founders, educators, authors and experts in the college space. Join us as these experts share their knowledge, experiences and lessons learned to help you have stress free and formative and tasty college journeys. Whether it's your first or last child going to college, or you're just interested in going to a college town for a game or meal, we've got you covered. If you haven't already, please subscribe to the College Scoops podcast to get the inside scoop, send everything college related, and leave us a review. Thanks to all of our sponsors, partners and the entire College Scoops Ambassador team for helping us bring valuable content to our community. If you would like to support College Scoops as a sponsor, please head over to patreon@patreon.com/collegescoops and sign up as a sustaining listener, insider or Deluxe sponsor. We have exclusive benefits for our members free ebooks and even a College Scoops care package. Although Craig Heller has written for film, television, books, theater, newspapers and some of the world's largest corporations, and despite his four Emmys, and Writers Guild Award, no endeavor has given Craig as much satisfaction as assisting students with their college application essays in business since 2005. His service is comprehensive and highly individual dedicated to helping students make their application essays the best writing they have ever done. To learn more, you can find Craig at CollegeEssaySolutions.com. Welcome to the College Scoops podcast, Craig, thank you so much for joining us today.



Craig Heller 01:57

My pleasure.



Moira McCullough 01:58

You've been a supporter of College Scoops, you wrote a great blog post about helping students as we enter the summer months on how to tackle the college essay. I've never enjoyed writing. So that's why I want to know first off, you have such a great background in the writing industry, can you share a little bit about that, first? How you transition to helping students with college essays? Talk about going from one stressful job to another!



Craig Heller 02:26

I'd be happy to. Writing was always something I loved. I'm not quite sure why but it was always something I was good at. I was the Editor of the literary magazine in high school and I actually had a short blurb published in Reader's Digest when I was in the ninth grade. So I used to walk around with the notebook, that was always my thing. And so I cleverly went to New York to become an actor after college. But then I quickly discovered I didn't have any talent as an actor. So I went back into writing, I eventually wound up working for a company that did corporate communications, as a writer, and then as a head writer for staff and then as a creative director, and vice president. It was a wonderful learning experience, because everything I wrote got produced in one way or another. And as a writer, you learn a lot when you see your stuff produced. So eventually, I had a friend who got a job writing a PBS special, and he asked me to write it with him. And that's how I started getting into TV. And we wound up being a partner for several years, and we worked on three PBS specials. And then he had a friend who got us into TV into network TV. I was living in New York at the time. Eventually, I moved out to California, I gave up working in corporate communications, I wanted to do stories. So I went to LA and I was experienced at that point, but I sat for an entire year without work. Eventually again, it is so much of the entertainment business, runs on friendships. I was dating a woman who knew a guy, who knew a guy, and eventually they looked at my material and they hired me for a sitcom. And that kind of started my career. Really, following that I got a staff job and little by little things start to fall into place and you you get a reputation. Again, you meet people And I also wanted to write films, which is somewhat different. I sold the film to Warner Brothers, that was a big moment in my career. And then I also had a career in film. I never had a film produced a feature film. Yet, I will say, although I'm not really actively doing that anymore, which was disappointing, but I did sell screenplays and worked on rewrites for major studios. And I love doing the long form. I did work in TV in long form and add to TV movies produced and, and wrote to others that wound up not

being produced. But that's very much part of the whole scene in LA. Not everything you write gets produced. Anyway, I'm sorry, that was a probably a much longer answer than you required.

M

Moira McCullough 05:57

No, there's just so much there. I need to go back over a couple of things. First of all, I love for all the students out there, and I have a son who just graduated from college, and I kept on saying, life works on friendships and relationships. So when we were growing up, my parents always introduced me to people and said, that's your network. And it shows through your professional life, it's the network and the friends that you have made. And that has helped you especially in the entertainment business.

C

Craig Heller 06:26

There are so many people wanting careers, and it's just easier for people to develop a family of volumes. And to keep working with those people. It's just, it's it's exhausting to read everybody's screenplay and decide which one to produce, or to read everybody's spec television script and decide who to hire. Sometimes it works that way. But often, it's your reputation. And then well, I loved working with him, or I love working with her. I'm doing this project, let's get that person.

M

Moira McCullough 07:10

When you talk about your writing, and what you love to do. You talked about going into New York as an actor, and then all of a sudden, you end up at corporate communications. I worked for Nynex for a long time. And I can't imagine an actor coming in and doing corporate communications and then going into screenwriting or TV. So what did you love the best as you've had such a varied career? Is there a certain type of writing?

C

Craig Heller 07:33

Well, I love writing of any kind. Really, if I had to write the labels on Progresso soup cans, I'd probably liked that too. I love the the creative problem solving that's involved in writing. Making stuff up is fun and doing it in a way that touches other people. Hopefully, you have something to say, not every writer does. And there are many ways if you really want to just talk about writing outside of television and movies. There are many ways to make living a living as writer, you can write nonfiction. I also wrote a book about classical music. That was one of my favorite projects of my whole career. You know, so that's

another way in nonfiction if you have an area of expertise or an idea that that could be compelling to people. You can get across that way you can be a magazine writer, there's, you know, you can be a news writer, there's all different ways to to make a living and to enjoy yourself. You know, you can work as a news reporter, as a sports reporter.

M

Moira McCullough 08:49

It's endless. Did you find in certain capacities that it was easier to write, because of the editing process? I mean, are there certain industries where you're writing and then it goes through this editing process and it comes out, not what you had originally wrote or envisioned?

C

Craig Heller 09:05

First thing I wrote with television, we submitted it to I don't want to mention the show, mostly because it dates me. We submitted our script and was accepted, we got paid. And when the show came on the air, there was one line from the original script still in it. So the answer to your question is, yes, everyone's an expert. But this is particularly in TV and in film, the original writer and this is this is a big issue within the Writers Guild. Can I can I tell you a brief joke Moira? There's that well, you'll get it. It's a very simple job. I don't even know if it's sort of an apocryphal story. It's not really a joke, but a man has a play open on Broadway. A writer has a play open on Broadway next day. He gets into his elevator and downtown and man says Oh, I saw your play last night. Oh, really, that's wonderful. And the man goes on through a litany of things that the writer should have done. Well, you know, you brought in the grandmother too early, and the gun disappeared too late. And the second act was a disappointment. And they should, you should have had more humor, you missed an opportunity to make this character funnier, on and on and on till they get up to the 12th floor. And just as the writer is stepping out, he turns to the other man and says, "Let me ask you a question. Where were you when the page was blank?" So the point is, everybody knows what's good or bad about your story, after you've had the courage to sit with that blank screen and fill it up. However, if you're going to work professionally, in this industry, then you've got to accept that as a given, and have a sense of humor and learn to deal with it. Because you there's no way to avoid it. I guess, if you're a novelist, I doubt John Grisham gets a lot of notes at this point, people who have a great reputation can evolve away from that. But when you're starting out, you're going to get notes. And you have to learn how to negotiate that process. But I think that's such great advice. Because writing is something where you're pouring your heart and soul into something, you're vulnerable, right? It's your baby, and you, you've nurtured it. And then you let it go out into the world and not know, not everybody always loves it. And then somebody will say, No, I've worked for the studios, and they'll purchase something. And then you'll have a

meeting and just people have read it. No, it always goes like, it always goes like this. We love the script, we love everything about it, we're going to make it. I can see this for Tom Cruise, he's going to be something! He's never done this before. It's fantastic. However, have you thought about making the grandmother, a grandfather, and then it goes on and on and on until it's you can no longer recognize your script. And it's something that particular story development person wishes he or she had written. And I don't mean to be disparaging toward those people because I've met very, very smart people who understood story. And and and a writer does need an objective outsider to help him or her develop the work. But sometimes it gets out of control.

M

Moira McCullough 12:44

To students who are looking at writing that, as you said, there's so many different avenues that you can go into, right. Like if you're going into writing for a newspaper, there's deadlines you've got. That's right, specific deadlines and you have to write in a certain way correct in order to go into that.

C

Craig Heller 12:59

And there's an editor in print, there's an editor who likes certain things. And you get to know that I know when I was creative director of this company, we did a lot of humor, we did a lot of corporate films. And I know that the writers understood what I responded to. And they tried to give me that, that's just how it goes. I want to offer some advice. This is way way ahead of the of the game for students who are just going into college. But here's how I used to handle notes from studio executives. I always had a stock on I would say, that's a great idea. Let me take a look at that. And so you didn't make a commitment. You didn't say leave me alone. And you didn't just roll over and say oh, I'm going to put that in right away. Thank you so much. I always kind of gave myself an out and said, I'm gonna I really liked that direction. Let me take a look at it and see how it's going to work out how I can fit it in. So that way I had a you know, an option to to say to them I tried to work it in it just didn't fit because of this and that. And that, you know, made everybody happy. You have to learn how to work in committee.

M

Moira McCullough 14:24

Well, I would say that's very hard to do. If you're just starting out and you're trying to get that first project you might be more apt to yes. Yes, I'll do whatever it is that you want. And then it becomes not yours as you said it becomes totally different.



Craig Heller 14:39

You have to have the where withal if somebody says you know, have you thought about for the hero having a pet monkey. And you know, that's an awful idea. It's tempting sometimes because you're vulnerable. You want them to like you. You want them to buy your next project. It's a fine line to walk.



Moira McCullough 14:57

So if you had advice for students who are entering their senior year of college and getting ready to launch into the writers world. Any advice that you would have for students?



Craig Heller 15:08

I would say, first of all, if there's anything else you can do, you should do that. Because it's a hard career. It's a very hard career to break into. And it's a very hard career to sustain. So that would be my first advice, be sure that that's what you really want. The other thing I would say is, learn everything that you can have your skills in order, read every book, take every course, stay up with the latest ideas, the latest trends in TV and film, I would say have a variety of skills. Try it if you're going into TV, understand production, editing, acting, directing, same with film. Don't just focus on one thing. Be patient would be another bit of advice. Sometimes it happens that people come out to Hollywood, and they wrote something that's just so compelling that the next day they have a deal. But that's not the rule. You have to wait your turn. To some extent, there's a lot of really talented people already here. They want the same jobs that you do they want the same slots in a in a company's production schedule. So you have to be patient at the same time, you have to believe in yourself. I would also say especially at the beginning, write what you know. That's an old bit of advice, it's been around forever,



Moira McCullough 16:54

Sometimes you think I have to do something different, something unique. And then it comes off as you're not the expert in that and that it's forced and, and I know you wrote a great article on tips for college statement for high school students with the college essay. And that was one of the points that you had - write something that you know about, that you're an expert on.



Craig Heller 17:12

Funny I have a student who I worked with and got into UCLA film school. I always say to

my students, if you'd like to stay in touch, I've always be happy to share in your your journey in your career, whatever it is. I try to form some sort of a relationship with the students, but it's totally up to them. This young man has stayed in touch and asked me to look at some of his material. Now he works for Netflix, and he's starting his career. The first thing he showed me was about a CIA agent in some jungles, and it rang so hollow. And when I said what do you know about this other than what you learn from other movies, and he didn't know that much. And the second thing he did, and I don't want to reveal what the story is, but was much more personal is built on his personal experience was a whole different tone to it. It had the feeling of somebody who knew what he was talking about. That's not to say you can't do a lot of research and one of the great things about our digital world, if you want to know, you know how mail was delivered in Germany in 1912, you can find out online. And that's great. But you should make that effort don't. It will inform everything that you write whether you're writing novels, or screenplays, or a TV, mini series or anything of a stage play, you really have to know what you're talking about. The other bit of advice, I would say to one I've already mentioned, cultivate friendships, be part of it. Don't stand apart and make believe you're better or different than anyone else. There is a community within show business. It helps if you're a social person, it helps if you like people and people like you. It does help. The other thing is, don't become a hack. And what I mean by that is keep your standards high. Don't just try to write because you think people will love it. People don't always know what they love. They think they do, but the trends change very quickly. So don't don't chase the prevailing popular idea. If writing horror films is your thing. If you love horror films, and you've seen every horror film and you understand the genre, and you can bring something new to it. Fantastic. That's great. But if you really write romantic comedies and you decide you Going to write an action superhero movie because that's what people are purchasing, most likely you're not going to do that good of a job. So that would be the last thing. Keep your standards up.

M

Moira McCullough 20:13

I like that. It just brought back a memory. I like Sara Bareilles as a songwriter. I think she had a song where she said that her producer wanted her to write a song about a love song. And she just was adamant, like, I'm not feeling it. And I think that was the song we heard was, I don't want to write about a love song. And it ended up being a huge hit. But it was her response to NO, I'm not going to write about it and here's why not. And that was the biggest hit. And I loved it. It's like forcing somebody to do something that they don't and can't feel, and it's not authentic.

C

Craig Heller 20:47

You know, you bring up an interesting point, because hopefully, anybody who's entering the business is going to have representation, you do need representation. And I resisted this, I think to my own detriment earlier in my career. I'm not going to talk to the agent about what I'm writing, I'm going to write what I want to write, but it is a good idea to bounce it off your agent, because hopefully, the agent will know what's going on in the business. It is show business. It's not show art. So it's a good idea if you get that. There is an old expression from Stanislavski. Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art. So if you can do something, anything, I wrote soap operas for years, this is not the highest artistic level of of dramatic writing. But I always did my best, I always brought the art in myself to it. So it's a line you have to walk. If you're writing something about, I don't know, whatever subject. And your agent said, Well, you know, there were five films in the last year on that subject that all failed. Maybe that's not the best project for you. So it is it is good to at least consult if you still are. If you think you have a take that nobody's done or you're just driven to write it. Sure, go ahead. But it is good to get some input from people.

M

Moira McCullough 22:17

So then how did you make that transition? I mean, how can you possibly go from that type of world into helping High School stressed out students and families?

C

Craig Heller 22:27

First of all, on my website, there is an article I wrote for the New York Times, The New York Sunday Times had a column on Sunday, free professions or something like that. And I wrote about my transition from writing soap operas at the time to working with students. To be honest, I was not working, which is a part of any writers career. I have two children of my own. And and house. I when you're when you're a writer, people usually ask you to take look, take a look at things or is so my brother in law asked me to take a look at my nephew's college application essay. And I worked with him on it. I really enjoyed it. He got into his first choice school. And my brother-in-law who lives on the East Coast. I was in LA he said to me, you know, Craig, that's a job. People are doing that for income. I honestly had no idea. This was 14 years ago, or 15 years ago, and I started to look into it. I enjoyed working with children. My daughter was an athlete in high school and I was the soccer coach dad. For many years. I always enjoyed getting to know her friends and my son's friends and so on. Um, little by little, I started putting it out there that I was available. I read every book on the subject, I consulted with people I knew who worked within the college application or college admissions industry. I knew somebody who worked in the UC University of California system in the admissions and I met with her and asked her a lot of questions. I did a workshop at my son's High School and I worked with the college

counselor there. And then I started getting students from the school, which was great. I took the next inevitable step which was I developed a website and eventually I started to learn more and get my own process going with students in a way I thought would work best. I never wanted to go to people's homes. I just didn't feel that comfortable. So I decided early on, I would work online with students, which 15 years ago was not quite as ubiquitous as it is now. But now that's how everybody does business. So particularly since the last year and a half when we were all inside. So yeah, then it built. And then I started working with kids all over the country, I developed some students in Asia, I actually worked with a Chinese company that helps student Chinese students come to American colleges, and I'm on their website as a US contact. Of course, last year, I had no students from China, no one wanted to come here. And I understood. So that's basically how it happened.

M

Moira McCullough 25:54

You must love though, as a writer, and being so passionate and saying, you always loved writing, right? You said that from the start, you walked around with a pad of paper, I've never been somebody who's found writing enjoyable, or easy working with students, it must be so rewarding for you, when you all of a sudden that light bulb goes on, they find a way to express themselves and share their story.

C

Craig Heller 26:18

What I love about working with students is being a resource that helps the students and their parents through a very stressful time. college admissions, and you know, this, it's just so stressful for for families on every level, if you go into a state school, or you're you're trying to get into IVs, or whatever it is, it's just a stressful process. What I have seen over the last 15 years I've been doing this, the essay has taken on more and more importance in the admissions process. And I'm not the only one who's noticed that. That is pretty much accepted lore within the college industry. The kids know that the parents they don't always know what a good essay looks like. So I enjoy helping them through that process. on an emotional level, in terms of them finding something that's right for them. I do a lot of brainstorming with my students. I asked a lot of questions. Many students don't think they're interesting. Many think they're too interesting. And I enjoy helping them through it and and then helping them through the process and just putting their absolute best foot forward. Another thing I enjoy is getting calls from students, I got into my first choice school or an email or whatever. And thank you. And that's exciting for me sharing in that excitement with the whole family.

M

Moira McCullough 27:54

I can imagine in the post that you wrote for us don't sell yourself. Yet, we're supposed to sell ourselves. But how do you how do you do it in a way that comes across?

C

Craig Heller 28:03

I have a very specific answer to that question. But it's not easy to execute. I may have mentioned it in that post, when you come across as selling everybody in our culture today knows what selling looks like. And there's a little bit of pushback from it, we all know know that if when you feel you're being sold on the phone, or in a on a website, your resistance is immediately activated. And I believe that the same is true. When a college admissions officer has read 25 essays that day and comes across a heavy sell job, what you want to do is let the reader come to the conclusion that you want them to have. Meaning we've got to have this student in our freshman class without them realizing you're leading them there. So how do you do it? You take them right up to the conclusion you show not tell that's not my idea. That's an old and very valid, right rule in good writing, show them tell. you demonstrate let's say you let's say you want you want it to be clear that you're somebody who is an activist, and and has raised a lot of money for various charities and that this is something that you even your goal in life is to be the president of the American Cancer Society or Special Olympics or whatever. What you want to do in the essay is describe what you've done without drawing the conclusion for the reader. And so you are allowing the reader to draw that conclusion for him or herself. Oh, this person is a tremendous organizer. And this person really cares about this issue. And she knows how to get people motivated and knows how to put on a great event or whatever. But you don't say that you let the reader come to that conclusion through the material that you've put in front of that makes sense?

M

Moira McCullough 30:22

Oh, it totally does. It is very hard to do. But when it's done and done well, it seems. And it's about a subject that you know, and it's an essay that that student loves. It's so easy in some ways.

C

Craig Heller 30:33

Yes the other thing to avoid is you don't want the essay to become a narrative resume. Well, then I did this, and I was most valuable player on my volleyball team. And of course, there was that wonderful science fair thing where I won first prize, and then it does come off as bragging. What you can do, too, if you if you feel compelled, or if it's, it's essential in

some way to mention those things. You kind of throw it away, you can say following winning first prize in the Wisconsin State science fair, I began to examine where I wanted to go with my life. So you've mentioned it, you've sort of got it noted, but you didn't put it in terms of aren't I amazing.

M

Moira McCullough 31:27

I don't know how you can continue to do this year after year. I just know that after having a third child. It was like, wow, but I will say obviously, each child is different. You have two kids, you know that my third he loves to write. So when he ended up, he wouldn't even show me his essay. At the end, I finally said, can you show it to me at least? And when he did, I'm like I have nothing to add. That was really great. It's really nice to see. So what do you wish you knew before you attended college?

C

Craig Heller 31:56

I wish I knew myself personally. That's a very personal question. I was in a fog completely. I didn't know much. Without going into my personal psychological history, I think it's important to know yourself to know what you like, who you are, what are your values? What are what if you have some sort of a guiding principle in life? Or you're starting to develop one? I think that's really important. I am not an advocate of knowing everything before you go to college. The question do you want to major in what do you want to do? For some students is absurd. They don't know. There's nothing wrong with that. And unfortunately, there is a certain stigma put on it. Johnny wants to be a doctor, and he wants to go to law school, what's wrong with me. But I personally don't buy into that. It's, it's fine to not know, as long as you're seeking input and exploring your own needs and values and approach, principles of life and so on. So for me, that's what I wish I knew. I wish I knew more about myself, I think that would have changed everything. For me. It took me much too long to get around to what I really wanted what I always wanted to do and what I was made to do, which was be in the creative world. My parents stressed how insecure that was. And they were right. But they their their advice was become a dentist. And then right on the side, which was terrible advice, but it confused me. And so I it took me a while to get back to who I really was.

M

Moira McCullough 33:46

Yes, and I don't think that's unusual. I wish I had known you. You would have been able to tell me Don't worry about it.



Craig Heller 33:51

We're in the same boat. Or maybe Yes, it was so interesting. I still have a lot of friends from high school and college. And when I say that to them, they'll say I say I was in complete fog. And they'll they'll say, really, gosh, we we looked at you We thought you had it all together. He said I had nothing together. So it's good to communicate these things with your friends. And I must say the generation coming up now and even just in the last several decades. They're amazing young people and they know how to communicate much greater than I did and they are more in touch with their feelings and and the world around them. And that's a wonderful thing.



Moira McCullough 34:36

I really admire that about the younger generations. But I also think too, it's sometimes that the pressure and the stress on them. I always say what's the point of going into college as you said, knowing everything you should go in and take a really hard class and not worry about the grade and just have that curiosity to learn and fail. It's okay to be can't do it and The class when can you do it?



Craig Heller 35:01

I agree. But that's a tough sell for many kids. I know much emphasis on achievement and your occurred and your grade point. I was in when my college career postgraduate, I took a course. And it was a self grading course. And I had set certain goals for myself for the course I didn't, I had several books I wanted to read, and I didn't read them all. So I gave myself a beat. And you had to tell the class, what grade you gave yourself and defend it. And people were furious with me because I was very active in the class. And they felt well, Craig gives himself a B, and I want to give myself a really messing me up here and people raise their hand. No, I think you should get an A. I said, Well, I don't really care about to grade. I know what my aspirations were for this class not to present myself as such a you're morally exemplary person, but it's difficult because then they want to go to grad school. And the GPA means something there. The pressure is huge.



Moira McCullough 36:10

And it's a balance.



Craig Heller 36:14

Yes, I know. My daughter had two majors, she just is graduating in 10 days congratulations she

had two majors in the second major was I'm sorry to minors, the second minor was music. She does not want to be a professional music musician, but she plays a piano and she sings and she writes songs just for her own pleasure. And she wanted to know more. And so she took something that she really loved, that she knew was not going to make her money but would enrich her life. So maybe that's a way to to do that as a as a minor within your college education so that your your electives have a structure to them.

M Moira McCullough 36:54

I like that. I think that's great advice. Last question. I always love asking our guests is Do you have a favorite dessert or food place on a college campus?

C Craig Heller 37:02

For me any place that makes fresh doughnuts and is open late.

M Moira McCullough 37:06

Okay, then you have to give one at least.

C Craig Heller 37:08

Krispy Kreme. There was a place in the valley where I don't live in Los Angeles anymore, but in the San Fernando Valley, and one night, it was a Saturday night and my daughter said hey dad, I really feel like a Krispy Kreme and it's not wasn't close to where we live. But I said okay, we got in the car and we drove like half an hour to Burbank to this Krispy Kreme and I thought we'd be the only people there. And there was a line around the block you can fill in Why? But that would be the place the crispy Krispy Kreme donut place would be my favorite dessert place. Boy, this is. This is the toughest question my tribe. I'm really floundering here. Can we go back to talking about it?

M Moira McCullough 37:53

No, I'll tell you there is a place where we like to go during the summer. And to your point they have it's called the Back Door Donuts and they open up the door late at night and it's the back door and you can go and get your box of crawlers or Apple fritters that are to die for.

C Craig Heller 38:11
I have a personal weakness for the apple fritter.

M Moira McCullough 38:13
So there you go. So I know the place for you. If you're on the East Coast, you can come and I'll take you Back Door Doughnuts.

C Craig Heller 38:20
That's a good deal. I like it. Great.

M Moira McCullough 38:23
Thank you so much for joining us and sharing your expertise and advice for students and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

C Craig Heller 38:30
Good luck - lovely chatting with you.

M Moira McCullough 38:39
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