

# ROMANCE IS ALIVE & WELL

NICHOLAS SPARKS TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW NOVEL, *EVERY BREATH*, AND THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING THE KING OF ROMANCE NOVELS

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE

PHOTO CREDIT: JAMES QUANTZ JR.

So, what's he like? Refreshingly, much like you'd hope: warm, open, kind...

It's a sunny day in late May when I enter Grand Central Publishing, Nicholas Sparks' book publisher. As I wait for the renowned author in the intimate-sized room I've been escorted to, I examine the shelves of books surrounding me. When I get to the shelves devoted to Nicholas' work, I linger on their book spines. There are a few different editions of each: *The Longest Ride*, *The Lucky One*, *Message in a Bottle*, *The Notebook*, *Safe Haven*, *See Me...*

Nicholas has a way with words, and a knack for crafting characters that resonate with us. In the last twenty years, he has penned twenty novels and watched nineteen of them land on *The New York Times* best sellers list (#20 is slated for release on October 16th and will undoubtedly make the list). Once Hollywood realized his talent, they swooped in and bought the rights for eleven of his novels and adapted them into blockbuster films starring Tinseltown's most well-known stars: *The Notebook*, starring Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams; *A Walk to Remember*, starring Mandy Moore and Shane West; *Message in a Bottle*, starring Kevin Costner and Robin Wright; *Nights in Rodanthe*, starring Richard Gere and Diane Lane.

I don't normally get nervous before an interview, but in the moments before Nicholas walks into the room, I am a tad anxious at the realization that I am about to interview one of the most celebrated authors of our time, a man whose work I deeply admire, as much for his immense talent as for his prolificacy. Being a writer with the opportunity to sit down with a storyteller whose tales have received universal approbation, feels much like I've been told that I can eat my heart's desire of pizza and not gain a pound.

As soon as Nicholas arrives, the energy in the room shifts. The novelist-screenwriter-producer is dressed in a black V-neck with its long sleeves pushed up to his forearms, olive-hued pants, and black sneakers. I hand him my business card, which he carefully appraises. "I like it. It's pretty fancy. It's blue. It's playing toward the blue skies of Miami? Or is it the peacefulness you feel when you read *Miami Living Magazine*?" he asks in a pacifying tone. It's both, I would like to think, right? The small talk goes on a few more beats as he settles into the chair beside me. "It takes me a second to get situated. OK. Now, we're ready. Thank you for coming, first off." His kind, brown eyes and easy smile put me at ease.

The North Carolinian, who was born in Omaha, Nebraska and grew up in California, is in New York City today for the 2018 Reimagined BookExpo; to do audio recordings for this book; and to chat with me. On October 16th, Nicholas' latest novel, *Every Breath*, will be released. It's been two years since his last novel (*Two By Two*), so fans are eager to get their hands on *Every Breath*. A throwback to his earlier stories (think, *The Notebook*, *Dear John*, *Nights in Rodanthe*, where there's "an outcome a few years later type-thing and a two-part story."), *Every Breath* introduces readers to Hope Anderson and Tru Walls, temporary neighbors who immediately connect during the few days they spend together. While their affinity for one another is strong, there are a couple of factors that challenge their bond, one being that they live on different continents; also, Hope is on a break from her boyfriend of six years.

"One of the interesting things about *Every Breath*, my male character is foreign; he's from Zimbabwe, and of course, he's visiting North Carolina." He laughs at the latter as he had



Is there a character of yours that you like the best?

“Y’know, for the most part, I’ve tried to create, except for in novels where I have a legitimate bad guy, I tend to like most of the characters I create. And I try to make them honest and authentic, which means, they’re good people, but they’re flawed. All of them have flaws and regret and they wonder about the choices they’ve made, all of these things. And so, I really like them all, whether they’re male or female.”

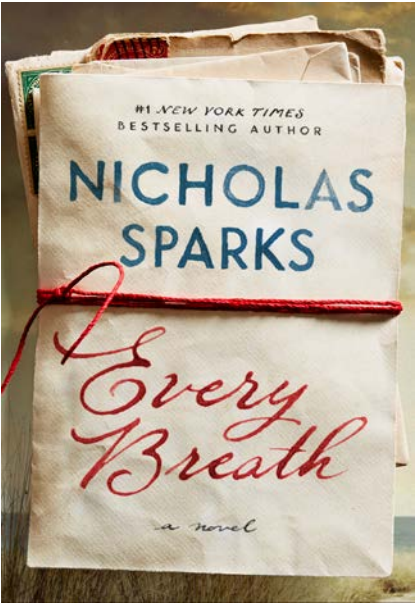
just finished explaining to me that his novels have three constants: 1. It'll be a love story. 2. It will be set in North Carolina. 3. Hopefully, you won't see the ending coming. “I have such a broad readership around the world, I'm trying to make sure that readers can find people they can relate to, no matter where they are. I'm hopeful that people will find it very romantic and they will be moved by the story.” I can attest that this incredibly-romantic story moved me to tears—I literally sobbed when I read Tru and Hope's fate.

Nicholas' characters make us believe that there is that one special person out there that we're meant to be with, and if we're lucky, we'll get them, but even if we don't end up with our person, we realize that true love *does* exist. It's not always a fairy tale—it's real, it's what life is *really* like, with obstacles to overcome, tough choices to make, and crushing setbacks. Despite the trials and tribulations his characters encounter, we can always count on the trusty romantic-at-heart to steer the ship —reminding us to have hope and faith, and to give love a chance. His characters pull us into their world with their nuanced actions and relatable thought process and make us invest in their story to the point that we're cheering them on, faults and all, and tearing up as though we're hearing a dear friend's story unfold.

And then you have the charming backdrop of North Carolina that Nicholas paints with his words so beautifully. Strong visuals of waters—from peaceful

creeks to the energetic ocean—make recurring appearances in his books. “They sat in the middle of a small lake fed by the waters of Brices Creek. It wasn't large, maybe a hundred yards across, and she was surprised at how invisible it had been just moments before. It was spectacular. Tundra swan and Canada geese literally surrounded them. Thousands of them,” Nicholas wrote in *The Notebook*, describing what would become one of the film's most iconic scenes. “I lived on Brices Creek and just probably 75 yards down the creek there was kind of a turn where these trees had fallen over, and it was this lake. I went out there and it was just filled with these swans one day, and then they were never there again. In all the years I'd ever been there, they were never there again. I remember just seeing that and I thought, this would make a great scene. This is beautiful,” he recalls.

The inspiration for his novels comes from all sorts of places, he tells me. “I was blessed. I had really nice parents. And they were loving parents and I was, whether it's an innate personality thing, I'm an optimist when it comes to things like life and love. I'm definitely a glass-half-full kinda guy. [*The Notebook*] was a family story, it came from my wife's side of the family. Her grandparents and their story was similar in a lot of ways to what happened in *The Notebook*. I said, ‘Well, I've had no success as a writer up till this point, but this is a story that I think I can tell. I don't know if anyone else is going to like it, but I think it's really sweet the way this guy still loves her when

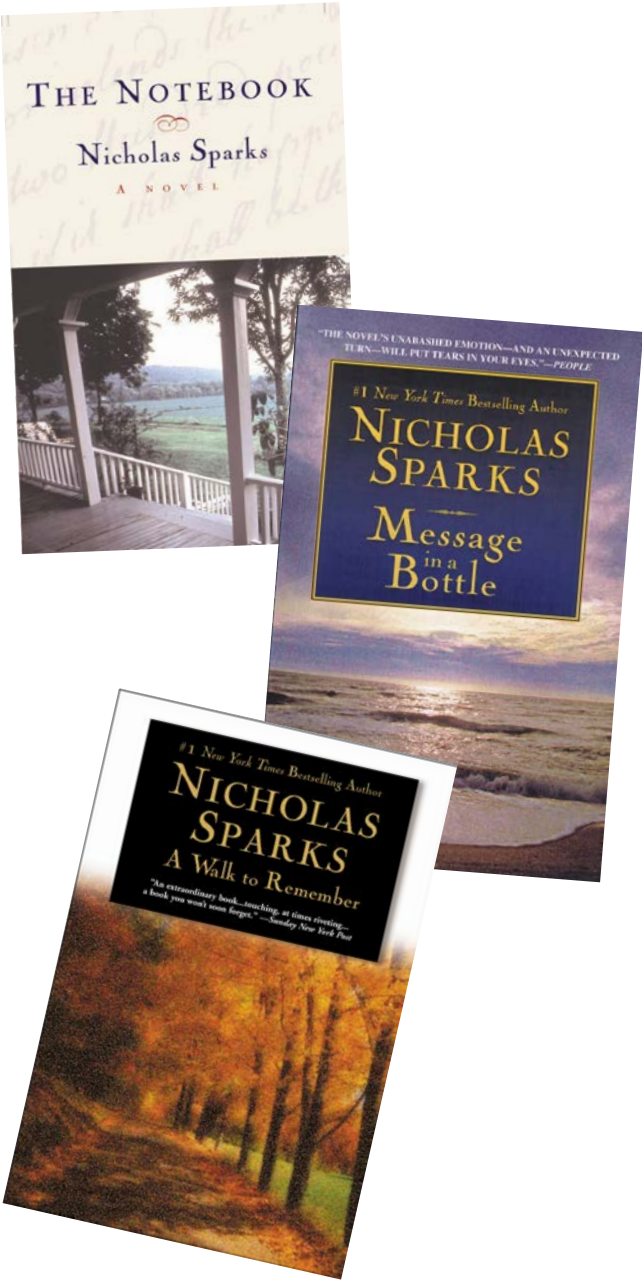


she doesn't really know who he is. The initial idea can come from anywhere, but no book is just an initial idea, it's like a hundred different ideas that all have to fit together right before I start writing.”

As you may have guessed, Nicholas is an incredibly romantic guy. “There is no question about that. I think in those terms, and that's just who I am,” he says matter-of-factly. So your gestures are just as big as the characters'? For instance, Landon helps Jamie complete the list of things that she'd like to achieve in her lifetime and Noah buys and fixes up the house Allie envisioned for them. “Yes. Oh, I have had some big gestures. Some of my stuff ends up in my books, but never the book to me, it's always me to the book. So, I do it first, like love letters. Some of these love letters have been written, drawn from letters I have written,” he says with a smile.

The road to becoming a novelist who has sold over 105 million books worldwide is an interesting story. Nicholas' real-life story sounds much like the premise of one of his novels: The town's handsome, record-breaking track-and-field star is injured his freshman year of college. When the doctor instructs him to take the summer off to rest and recover, he channels his energy into writing. He marries his college sweetheart, has children, and finally gets his third novel published, bringing him worldwide acclaim.

Nicholas has always been a star. After graduating Bella Vista High School in California as the valedictorian, he went on to the University of Notre Dame with a full sports scholarship for track and field. “I loved sports. I was a good student and all that, but my passion in life was sports.” When he found out he couldn't run after an injury, he was devastated. “It was very traumatizing for me emotionally because *this* was my big passion.” That summer, Nicholas' mother became tired of her son moping around the house and finally said something about it. “She literally said, ‘Well, don't just pout. Do something!’ I said, ‘What?’” [in a pouty voice.] “She said, ‘Well, I don't know! Go write a book!’ Like that. And I kinda said, ‘OK.’” He laughs.



Is there any one character of yours that you are most like?

“All these characters have bits and pieces of me here and there, then of course they have bits and pieces of other people. The one that was probably easiest to craft was Landon in *A Walk to Remember* and that was because I had been a 17-year-old boy. When I'm writing Noah, I'd never been an 80-year-old man. Or if I'm writing *Dear John*, I've never served in the military overseas. So Landon was probably the easiest but he was his own character, right? So, I guess you might say a little bit of Landon, little bit of Noah, all those kinds of things, a little bit of all of them.”

## MIAMI LOVE

"I enjoy Miami —I'm probably down in Miami two or three times a year. I have friends there, and I, of course, go down for the weather. Sometimes they have some really neat city things going on, whether it's Art Basel or things like that. But Miami is one of my first choices to go if the weather gets me down in North Carolina. It's option A. It's either there or the Bahamas," he laughs, "Or something like that."

At the time, Nicholas was reading a lot of Stephen King, so his first book, *The Passing*, ended up being a horror novel. He enjoyed the writing process and realized he had what it takes to see a novel through fruition, but he didn't see it as a lucrative career, so he majored in business finance. Once Nicholas graduated, he still wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life and worked various jobs, from real estate to sales. He got married, had kids, and at 28, he had what he calls an early mid-life crisis. "'What am I doing? What's my purpose?!'" he asks theatrically. "I said, 'I know, I'll try writing again. So, I wrote in the evenings while I kept my day job, and that was the book that became *The Notebook* [1996]. So, it was very strange. It's not as though I wrote really much of anything in between any of these things."

Did you know *The Notebook* would be as well-received as it has been? "Man, I had hopes! I thought it was a good book." He laughs. "I said, 'Man, if people don't like this book, they don't know what —right?' But I think every author thinks that about their book, right? I worked very hard to make sure every word was exactly what I wanted it to be, and I did a lot of editing before I even solicited an agent, so I had hopes that it would succeed. I dreamt about it. *Boy, what if?* So many other things have to go just right for that to work and I certainly was very blessed in that regard."

The next book he wrote was *Message in a Bottle*. "It was a love story, but it had a different type of ending: It wasn't bittersweet; it was more tragic; it was longer; it was from a woman's perspective; it was third person, instead of first. So, there were all these very significant structural and character —it was more complex, all these other issues." This is when he decided to put those previously-mentioned constants in place. "I'm trying to do everything different, except for three things," he says with a smile. It surprised me to hear that Nicholas still finds writing incredibly challenging. "If you're changing everything from the structure to the point of view to the voice to the perspective to the ages of the characters to the time periods with every book, it feels as though you're reinventing the wheel all from scratch. You don't know what to do on

Chapter One because it's all going to be different. I've been writing for a long time and I still find writing as much of a challenge I did the very first time."

Are any of your other books slated to be made into movies? "Uh." He sighs. "That's always a maybe... My thought on that has always been, until the camera starts rolling, I don't really say anything because you never know. But yeah, there are some in various stages always." Do you ever get to help choose the characters? "Always." So, you chose Ryan Gosling? "Generally, I'm a voice in the room, and I think that's the best way to say it. In the end, you have directors who have input, you have other stars who have input —depending on who they are. Kevin Costner, for instance, had a say in who he wanted to work with. Producers, the studio, and then sometimes everyone wants someone, but they're not available. So, there's a lot of factors that go into it... To see how they bring them to life, it's always, it's really amazing to watch. I've been very fortunate with the talent that have been in my films."

Even though Nicholas has ranked among the best romance authors of all time and is no stranger to hobnobbing in Hollywood, he claims to lead a pretty simple life. When he's not writing, he spends his time brainstorming ideas for a story and catches up on the things that fell by the wayside due to writing. "I'll go on a book tour or I'll do Hollywood stuff or I'll think of my new book. Most of my days, I workout a couple of hours, I read probably a couple of hours. Of course, I have family, I have kids. I have a lot of friends, so I spend a lot of time on the phone talking to my friends —I live in a very small town, so I have friends all over. I like to cook. Then there's always some little passion that has me interested for a while, it's varied over the years. I was a coach for a while. I got really into investing for a while. Right now, I'm kind of into colored diamonds and designing jewelry, so I'm doing that. When I'm writing, it's a little bit along those terms, except all those other things a little bit less." **ML**

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