

# Living the Dream

*A personal conversation with bestselling author Nicholas Sparks*



With 17 novels, 6 movie deals and counting, CliffsNotes and teacher guides, it's clear Nicholas Sparks' realistic love stories travel way beyond the bookshelf and into theatres and classrooms. It takes a certain gift to be a writer whose stories truly appeal to all ages. Nicholas has that gift.

At the height of his career, fans are anxiously awaiting his next novel, perfectly happy knowing they'll probably need to stock up on tissues.

How Nicholas can so beautifully write unforgettable stories that touch readers' hearts and make them re-evaluate their own lives is due in part to the hardships he's had in his life, including the tragic death of his parents and sister, and realizing his dream of running in the Olympics was never going to happen.

Here Mackin's Lori Tracy talks with Nicholas about his journey, one that was influenced, amazingly enough, by horror novelist Stephen King.

## FROM HORROR TO HEARTSTRINGS

**Lori:** You've been a voracious reader your entire life and now read about 100 books/year. How have all these years of "informal research" helped you develop your writing skills and style?

**Nicholas:** I was a big reader as a child. Both of my parents were big readers. My mom would go to the library every week and check out 4-5 books. My dad was a university professor, so his office was surrounded by books; he read practically 5 hours a day. So I learned to love reading at a very young age. When I ran out of books, I'd read the encyclopedias. I had read through our set of Encyclopedia Britannicas by the age of 10 or so.

My sister though, I think she maybe read one book her entire life. So you can

say all you want about environment and leading by example, but in the end, I've found that people are going to be who they're going to be.

**L:** What types of books interested you the most?

**N:** I liked lots of different genres, but Stephen King was my major influence.

[See "Finally Meeting Stephen King" on page 6]. My dad loved horror movies. I've seen probably every horror movie known to mankind, from the very worst, C-type, cheesy movies to the classic ones. It was

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*My first novel at age 19 was actually a horror novel ... blood, guts, zombies and the whole bit.*  
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really wonderful when I read King because it's a journey. It taught me to never lose sight that you're trying to tell a story that interests people.

When I wrote my first novel at age 19, it was actually a horror novel, which was a lot of fun. Blood, guts, zombies and the whole bit! It's in my attic.



*Nicholas graduating from Notre Dame with proud Mom and Dad*



*Photo Credit: Alice M. Arthur*

My senior year in college I took a class called American Fiction Since the 1950s, and I was introduced to the more modern classics — “Catcher in the Rye,” “Slaughterhouse 5,” “Catch 22” and “Bullet Park.” I found I really enjoyed these modern classics much more than the older ones I’d read in high school and could relate to the characters more. That class really piqued my interest for the second time in becoming a writer.

**L:** So you loved horror novels (even wrote one), graduated with a Business Finance degree, and then applied to law school. Now you’re writing love stories. What happened?

**N:** Once I graduated from college, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I thought corporate law might be interesting. That didn’t work out, so I wrote a novel. I was 22; it was never published. I never even sent it off to anybody. Going through the process of writing those two novels (19 and 22) led

me to age 28 when I sat down to write another novel — “The Notebook.” I knew going in that I was going to finish it.

### **FINDING WHO YOU’RE MEANT TO BE**

**L:** You were valedictorian of your high school class. How is it that your law school applications were rejected?

**N:** I was actually white listed at a couple places. One of them was UC-Davis, and I called them and said, “What was it about my application that you didn’t like?” They said, “Well, as a business major, we don’t feel that you’ve developed the writing skills necessary to be successful in law school.” I still have the letter from them to this day that explains that! Isn’t that funny?

**L:** That is hilarious!

**N:** Isn’t it? I even included my second novel in the application and told them I’d written one novel already, but that didn’t cut any weight. At the time it wasn’t funny. But I moved on, and I guess when I look at how everything’s turned out, it’s good. I don’t know who I would’ve been if I became a lawyer. I don’t know if I would’ve tried writing a novel again, or if I did, maybe it would’ve been a legal thriller, like a John Grisham novel.

It was a great experience in my life — I waited tables, appraised real estate, bought and sold rental properties, sold dental products by phone, tried to start my own business but failed, then failed again in a second business. The learning that happened then was really critical to understanding who I was. I didn’t know if I wanted to work for a big company or little one, in an office or be more autonomous.

After that I turned 26 and got a job selling pharmaceuticals.

**L:** So you chose autonomous?

**N:** I did. I liked the type of job where you see your boss once a month, come and go when you wanted. I very much enjoyed it.

**L:** If you could go back and do college again, do you think majoring in creative writing would’ve helped you?

**N:** No, I don’t think so. My own opinion is that creativity is this enigma. Even I don’t understand where I come up with ideas. I get an idea, and I know if it’s right or wrong. I think part of that for me is I work both sides of my brain.

My hobby is studying economics. I love charts and numbers and GDP and percentages. I love to follow commodity cycles and prices. So I’m always working that side of my brain. Then I sit down and write and exercise the other side of my brain.

### **AN AWAKENING**

**L:** Your bio says you did a mid-twenties life check after watching the final “Cheers” episode on TV.

Most people don’t do a life check until they’re in their 30s and 40s! I get the feeling you were always very ambitious and motivated. True statement?

**N:** It’s such a ridiculous story! After that episode I literally couldn’t sleep. This show started when I was a high school sophomore. I loved track and field and wanted to win a gold medal. It was the first and last thing I thought about each day, and it gave my life meaning. I remember talking with my coach about these TV episodes during high school.

Twelve years go by and the show is going off the air. I looked at everything I did and realized there weren’t any dreams that I was chasing. I was living day to day. I didn’t feel like my life had meaning. So “Cheers” was on 12 years, and I thought about how many 12-year periods you get in your life — 6, 7, or 8 probably. I didn’t want to go through another 12-year period having dreams in the beginning, but not chasing any dreams during those years.

But it wasn’t like I could just go off and climb Mt. Everest. I had a wife, two



kids and a mortgage to pay. “I know, I’ll try writing again!” This time I’m going to give myself three shots to write a novel. If they don’t get published and they’re no good, that’s okay. I’ll know I tried. I also wanted to be an Olympian, but not all dreams come true!

The family was in bed by 9 p.m. at night, so I wrote from 9-midnight and maybe one weekend day. Six months later I had “The Notebook” written.



Nicholas (right) and brother Micah during their “around the world” excursion. After the trip, they co-wrote “Three Weeks With My Brother.”

## FAMILY TIES

**L:** Tell me about your first published book, “Wokini,” co-written with Billy Mills, and how that helped you get “The Notebook” noticed and published.

**N:** Billy is an Olympic Gold Medalist in track and field, and the only American to ever win a gold medal in the 10,000M run. As a former track and field nut, I worshipped Billy Mills. He actually lived in my town, and I ended up dating his daughter for about 4 years! When my wife and I take our children to California now to visit family, we stay at Billy Mills’ house. Because my parents are deceased, they’re the closest thing to parents that I have.

My ex-girlfriend, Lisa, calls me “the ex-boyfriend that never went away” because I still show up there!

When I was 28 and trying to get “The Notebook” published, one of the things the agent wanted to know was previous writing experience. I could say “Hey, look, I

co-wrote this book with Billy Mills.” With that being said, “The Notebook” had to stand on its own. Once she read it she had to like it.

[Note: Only a few days after Nicholas submitted “The Notebook” to Warner Books, they offered him \$1 million for the rights. At the time he was making \$40,000/year. “I jumped up and down so long I got a cramp in my calf.”]

**L:** You’re so young (45) to have both parents and one sibling gone. How have all these family tragedies affected your life views and relationship with your last remaining family member — your brother, Micah?

**N:** I wrote a book about that — “Three Weeks With My Brother.” It’s a memoir of sorts, a story about family. Whenever you lose someone close to you ... they were all young. I think it really emphasizes the fact that if you have a dream you do it now. You never know when it’s going to end. You just do what you can do to reach your goals. As far as writing goes, I think it’s given me a good sense of tragedy and sadness.

## CREATING NEW STORIES THAT PEOPLE WILL LOVE

**L:** Seventeen novels under your belt and movie deals constantly in the works. There has to be a lot of pressure now when you write, the expectation that every novel has to be successful. Is that tough?

**N:** There’s nothing harder than writing to reach a large number of people. To write something that appeals to ages 11-95 and around the world, it’s very tough. I want to write novels that are not only enjoyable in the present, but will be remembered for a long time. But

one of the criteria in my specific genre is originality. You might say, “Aren’t all novels original?” Well no, they’re not, and you like them because they’re not.

You’re going to read a thriller because a) you want to be thrilled but b) you know in the end the bad guy is going to get caught. At the end of a romance novel, you know the characters are going to get together. A lot of authors keep their structure the same, maybe recurring characters, point of view. That’s why people may reach for that book.

It’s just the opposite in my genre. You read it because you want to be surprised; you don’t know what to expect. People who’ve read my books know that sometimes the characters get together, sometimes they don’t. Sometimes it’s happy, sometimes it’s bittersweet, sometimes it’s tragic. Sometimes it’s teenagers, sometimes it’s an 80-year-old man, sometimes it’s people in their 50s. Sometimes it’s first person, sometimes it’s third person. Sometimes I cover two time periods, sometimes it’s very linear.

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So in my genre the requirement is originality of virtually all of those elements. As you write a lot of novels, it gets harder and harder to be original! There’s only so many surprise endings.

**L:** It’s interesting that you say you need to know the end of the novel before you begin writing. Not all writers are like that. Do you ever just sit down and start writing without a purpose?

**N:** I cannot write unless I know the ending. These are novels that really try to evoke genuine emotion without being manipulative, and they need to be dramatic without being melodramatic. Unless you know exactly where you’re going, you can’t do that. If I know it’s going to be sad in the end, I don’t want to



# HOT OFF THE PRESS!

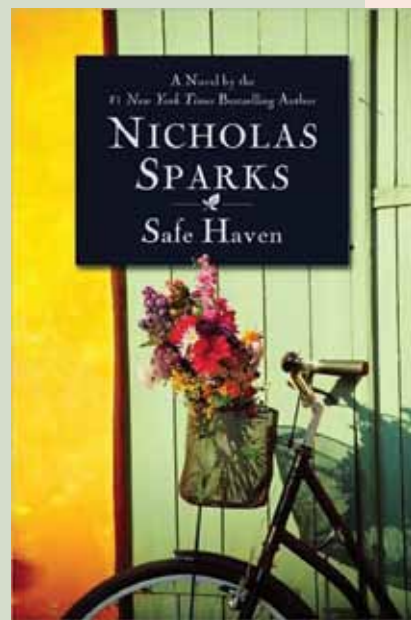
Nicholas' new novel, "Safe Haven," will be published in September 2010.

"This is a very original love story, set in North Carolina," said Nicholas. "At the same time, if you like what I do you'll like this story. There is a really strong love story element, small town, with characters you'll relate to and like."

**Synopsis:** When a mysterious young woman named Katie appears in the small North Carolina town of Southport, her sudden arrival raises questions about her past. Beautiful yet self-effacing, Katie seems determined to avoid forming personal ties until a series of events draws her into two reluctant relationships: one with Alex, a widowed store owner with a kind heart and two young children; and another with her plainspoken single neighbor, Jo. Despite her reservations, Katie slowly begins to let down her guard, putting down roots in the close-knit community and becoming increasingly attached to Alex and his family.

But even as Katie begins to fall in love, she struggles with the dark secret that still haunts and terrifies her . . . a past that set her on a fearful, shattering journey across the country, to the sheltered oasis of Southport. With Jo's empathic and stubborn support, Katie eventually realizes that she must choose between a life of transient safety and one of riskier rewards . . . and that in the darkest hour, love is the only true safe haven.

**Purchase "Safe Haven" on Mackin.com today!**



start beating them down in the beginning of the book. You want to be fair to them. I know the end of the novel and the beginning before I start writing.

**L:** What is your editing process?

**N:** The most important thing to know about this process is there's no right or wrong. I will write a couple thousand words at a time, so maybe over a week at about 8,000-10,000 words, I'll go back and edit that very substantially. Then at various times during the writing of the novel I'll sit down and edit larger chunks, maybe a few chapters at a time. Then I'll make more changes and more changes. By the time I'm finished with the novel, I've probably gone through every line 8-10 times.

From there I send chunks of the book to my agent. She goes through the book with a fine tooth comb and makes suggestions about where I need more

development, makes sure it's not too slow, makes suggestions about how to rewrite things or change descriptions.

Then we're ready for the editor. My editor is probably the first person who sees my book in its entirety. She gets the book cover to cover, and that allows her to see if there's any problems with pacing, any holes, anything that doesn't feel right, as a novel, as a whole.

Then I do my **word search**. I don't know if any other authors do this, but I know my weaknesses as a writer. Let's say I wrote, "He paused for a moment." I'll type "paused" in word search and it might say there are 294 "pauses" in my 200-300 page book. I'll go through and delete some of them. The word search is just my own little polish so to speak.

**L:** Does your family offer up new book ideas to you?

**N:** No. It takes me a long time to come up with a new story idea. I sift through thousands of ideas to find a good one.

**L:** Do you have any superstitions when you write?

**N:** I have to have a big cup of ice water. And I have to have the television going, but it has to be DVDs of TV shows I've seen 10 times before — for instance, "Seinfeld." I've seen every episode several times. So when I sit down to write I pop in one of those DVDs. I'm not necessarily watching, but it's background noise.

## NICHOLAS IN THE CLASSROOM

**L:** The CliffsNotes and Teachers' Guides for "The Notebook" and "A Walk to Remember" came out last fall. Is the classroom a new market for you?

**N:** Because of teacher and student demand, I started working with John Wiley & Sons for CliffsNotes versions of two of my novels. It sounded like an interesting project on many levels. It's rare for CliffsNotes to be offered on novels by "currently living authors," (I think only 5 living authors have CliffsNotes regarding their novels), but it's important since the author can answer any questions regarding the novel.



(continued)



**One of the best ways to develop lifelong learners is to develop students' love of reading and a confidence in reading.** It doesn't have to be novels. If you only give them books they hate, they're going to regard reading as miserable, and you're doing no one a favor, not the student or society in general. It's easier for students to relate to novels in which they can see themselves in this role.

I can tell you many of the emotions Jane Austen wrote about are in parallel to the emotions people feel today. People don't change that much. Other than that, it's a foreign world to them. They can't really understand the environment. Today kids are thinking about texting and computers. They have sports and proms. None of this is in "Emma."

**I certainly think there's a role for classics in the curriculum, but it should be bundled with things that the students can relate to.** If you take what I do — I really just write tragic love stories. Shakespeare did that, too. But I think most kids can relate to "The Notebook"

or "A Walk to Remember." So if you pair that with something like Shakespeare — this is how they did it 400 years ago. Essentially, you're talking about a love story.

### GIVING CHILDREN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**L:** Tell me about the private Christian school you and your wife helped establish in New Bern, NC.

**N:** Well, for a while in my town there was a real big push to get a Catholic high school. We didn't have many educational options here besides public schools. It just never worked, but that didn't mean there wasn't a need for a school with a strong college prep education.

So my wife and I helped establish the Epiphany School. It's important to understand we don't teach doctrine there. It's not associated with any particular religion. You don't even have to be Christian to go there or teach there. But we are Christian in the service aspects of the school, in the goal of making our students good people.

*Nicholas co-founded the Epiphany School, in his hometown of New Bern, NC.*



It's college prep and has a really strong global program built into the curriculum. For instance, if you're a sophomore at our school, in your European History class you'll learn about the Holocaust. You'll learn about Anne Frank. But unlike other schools, we actually load the students on a plane and fly them to Amsterdam to see Anne Frank's house and to Krakow to see the Jewish quarter. I think it just makes that experience more real to you, it brings it home. It also teaches the students independence. They have to go through customs, order lunches in a foreign language, meet new people.

When all is said and done, many students have visited 20 countries on 6 continents. Then you have a student who is very interesting to colleges. It's a student that'll be first in line to take that semester abroad.

**L:** So do 100% of the graduates go to college?

**N:** So far, yes.

### ON THE HOMEFRONT

**L:** How do you balance work and family life (5 kids) when you're busy writing or on a book tour?

**N:** It's *fairly* normal. I don't view myself in my daily life as a famous novelist. Nor do my wife or kids. They do know I'm a writer. This is my job, this is what I do — but I don't feel famous most of the time.

## Finally Meeting Stephen King

"When I toured for 'The Notebook,' one of my stops was Bangor, Maine (home of Stephen King). So I decide to go to his house and present my novel and thank him for being an inspiration. I find the address and his house.

He had a little chain across his driveway; basically, it means don't go up to his front door. But I thought, 'I'm gonna do it anyway.' I get to his door and a little plaque says, 'Mr. and Mrs. King don't accept unannounced visitors.'

I said, 'Well, does that mean me? I'm an author and I just want to give him a gift. I don't want anything from him.' I debated and debated.

Then I look up, and there's this security camera in the corner. I just left my book by his door and walked away.

Then a few years ago Stephen King wrote a novel called 'Lisey's Story.' Of course there are some supernatural Stephen King elements to it, but it's also a love story. Normally Stephen is such a popular author that they don't do preview copies. However, they decided to do it for 'Lisey's Story.'

He wanted to have a couple of endorsements by other authors, and he asked Michael Chabon and ME. There I am, my name is on the cover with Stephen King and a Pulitzer Prize winner.

All I'm thinking is, 'Boy one of these things just doesn't belong.' So I did finally get to meet him."

NOTE: Nicholas is currently working on a horror screenplay.



**L:** Do you think having your books turn into movies was a big push for your popularity?

**N:** Without question. That's really the big thing. It's been a very busy year. I had two films come out back to back ["Dear John" and "The Last Song"], and so basically my name was in commercials for 3 months straight. I've had 6 movies, and "The Lucky One" begins filming this fall. So when you start getting up to that, more people watch movies than read books.

**L:** Do any of your children have an interest in writing? Are any of them voracious readers?

**N:** They have an interest in reading and writing on a school-wide level. We encourage a lot of writing and hired a teacher to do the home schooling for my three youngest children. You never know if they're going to do what I do. They know it's hard; I complain about it all the time.

**L:** One of your sons was originally diagnosed with autism, then later you discovered he had an auditory processing disorder. What was it like going through that with your family?

**N:** It was around 2-4 hrs a day of therapy. I was working on speech and communication. My wife was working on life skills — everything from tying

your shoe to holding your fork the right way. We found out back in 1996, and while there were some programs, we really believed in ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis) therapy. At the time there was no one in our area that was trained to do that. The therapy had to be intensive and consistent. So I had to go ahead and figure it out.

My son goes to Epiphany School now. He just traveled to Czechoslovakia. He gets good grades, but it was a lot of work in the beginning.

**L:** Your oldest child just graduated from high school. What are his plans?

**N:** He's heading off to Florida State and got a track and field scholarship. I think he'll study business of some sort with a minor in Economics. Lots of different schools of thought on economics. I of course have my opinion on which are the best, and colleges typically teach different ones. So he'll be coming home and I'll be saying, "You remember everything you learned? Forget all that."

**L:** Do you see yourself writing your entire life, or do you have different plans and goals for the future?

**N:** I've never been one to predict the future. My current plan is to continue writing, and I'm sure I'll do so until I can't come up with a story worth telling.

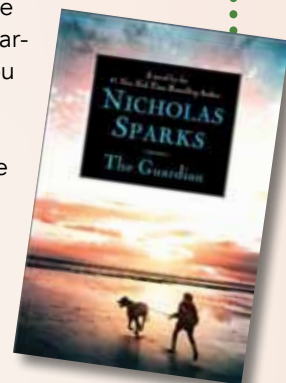
## Better Luck Next Time

"I've had two situations where I was about halfway through the novel and ended up throwing it out.

"The Guardian," that was the worst editorial letter I ever received. My editor is a wonderful, wonderful person. I asked her what she thought of the novel, and she said, "Oh I think it was terrific. I think there's a lot of really wonderful things in there, but of course it needs a little bit of tweaking."

I said, "Well what kind of tweaking?" She responded, "Well I don't really like the main male character, and I don't really like the second male character, and I think you can really improve the main female character. I think the structure doesn't work, the pacing is all wrong, and you have to rewrite the last 40% of the novel from scratch."

"Anything you do really like?" I asked. She said, "Oh yeah, I really like the dog!"



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Nicholas Sparks' novels,  
CliffsNotes and teacher guides.**

**For more information on Nicholas, visit his  
website at [www.nicholassparks.com](http://www.nicholassparks.com).**

*Nicholas signing "The Lucky One"  
on the streets of New York.*