

The Greenville Journal
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Greenville, SC
"Author to Author" with Mindy Friddle
Q&A with Nicholas Sparks

The Author: Nicholas Sparks

The Book: *The Lucky One* (Grand Central Publishing)

The Event: Nicholas Sparks will be at the Open Book signing copies of his new novel, *The Lucky One*, on Wednesday, Oct. 1, at 6 pm.

Nicholas Sparks is the author of 14 *New York Times* bestsellers. Several of his novels have been adapted into major motion pictures, including *The Notebook*, *A Walk to Remember*, *Message in a Bottle* and *Nights in Rodanthe*. Sparks graduated valedictorian of his class from Bella Vista High School in California, and received a full track and field scholarship to the University of Notre Dame. A former resident of Simpsonville, he wrote *The Notebook* at age 28 while working as a pharmaceutical salesman. The novel was published in October 1996 and quickly made the *New York Times* best-seller list. A major financial contributor to the creative writing master's program at Notre Dame, Sparks recently donated nearly \$900,000 for a high school track program in New Bern, North Carolina. He lives with his wife and five children in North Carolina.

***Nights in Rodanthe* (now a movie starring Richard Gere and Diane Lane) centers on a middle-aged couple, rather than an older couple (*The Notebook*) or younger characters. What was it like writing a love story about middle-aged characters?**

To that point in my career, it was different, and as such, a nice change of pace. Prior to that, the characters either tended to be teens (A Walk to Remember), couples in their twenties or early thirties (The Rescue, A Bend in the Road) and older (The Notebook). Writing about middle-aged characters had a few challenges, but nothing extraordinary. The main issue I had to keep in mind was that both Paul and Adrienne had issues with their children and made sure that played into the love story in the appropriate way.

You're quoted as saying *The Lucky One* started with a simple image of a marine finding a photograph, and it grew from there. Do your novels usually start with an image that intrigues or inspires you?

Sometimes it's an image, sometimes it's a character's voice, sometimes it's an idea for the conflict that keeps them apart, sometimes it's a character. It depends on the specific story, but for the most part, even if inspiration strikes, it never fills in the

blanks for the vast majority of the story. The rest of the story comes through active thought, considering outcomes, and trying to imagine what the story will be like when it's completed.

***The Lucky One* involves the war in Iraq. A previous novel, *Dear John*, did as well. How did you go about researching combat in Iraq for both novels?**

I read books, I read articles, I talk to people. Nothing out of the ordinary. Still, I like to make them as accurate as I can because I know that if I make errors (and I'm sure I do), I'll receive tons of letters from veterans telling me what I got wrong.

Picasso once said, "Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working." That certainly seems to be true in your case. You manage an incredibly disciplined schedule of writing 2,000 words a day, You read more than 100 books a year. Do you ever experience lags in creativity, the stress of looming deadlines, "writer's block"? How do you cope?

I hate deadlines. I think all writers do, because creativity can't be turned on and off like a switch. All novels have their share of "writing that isn't hard" and "writing that is hard": originality and creativity is always, always challenging. I just do my best to keep things in perspective. At 2,000 words a day, I always know in the back of my mind that it means I have to write 120,000 words or so to reach the 90,000 words that end up in the final draft. That's only 60 days of writing. Usually, it takes 120-175 days to get those 60 days, but that knowledge is enough to keep me fairly balanced about the whole thing.

Your website is a rich resource for writers who want to learn more about the process of writing. For example, you mention, "After coming up with an original idea, structure is always the most difficult part of crafting a love story." Do you usually outline your novels? Are there other trusted readers who read your work before your editor sees your manuscript?

I don't usually outline my novels because it doesn't seem to work for me. As long as I know, in general terms, what the story is going to be, I'm able to start writing. That's just me; there is no correct way to do this, and I've learned that every writer is different. As for readers who see my work before the editor? Only one. My agent, Theresa Park. If it gets past her, trust me, it's a good novel. She's probably the most intelligent person I've ever met.

You've said that, "Publishing is a business. Writing may be art, but publishing, when all is said and done, comes down to dollars." You're one of the most successful and prolific authors working today, and yet you're also quoted as saying, "I don't know that I love to write these days." Does writing ever get easier for you? Is the process of writing each novel different?

Writing is easier in some ways, and more challenging in others. It's harder to be original, for instance, since I've already written on a number of topics. It's hard to be original in the specifics, since my characters have experienced a number of different

ways of falling in love. It's easier in that the quality of my writing has improved over the years, and that's a goal I set for myself long ago.

You are as loyal to your readers as they are to you. You mentioned that you “don't want my readers to think I had strayed too far from the type of novels that I originally wrote. Many authors do exactly that -- stray too far -- and lose readers in the long run for doing so.” Can you see yourself ever departing from the love-story/tragedy genre and writing an entirely different kind of fiction? (Perhaps, as Stephen King has, under a nom de plume?)

*Three Weeks with My Brother was a memoir, and I wrote an original screenplay last year. I'm also writing another screenplay this year, though I can't say much more about it. As for writing a thriller or a horror or an adventure . . . I suppose I could, but I have no desire to do so. Many other authors do those things very well, so there's no reason for me to do it. I'd rather stretch the love-story genre by incorporating different elements; danger, or the supernatural, for instance. Which I did in *The Guardian* and *True Believe* respectively.*

You're quoted as saying that there are three ways a novel becomes a bestseller: the Oprah Book Club, critical acclaim, or word-of-mouth, and that “Over time, quality work will lead to an audience for your work. In the end, readers always choose.” From your perspective, do you see the digital world, print-on-demand technology, the Internet, the blogosphere, etc. opening new avenues or limiting opportunities for books and authors—our society's stories and storytellers?

Both. But always, in the end, it comes down to the book, the author and the quirks of fate. People like to “curl up” with books. I just don't see a computer ever being able to do that.

Mindy Friddle is author of *The Garden Angel*, a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers pick and SIBA bestseller. Her second novel, *Secret Keepers*, is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press.