

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year, thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival, co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now it's 9th year, this free event held Saturday, September 26th, on the National Mall in Washington DC will spark leader's passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person, you can still participate online. This podcasts with well-known authors and many other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). It's now my pleasure to talk with the critically acclaimed author, Nicholas Sparks. Mr. Sparks has written an array of admired novels including the New York Times best seller "The Notebook", "A Walk to Remember" and "Nights in Rodanthe", each which were adopted into Blockbuster Films. In addition to movie version of "The Last Song", will hit theaters in 2010. Mr. Sparks, thank you so much for talking with us today.

>> My pleasant, thanks for having me.

>> Let's start out just a little bit with your background for people who might not know. What made you decide to pursue a career in writing?

>> I have not the slightest idea. I think it was--I started writing on a whim to see if I could do when I was running. At that point in my life I was 19 years old, I was a full scholarship athlete at the University of Notre Dame. And I was going through a period of injuries and I was very frustrated. And my body just didn't seem to heal. And so, over the summer in between my freshmen and sophomore year, me and my mom, she just got tired of me pouting and she said, "Well, don't just pout, do something."

>> And you were an athlete, correct?

>> I was an athlete--

>> Yeah.

>> --and watching my career go up in smoke. And I was just a bitter--you know, I was just real sad about that. And my mom, when she said this and I'm--I give her the all soapy teenage, "What should I do?" She said, "Well, I don't know. Write a book." And I kind of said, "OK." I don't have else to do that summer. So I wrote my first novel at the age of 19, it was terrible. It took me about six weeks. I actually finished a 300-page novel. I went back to college, majored in business finance. I didn't know what I want to do out of college. I wrote a second novel, also not very good. I moved on with my life, got married, had kids. And I guess when I was 28, I was selling pharmaceuticals. And I really had always been the kind of person who wanted to chase a dream, and I said, "I know, what can I do and keep my job?" 'cause I get--of course, I had bills like everybody else. I said, "What can I do to chase a dream and still keep my job?" And I said, "I know, I'll try writing again, but I'll give it a real shot." And the novel that came out was "The Notebook".

>> Have you done much writing before that first novel?

>> No. I was a very good student. I was a very good student. You know, I got A's in my high school English classes, but I got A's in all my classes. And so, I wasn't any better at writing than I was in mathematics or physics or anything else. I just--I always loved reading novels. I love stories. I love to turn the page quickly and become so caught up in a world full of imagination that I just--I grew up doing that. My parents were big readers. And so, I decided I wanted to give it a role.

>> Is your success at all surprising to you given how sort of spontaneously you got into this?

>> One would think, yeah. I mean I--it's one of those--it's been a very blessed career. I've been--Well, I worked with wonderful people. I will say that I worked very hard on the novels that I've written to make it as good as they could possibly be. But there's certainly no way you could ever pursue the kind of career that I've had or the good fortune that I've had. So yeah, it's always a bit surprising.

>> Now, we solicited a few questions from some of your fans on our Twitter feed. And the first one that I want to ask you says, "Are there real life experiences that inspire you to write your love stories?" And I know that, you know, this has happened. And I think in particular a lot of members of your family, is that correct?

>> Yeah, a lot of--most of my novels especially the early ones were drawn from events in my family whether it was my wife's grandparent served as the inspiration for "The Notebook". And my father after the death of my mother served as inspiration for "Message in a Bottle". This--And this, you know, you draw from wherever when you're a novelist. You may draw characters from people that you know or at the very least people you know in your mind, so to speak, people that you make up. All authors are more than anything observers of the world. So, that is what--then they try and take these observations and put them into words that people can understand. So I drew from these experiences when I'm certainly starting out. And even now when, you know, I'm dealing with novels that I don't--that aren't necessarily drawn as specifically. Certainly, you know, there's still elements of personal stories of characters or people that I know, for instance in this last book, you might say that the younger brother John [assumed spelling]. He's a lot like my son lay in the crib.

>> Now, I've read that your Catholic faith is very important to you, how does that manifest itself in your work?

>> I am--Religion, spirituality is very important to me, and how does that manifest itself? Well, I don't put much or I don't profanity in my novels. I don't write about adultery and I don't try to shock the reader, so to speak, with horrific scenes. Any love scenes that I intend to be very timid thing, you might say that very--they're probably PG rated they're not even PG13, they're PG rated. I kind of slide through the whole physical acts. It's all the build up anyway so, you know--

>> Yeah.

>> --they might kiss passionately. And then you get to it and fit with sentence and its over and--

>> The sun comes up the next day, huh?

>> Yeah, exactly, you know. So, it's kind of like that and--but there's no question that my morality maybe. And in fact that's one of the things that I'm most proud of when I looked back in my career is that I haven't had to resort to these shocking things, profanity, or excess sexuality, or excess violence. I haven't had to do any of that and have still had the ability to keep readers interested and coming back and reading more and really caring about the novel.

>> And how do your fans react to that? I mean, do they ever question whether that's true to life or realistic?

>> Yeah. Oh, there's no question. There's no question. I mean there're plenty of authors who do the other way and I certainly know that profanity exist in the world. And there's books for people who wanted-- who don't mind reading that and I don't necessarily mind reading it. But I do get a lot of letters from people who thank me for writing the kind of books that I do.

>> Now you're often hailed as a writer of romance as although you have said that that's a misconception, but your books do deal with the ups and downs of love. Why is that such a universal theme in your books?

>> Well, I write dramatic fiction, you know, I do. I write dramatic fiction. These are love stories, well, there's an element. But the goal of dramatic fiction in early stages when you go all the way back to Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus was to--and they were writing plays way back when. They're then called the Greek tragedies. And what those were are those who work with dramatic fiction. And what they intended to do was to move the audience through the full range of human emotions whether it's happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, bitterness, envy, love, loss, tragedy, you want to move the readers through all of that. A romance novel does not necessarily strive to do that. A romance novel is a little bit different. It's more of a--like a fantasy-romance and that's not denigrating that genre but it's not what I do. They're not required to move the reader through the entire range of human emotion like a love story is. So, because I'm supposed to move them through the entire range of human emotion, love is a central element of that and in it's always will be.

>> Now I'm going to go--

>> So--

>> --OK

>> Go ahead.

>> Just going to go to another question from the Twitter feed. This one sort of gave me a chuckle but it says, "Why does someone almost always die in your books?"

>> I would say to them, they have to read all of my books before they lump me in that.

>> OK.

>> I mean I've written happy endings. I've written tragic endings. I've even written bittersweet endings. And yeah, even--there might be someone--there might be a--most of my books may have an element of loss in it. But again, it goes down to the function of the genre in which I work to say, if you don't have loss in a novel like I write in--in the dramatic fiction that I write, it's like trying to write a horror novel where you don't get scared or without a creature. You just can't do, it's intrinsic to the genre. And that is one of the reason why it's a very difficult challenging genre in which the work because some authors are very good at building suspense, some are very good at, you know, building terror, some are very good at building fantasy. But in the work that I do, you have to evoke the full range of human emotion and you have to do it without manipulating the reader or resorting to cliches or melodrama and things like that. So, when you say, "Why do I have loss? Why did someone die?" because that's what this genre is all about. That is what Ernest Hemingway did in "A Farewell to Arms". That is what William Shakespeare did in "Romeo and Juliet", "Anthony and Cleopatra", in "Hamlet" in [inaudible]. All of this fictional, these dramatic works are really trying to move you through the full range of human emotion. So that when you look a book like this, you're not reading--you read a thriller to be thrilled. You read a horror novel to feel scared. But in this, you read the book if--as if what your goal as a writer is to move the reader to the range of emotions that they feel as if they [inaudible] the whole life cover to cover.

>> Yeah.

>> And if you eliminate one of these major emotions, well, you kind of got a hole. It wouldn't feel as real 'cause everybody has loss in life, everybody falls in love or has love in someone.

>> Now, seven of your books have been made into movies very well-received, of course, which include "The Last Song", "Dear John", and "The Lucky One" all which are going to be released next year. What do you think it is that your movies are so well-received or I should say your stories are so well-received both on the silver screen and on the printed page?

>> Well, I think that goes down to a number of facts. They tend to be characters that actors want to play, that studios want to do because they fill a hole in their--let's say the programming so to speak. I mean, if you're looking at a major studio, you're looking at Warner Brothers screen, you know, they'll do a Batman which is, "OK, we're targeting this particular audience, you know, young men, you know, or teenagers and people like that." So, they have all these little demographic groups that

they want to hit. A simple fact is there're few people who write what I write. There're various people who really try to cover this full-range of human emotion. Offhand, I can't name another one. But there have been "The Horse Whisperer", "The Bridge of Madison County", these writers still write. But they don't necessarily--they're not necessarily writing the same things anymore. So, it's kind of--as if I have a little bit of a monopoly, you might say. For instance, there's a charming young woman in England with monopoly on books about kids who go to magic school, you know. And that's why--And those were adapted well.

>> Yeah.

>> And it's just--if you only have one or two people working in a genre, you know, the studios kind of have to take a look at you. And then you add in the fact that all the movies have been very successful on, you know, they want to make money and sell tickets--

>> Yeah.

>> --people, they pay to see the film.

>> Now, I want to ask you about "The Last Song". I was fascinated to learn that you wrote both the screenplay and you're writing the novel but you're doing the screenplay first. Does this pose any particular challenges?

>> There was a time, the time I supposed the biggest challenge because I didn't commit to the project until August and they needed to be filming by June. And you have to go through, of course, the entire writing then you go through to polish it. You have to have it in time so they can get a director and scout scene or scout locations and get everything in process. So they needed to have the screenplay by January. And that was a tough timeline because I had three distinct tours last fall. I had a US Book Tour. I had European Book Tour. And then, I had--I was part of the media campaign for the film, "Nights in Rodanthe". So, I had a movie tour. So I'm traveling and I'm coming home and trying to write a screenplay, and then traveling and coming home and trying to write a screenplay. And I was fortunate that I got it done by the end of November. December I went through all the polishes by January, and then I had to turn immediately round and start writing the novel. And that of course is coming out in September because there was the clause in my contract that said the book there--the novel had to come out by September 15th. So, it was a busy year. I supposed the timeline was the only challenge.

>> Now my understanding of "The Last Song" is a project that has been developed specifically with Miley Cyrus in mind, is that correct?

>> That's correct.

>> And is that the first time that you worked on a project of that nature with a specific actress in mind?

>> Without questions. I'm a novelist at heart and I still consider myself a novelist. Even when I was writing "The Last Song", the novel, which I'd already done the screenplay for it. Once I moved into the novel, it was no longer Miley Cyrus. It was written from my perspective to be the best possible novel that it could be. The respective of how well the film did or who was going to see the film or whether Miley Cyrus was in it or any of those things. I sat down with the intention of writing the best novel that I could. And I always do. And you never know if someone is going to buy one of your novels and make it into a film. It's a [inaudible] shoot-

>> Yeah.

>> --out there. I've been very fortunate. I've been very lucky. But what can you say?

>> So, it's Ronnie and not Miley, right?

>> It is Ronnie. But she did name the character. The character was actually named after her grandfather had passed away, the name is Ronnie. And so she--I offered her the opportunity to name the main character in the novel and the film. She chose Ronnie, I still like to call her Veronica and she shortened it to Ronnie.

>> What's been like working with her?

>> She's a nice young woman.

>> Yeah.

>> Nice young woman, very busy. She was--She finished Hannah Montana, filming for Hannah Montana. She went right then started working on the film. She filmed right through probably a few weeks ago. And now she's on a music tour. So, filmed that for four months and turn right around and work on Hannah Montana. Very busy young lady, very kind, wonderful family, she cared about the project. And I think she enjoyed it.

>> I was interested to learn about your friendship with Olympic Gold medalist Billy Mills and you two wrote a book together, correct?

>> Again, I was 25. That was the third book--

>> OK.

>> --that I've worked on. It was called "Wokini" spiritual allegory. It was--It's just a short little spiritual allegory about overcoming loss. It's just a secret on how to be happy in life. And Billy and I did that. We've been friends since I was probably 12 years old. I grew up--And we lived in the same town growing up. And I was running [inaudible] even back when I was little kid. And so, I've been going in to the grocery store and I'd say "Look, that's how an Olympic Gold Medalist looks when they buy bread. That's how they move, you know. Look at him standing. They're standing there and he looks fat." So, I see now we've got--star struck as it could be. I ended up dating his daughter for about four

years. And I just stayed close with the family ever since. In fact, when we go to California, I always stay with Bill. My ex-girlfriend, of course, she's married and all those. She calls me the boyfriend that never went away--the ex-boyfriend that never went away.

[ Inaudible Remark ]

I was very close with the family and were [inaudible] all of Bill's daughters including [inaudible] of their kids, and they're--our kids just got there. I mean it's--my parents died when I was young, so they kind of filled that role.

>> OK. I want to you ask just briefly about some of your work beyond the printed page. Tell me what is the Epiphany School?

>> Epiphany School that my wife and I found that Tom, he is the headmaster of the school.

>> Who's the headmaster? I just--

>> Tom McLaughlin.

>> OK.

>> And it is--it's grade 5 through 12. It's a college preparatory school, very strong academic school. It's got sport. It's a Christian school but you don't have to be Christian to go there and we don't teach any specific doctrine, we feel that's left to families. And it is a school that is really trying to embrace the new globalization but not just with catch phrase like "Oh, we'll teach world economics and call ourselves a global school." No. By the time the kids who go to Epiphany School, they'll enter school as a freshmen. By the time they graduate from high school, they will have visited 23 countries on s6 continents, spent 213 days abroad and become fluent in Spanish in addition to taking these other classes. So, it is a school that really tries to expose these kids to the world to see other cultures, to see that people around the world are more similar than they're different. This is something that's probably--I guess if you're in Washington DC, you had a lot more people who have traveled the world. But if you're in the rural south, in a very small town, you have a lot of families who never leave the county in their entire lives. So, this is a really wonderful way to expose them to Europe, to Asia, to Africa, to various places around the world.

>> Now you also sponsored the family that was displaced by Hurricane Katrina. How did that experience affect you?

>> Well, it was a--it's a good experience. It's something that we saw--my wife and I felt that we should do like everyone, you know, you watched the footage or just [inaudible] and you wonder what you can do. And there's certainly a lot of worthy causes we just decided to sponsor a family and move them up to Newbourne [phonetic]. They're still there, still talk to them all the time. Great people. They're back on their feet and, you know, work and doing all that stuff. They actually got job here very quickly. And so, it was a very good experience, something that I

don't regret. And I don't know. I've always found that the more you give the more you receive. And I know that's a cliché if something I would never write in one of my novels for that reason. But it's very true nonetheless. My wife and I, you know, it's important to do as much as we can to help other people in various ways, and we just kind of that following our instincts. And so, if we see this, we're going to help. If we see a need for school, we'll start the Epiphany School. I of course work with underprivileged kids, on the track team as well, the local public schools. So, there're a lot of different things that we do. And I guess part of who we are.

>> Nicholas Sparks, before you let me go, I have to ask, we'd talked a little bit about some of the other things that you're working on. But is there anything else that's out there on the horizon for you?

>> Well, not so much. I suppose I'll be turning to my next novel here in the fall and trying to get that started. I think I need a little bit of a break after this last push, because it's a very tough 18 months because it came right off the lucky one into the screenplay and into the novel. And at the same time, we were building a house. My wife's father was very ill and I was coaching the--probably the best high school boys relay team in US high school history that's here. So, I was trying to lead--you know, we're traveling every weekend for this track [inaudible] doing all this stuff. So I think aside from writing, we're probably going to be a little bit quieter this year. And I think it's something that both my wife and I do.

>> 14 novels in 14 years, sounds like a very grueling pace.

>> It is. It is. And then there was a non-fiction book and then I'm looking on another non-fiction book that I should--in this year within the next two or three weeks. And I'm scheduled to do another non-fiction book, yeah, that's my novel. It's a lot of--it's lot of--it's life. It's like everyone. We've got things to do.

>> Well, Nicholas Sparks, I very much appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today.

>> Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

>> And we're definitely excited to hear more from you at the 2009 National Book Festival. That's on Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall between 10 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details in the complete list of participating authors visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.