Interview: Nicholas Sparks Highlights Young Love in ‘The Lucky One’

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CHICAGO – The belief that most people are decent at heart may seem overly naive in a society that often favors cynicism over sincerity. Yet it is precisely this hopeful worldview that has made Nicholas Sparks one of the most successful authors of his time. His international bestsellers have captivated readers worldwide, and have inspired seven big screen adaptations.

The latest is “The Lucky One,” starring Zac Efron as a Marine named Logan who stumbles upon a picture of a beautiful young woman, Beth (Taylor Schilling), that functions as a sort of good luck charm during his tour in Iraq. Once he’s back in America, he embarks on a search to find the woman who may be his destiny. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Sparks about the challenges of adapting his novels into screenplays, his goal to create strong female characters and the real-life romance that has enhanced each of his wildly popular stories.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a male author, what attracts you to writing sensitive romance novels that often involve young people?

Nicholas Sparks: There are a lot of people out there who write romance novels. It’s a genre that’s primarily dominated by women and it really deals with romantic fantasy. You know exactly what you’re going to get, the themes are largely the same and they end happily ever after. That’s why you buy the book and that’s wonderful. It’s not what I do. The [sub-genre] of romantic drama has been dominated by men, whether it’s Robert James Waller who did “Bridges of Madison County,” or Nicholas Evans who did “The Horse Whisperer,” or Erich Segel from “Love Story” or the guys who wrote “Casablanca” or Hemingway who wrote “A Farewell to Arms.”

[“The Lucky One”] is a romantic drama and so for that, what you want to do is move the reader or viewer through all the major emotions in life. You want to see the intertwining of the relationships and you want to make the characters feel absolutely real. To make them feel real, you have to see them in every situation. That’s why your family knows you so well—they’ve seen you in every situation. So once you do that, then you begin to root for them, and then at moments you’ll cry with them. That to me is what a great story should do. It should bring you in, get you lost and linger in the memory for a long time afterwards.

Photo credit: Alan Markfield

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve written several books about adults as well, and yet you’re best remembered for your teenage romances.

Sparks: That’s Hollywood, that’s what [turns into] movies. [laughs] “Nights in Rodanthe” and “Message in a Bottle” were very mature love stories. Depending on who you talk to about “The Notebook,” the film is either all about Rachel [McAdams] and Ryan [Gosling] or James [Garner] and Gena [Rowlands].

HollywoodChicago.com: You met your wife in your early 20s. Has your marriage changed the way you view and portray relationships in your novels?

Sparks: I don’t know that it’s changed that much. I can say that a lot of these female characters are pretty much my wife in some way. I write the things that I find most attractive in women. I like intelligence, I like passion—give me a little fire, be strong, don’t be wishy-washy, do the right thing. When you fall in love, love deeply. Be tough but also be open to the possibility of forgiveness. This is what I’ve always found attractive, this is what I end up marrying, and so when I start writing, the female characters end up having the same qualities even if their lives and ages are different. And then, of course, I make these male characters that have to do what I had to do to win my wife. That’s been since the very beginning in “The Notebook,” so I don’t know if it’s really changed that much. If you look at Beth in “The Lucky One,” she’s doing the right thing, she’s passionate, she’s not wishy-washy. She’s kind of a different version of Allie [in “The Notebook”]. So I don’t know that it’s changed, but I also don’t know if it would’ve been possible without my wife in the first place.
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HollywoodChicago.com: Unlike the heroine in “Twilight,” your female characters don’t seem to be defined by the men in their lives.

Sparks: Well, believe me, my wife is not defined by me, darn it! [laughs] Boy, I’m going to have to start phrasing it like that from now on because I think you’ve just hit the nail on the head. They are not defined by “their men.” Beth is defined by her son. That is the number one male in her life at the present time. She doesn’t want to be defined by the ex, but she has to live within the reality of the world. She’s defined by the memory of her brother, but not Logan. And Allie wasn’t defined by Noah. That’s a very good way to phrase it.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve been very involved in the production of your book-to-film adaptations. What has the challenge been like of externalizing the psyches of your characters without relying heavily on narration?

Sparks: That is the art of screenwriting, and I’m a good screenwriter. I do rewrites. The biggest challenge is not necessarily adapting the novel to the film because you can lay out the major themes. We know who Logan is as a person and that he’s on a metaphorical journey, so you can chart that out. That’s not the challenge. The challenge, for me, is to be as involved as I need to be, but no more than that. If I suddenly get more and more involved in every film, they all feel the same. I’ll come across things and be like, “Oh, that’s not something I would write at all,” but does it work? The director likes it, the actor likes it, and you have to be able to zip your lip. If you don’t allow them that creativity, [the films] will all feel exactly the same, and you just can’t have that.

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HollywoodChicago.com: Is there an adaptation that you hold closest to your heart?

Sparks: Not necessarily. I’ve been very fortunate with the adaptations, and I’ve liked them all. The one that I’ve probably watched the most often with my kids is “A Walk to Remember” because they’re little. I don’t know what we’ll watch when they get older, or if they’ll even want to watch a movie with their dad, right? [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: They’ll end up watching your movies at their friends’ house.

Sparks: Exactly. The one most likely to become a classic is “The Notebook,” and I say that just because it’s on cable 35 times a year. It’s been around for a long time. The novel was published in 1996 and the film’s been out for almost eight years now. That’s a long time to keep talking about a movie. I won’t say that’s because of me. The film had tremendous performances, a tremendous director and producers who had a very specific vision.

HollywoodChicago.com: You co-wrote the script for “The Last Song.” What was that process like, and would you be interested in writing future scripts?

Sparks: Oh yes, I’ve written original and adapted scripts, but I don’t offer them because right now [my schedule] is crowded. I’ve got this movie, then I’m filming another one in May. You’ve got to pace these things. They’ll come out eventually. I enjoy the process. I’ve written teleplays and did a TV series. Would I do it again? Yes, if I have the time, but my time this year is very limited, so when they asked if I would write the screenplay for “The Best of Me,” I said that I just didn’t have time. I’ll edit it and go through it.

The particular process of writing “The Last Song” was interesting because I hadn’t done a teen story in a long time. It had been ten or eleven years since “A Walk to Remember,” and since that was about a teenage boy, I decided to make this story about a teenage girl. It was right
around then that Disney called and said, “Miley loved ‘A Walk to Remember,’ do you have anything?” I said, “No, but it’s funny that you should mention that.” So I spent the next eight weeks thinking of the story as a novel, not as a film. So whether or not anything happened with Disney later, “The Last Song” was going to be the next novel. I didn’t commit to anything until I had my story.

I flew out and talked to Miley, her family and the people at Disney. They all loved it and were onboard, but they wanted to film it soon and asked me if I could write the screenplay first. So “The Last Song” ended up being conceived as a novel first, then I wrote it as a screenplay second and then I just took the screenplay and used it as a template for the novel. It was funny because months after I wrote the screenplay, Disney called me and was like, “Hey, we’re going to greenlight this!” I was like, “Wasn’t it greenlit already? It’s a good thing I didn’t know it wasn’t greenlit when I started writing. I might not have said yes.” [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you found yourself adding elements to the films that you weren’t able to capture on the page?

Sparks: Always. Some things definitely work better on film than in books. Introspection is great in books but it doesn’t work on film. Anything with high intensity, whether it’s a love scene, a car chase, a fight scene—those things work so well on film and oftentimes they can tell a much broader part of the story. I can tell you exactly what we did for “Safe Haven.” It’s a very challenging book, so I wrote the [filmmakers] an outline and told them to hand it to the screenwriter. Their responses often were, “Well, that wasn’t in the book,” and I’m like, “I don’t have enough time to do certain things in the book. I’ve got to do them in a picture.”

HollywoodChicago.com: Has screenwriting become as much of a passion for you as writing novels?

Sparks: The movies are fun, but I’m a novelist. In many ways, screenwriting is much easier than writing novels. I find screenplays twenty times easier to write than a novel. When I talk to screenwriters, they’re like, “I’d love to have the freedom of a novel instead of feeling constrained by the structure of a script,” and I’m like, “Yeah, you can say that, but try to invent a structure.” That’s hard. You know at this point in the script that you’ve got to have the twist or otherwise it won’t work. I love having the structure laid out for me because it helps to show you whether it’s working or not.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your Catholic faith inspired you to write about people who are basically good at heart?

Sparks: It probably has less to do with my faith than my worldview, though I guess that could come from faith. I personally think that most people, most of the time, do the right thing. I just believe this. Otherwise, the world would be chaos, and it’s not. I’m not naive, I know that bad things happen, but most people do the right thing most of the time. Most people wake up and they try to do what’s right for their relationships, whether it’s marriage or family. They try to do what’s right for their job. They try to make a better world for those around them, and that’s what I want to write about.

As a writer, I will tell you that darkness is so easy to make interesting. It is so easy because you’re allowed to do anything you want. Try to make Jamie Sullivan [from “A Walk to Remember”] interesting. That’s just about the hardest thing there is to do. She has to be as interesting to the viewer as Hannibal Lecter. With that said, all of my characters have flaws. Logan has post-traumatic stress disorder, he’s got survivor’s guilt, he doesn’t tell the truth right up front, he’s not perfect. And Beth’s not perfect. But they’re still trying to do the right thing most of the time, and when push comes to shove, they’ll pull you out of the fire.
‘The Lucky One’ stars Zac Efron, Taylor Schilling, Jay R. Ferguson, Riley Thomas Stewart and Blythe Danner. It was written by Will Fetters and directed by Scott Hicks. It will be released April 20 in local theaters. It is rated PG-13.

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