

Film Review: ‘The Best of Me’ is the Worst of Formulaic Romance Novelist Nicholas Sparks

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CHICAGO – What do you see in the compilation image below?

Yes, it’s nine films based on books by romance novelist Nicholas Sparks. But look more closely. “Message in a Bottle” opened his can of worms in 1999 and 2002’s “A Walk to Remember” could only say it was based on a best-selling novel. Then, after averaging one film every 1.6 years, they’ve all been riding on the breakout hit of 2004’s “The Notebook” with Rachel McAdams and Ryan Gosling.



The nine films based on Nicholas Sparks novels with the most recent in the upper left on the oldest in the lower right.

Image credit: Nicholas Sparks



In fact, every single movie poster after “The Notebook” had to say it’s *from the author of “The Notebook”* or else it would have never seen the

light of day. The blessing of having a hit later becomes your burden of trying to repeat it. The problem with films based on Sparks' bestsellers is they have a formula. He's gotten so adept at writing it that you can practically do it for him.

Over the years, critics have been panned these movies for this very reason. Of the nine films based on Sparks' novels, all of them have earned rotten consensus ratings from critics at Rotten Tomatoes. The box offices tell a different story, though, with all nine of those rotten films making money – many four times their production budgets. "Dear John" in 2010 made 4.5 times its \$25 million budget and "The Notebook" earned about 4 times its \$29 million spend.

[Read Adam](#)[Fendelman's full review of "The Best of Me".](#) [20]

Nevertheless, films riding Sparks' money wave have declined over the years as he's followed his safety net. "The Best of Me" is the worst offender of this formula yet. When watching James Marsden and Michelle Monaghan artificially fall in love, you can literally see him writing the book. The problem with that is you don't forget about the writer and you don't fall in love with the characters. My being "a guy" has nothing to do with my tough love on "these kinds of films".

I enjoyed "The Notebook" just fine. But why I'm so hard on films whose sole purpose is to sell you on the chemistry between two people is because so few can actually pull it off. Those that do truly are gems. Comedies are very tricky and they often fail because it's so challenging to make you consistently laugh for 2 hours. Romance films are equally thorny because they live or die on their ability to make you fall in love with two actors who are trying to sell it.

"The Best of Me" stars James Marsden, Michelle Monaghan, Luke Bracey, Liana Liberato, Gerald McRaney, Caroline Goodall, Clarke Peters and Sebastian Arcelus from writers J. Mills Goodloe and Will Fetters and director Michael Hoffman based on the novel by Nicholas Sparks. The film opened on Oct. 17, 2014 and has a running time of 117 minutes. It is rated "PG-13" for sexuality, violence, some drug content and brief strong language.

[Continue for Adam Fendelman's full review of "The Best of Me".](#) [20]

James Marsden and Michelle Monaghan star in "The Best of Me".

Photo credit: Gemma LaMana

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