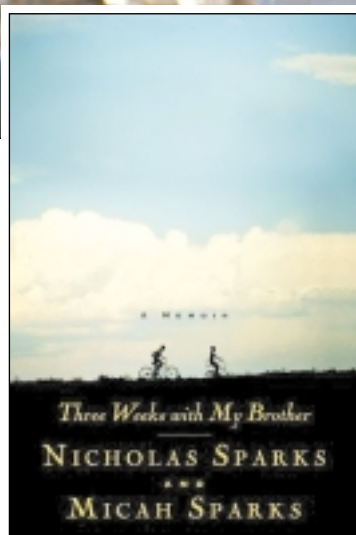


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Sparks fly

Brothers Micah and Nicholas Sparks team up for a global adventure

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Sibling revelry

The Sparks brothers recount a round-the-world adventure

BY JAY MacDONALD

This experience started the way any Nicholas Sparks novel might—a Notre Dame alumni brochure arrived at the author's North Carolina home advertising a three-week travel tour by private jet to see the world's most exotic sights: Machu Picchu in Peru, the stone heads of Easter Island, Ayers Rock in Australia, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, India's famed Taj Mahal, the rock cathedrals of Ethiopia, the Hypogeum in Malta and the northern lights of Tromsø, Norway.

Sparks, an admitted Type A personality, was deep into the writing of *Nights in Rodanthe* in the spring of 2002 amid the merry daily cacophony of three sons, twin daughters, barking dogs and parcel deliveries. Drop it all for a trip around the world? Sure, he thought, maybe someday.

But he couldn't shake the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When his wife Cathy pragmatically begged off but encouraged him to enlist his brother Micah instead, the stage was set for *Three Weeks with My Brother*, a poignant, funny and ultimately life-affirming family memoir/travelogue that only the Sparks brothers could have written.

Fans of Nicholas Sparks' novels—*The Notebook*, *Message in a Bottle*, *A Walk to Remember*, *A Bend in the Road*—may be surprised to learn that the author's life has known the same emotional turmoil he brings so vividly to life in his fiction. By their mid-30s, the Sparks brothers had lost their mother at 47 to a freak horse-riding accident, their kid sister Dana to brain cancer and their father to a traffic accident. They were the lone surviving members of a family that had managed to rise from Nebraska poverty to middle-class academia in Sacramento, California, and produce two sons who would prosper beyond their wildest expectations: Nicholas sold *The Notebook* for \$1 million weeks before his 30th birthday; Micah parlayed a real estate career into several successful businesses.

It was time to put it all into perspective, to revisit the best and worst times of a past shared as best pals, track teammates, devil's advocates, constant supporters, and above all, brothers. It was time to celebrate their survival.

BookPage caught up with the Sparks brothers in a conference call; Nicholas spoke from North Carolina, Micah from his home in northern California.

Which came first, the trip or the idea for a book?

"We kind of had an idea that we would write something together, so we both took notes the whole way through the trip," says Nicholas. "I mean, you're on an airplane for six and seven hours at a stretch, there are only so many bad movies you can watch."

"We knew we would relate the story of our family and the brothers," Micah adds. "And of course we're on this magnificent trip around the world, so after we got back, we started working on how to weave the two stories

together. That structure was the hardest thing about the book."

Being suddenly alone together, away from their wives and families, put both brothers in a reflective mood.

"On Easter Island, we were on our way to see our first Moai (giant statue) and there were all these horses just running free and we both immediately thought about mom, it just hits you," says Nicholas. "She loved horses. She could spot a horse flying down the highway."

But it didn't take long for their natural Wally-and-Beav playfulness to surface. In *Three Weeks*, the two revisit their favorite childhood pranks, from denuding a whole neighborhood of Christmas lights to blowing up mailboxes with super-charged fireworks to one particularly narrow brush with disaster in an abortive William Tell scenario.

On the trip, their inner kids grew restless and a bit punchy over all the antiquities. "It's a jar and a bowl!" says Nicholas. "We saw lots of jars and bowls."

It was Micah who failed the Ayers Rock appreciation test:

"Yeah, it's a big rock in the middle of Australia; they took us out there numerous times to look at the big rock—before sunrise, after sunrise, in 105-degree heat with flies. In the end, it's one big rock in the middle of the desert."

Their best moments were spent off the beaten path, in pubs and chatting with everyday people: cab drivers, waitresses, bellhops and the like. In Cambodia, where the devastation wrought by the Khmer Rouge has

given rise to a young but vigorously upbeat population, they had an encounter they will never forget.

"We went through a high school—it is now the Holocaust museum—where they tortured people, and our tour guide had gone to that high school; his brother had become a Khmer Rouge, so they were on opposite sides," says Micah. "And for him to go back to his high school and see bloodstains on the floor and the spikes and the shackles . . . he had his whole family wiped out by the Khmer Rouge! But they still smile and have a sense of humor."

The poverty of India still haunts them:

"It blew me away to learn that India, which is just a little bigger than Texas, has one billion, 250 million people, five times our population, just smashed into this country with no resources," says Micah.

Once home, the brothers recreated the gut-wrenching family memories by exchanging faxes between coasts. Nicholas wrote *Three Weeks* from his own point of view, but most of the memories were shared—and hard won.

"There were scenes that were very hard for us to write," says Nicholas. "These are not memories we want to remember."

For those, Nicholas and Micah can turn to their last night in Norway, arms intertwined in a local pub:

"They had this song where the Norwegians would sing these long verses and then the Americans would shout out the chorus—I can't tell you what it was, something in Norwegian—and we would boom it out at the top of our lungs, and they would all crack up. So at the end they said, 'Hey, do you know what you were saying?' And we said no, and they said, 'It means, you're beautiful and I'm warm and naked.'"

Micah laughs. "They have long nights in Norway and they enjoy them." ☺

Jay MacDonald belts a mean karaoke version of "Born on the Bayou."



NICHOLAS SPARKS

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It was time for the brothers to celebrate their survival, to revisit a past shared as best pals, teammates and constant supporters.



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