

Interview with Nick Nolan Author of *Strings Attached*

Reader Views would like to welcome Nick Nolan, author of “Strings Attached.” Nick is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Nick, thanks for talking with us today. Would you please tell us the storyline of your new novel, “Strings Attached”?

Nick: *Strings Attached* is about a boy named Jeremy, who wishes to be a ‘real man’ instead of what he is – a gay teenager. And it is a contemporary adaptation of *Pinocchio*, the puppet who wished to be a ‘real boy’. Jeremy’s mother is alcoholic, and after she enters rehab he is taken from the slums he calls home and shipped off to some very wealthy, very demanding relatives who try to change him; to keep things exciting I wove into the plot a murder mystery, sexual ambiguity, menacing villains, social-climbing teens, a dash of the supernatural, and folks with hidden identities and agendas - all set in a posh beachside locale.

Juanita: What inspired you to write this book?

Nick: I love to write and was determined to pen a novel, so I began *Strings Attached* as juvenile fiction because there wasn’t much out there for kids struggling with their sexuality. But then I found that my ‘voice’ was better suited to an adult reader; it was almost as if the manuscript I started actually finished puberty and became a ‘real book’.

Juanita: Would you tell us more about 17-year old Jeremy Tyler, and how you created your lead character?

Nick: I set out to create someone with a dazzling character arc; someone that people – gay or straight – could relate to and root for. And I’ve always loved the sort of conflict that arises with a ‘fish out of water’ storyline – watching how someone adapts to a cataclysmic life change is fascinating. And one’s teen years are inherently cataclysmic, so poor Jeremy is nearly overwhelmed. He goes from being poor and fatherless and hopeless to rich and fabulous and sought-after - but still miserable because he isn’t being himself. I believe that he’s a protagonist that most people will sympathize with.

Juanita: There is a significant amount of other colorful characters contributing to the drama surrounding Jeremy's life. Can you tell us about some of them?

Nick: Tiffany, Jeremy's alcoholic mother, is very...colorful, as you say. She is a schemer and a user – early in her life she scratched her way to the top, and then has spent her subsequent years self-destructing. Aunt Katharine is the 'Gepetto' character who 'carves' Jeremy into the young man she wants him to be – which is the replacement for Jeremy's father Jonathan, who died in a car 'accident' many years prior. Arthur is the family's live-in help; he's a proud and virile gay man with an unforgettable tragedy in his own past, as well as a clandestine identity beyond his role as the 'Blue Fairy' character from *Pinocchio*. And there's Bill Mortson – but I won't go into his position in the book...it would give too much away. Then there's Ellie, an acid-tongued teen socialite; Reed – the girl whom Jeremy tries to love; Carlo, the overtly gay boy who falls for Jeremy; and finally Coby – a sociopath and sexual predator who appears to embody the all-American boy. Each pulls Jeremy in a direction that may or may not lead him closer to becoming a 'real man'.

Juanita: How does Jeremy's upbringing affect his interaction with his new family and friends?

Nick: As the child of an alcoholic, Jeremy is used to subjugating himself while acting as caretaker for his mom; he is the picture of codependency – he's almost completely out of touch with his own needs and desires. And then Jeremy has to fit in with the exclusive and elite teens of Ballena Beach, which is the upper-crust community where he now resides. At first he is terrified, having grown up in poverty and without any male role models, but he's been gifted with good looks and a swimmer's physique, and these attributes - combined with Aunt Katharine's money, as well as her makeover of him – grant him tentative admission into their inner circle.

Juanita: Jeremy is coming to terms with his attraction to boys in "Strings Attached." How significant is Jeremy's sexuality to the overall vision of your book?

Nick: In my opinion, teenage boys define themselves by their masculinity – more so than by their intelligence, compassion, generosity or diligence. I think that most boys who experience true homosexual longings are terrified by their feelings – at least in the beginning. Having so few positive gay role models to identify with makes for a long road to self-acceptance when you are young and gay; one needs only to examine the higher incidence of suicide, substance abuse and depression amongst gay and lesbian teens to know that this is the case. I believe that Jeremy's struggle to become a 'real man' in his own eyes is authentic, and many of my readers would agree. As it pertains to my vision of the book, well...being 17 and reluctantly gay sets up a good conflict for the story, and good conflict makes for good reading.

Juanita: How did this particular storyline unfold for you? There are many things happening in and around Jeremy, it must have been an interesting and creative process?

Nick: I was fortunate enough to have my partner of nearly 20 years listen to each permutation of the story, as well as to act as my sounding board. He's been very supportive of the time I've invested in this, and he's been by my side through every stage. As for the writing itself...the creative process is amazing; in many ways the story unfolded for me as I wrote it. It's sort of like painting a picture, once the first layers are laid down they determine which colors and elements come next. It was extremely exciting to write this book - to live in Ballena Beach myself and to exist inside each character - even if it was only in my head. And now I have the excitement of other people living there too, while they read about Jeremy and his struggle. It's been a fantastically rewarding experience.

Juanita: "Strings Attached" touches on themes of betrayal, greed, wealth, lust, beauty, love, and temptation. That is a lot for a young man to deal with. Would you explain how you weave these into the plot?

Nick: Lust is desire mixed with obsession, and many of the characters in this story can't separate the two - sometimes to their great detriment. Each of these elements is related: those in possession of beauty and wealth can tempt those without to lust and temptation and greed, but seldom to love. These are all tied-up inside the human experience of 'wanting'. In the book, Jeremy's father tells him - in a dream - that one needs to be selfish with respect to what one *needs*, but to pursue judiciously that which one *wants* - it's a paradox that few ever take the time to understand.

Juanita: It sounds like you really know what goes on inside the heart and minds of teenagers. How do you know this situation so well?

Nick: First of all, I was a teenager once - and I've never forgotten how difficult those years were. And then I was a social worker - I ran a licensed group home for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens who were coming off the streets or out of jail. It's amazing how adults can underestimate young people; I find their minds brilliant and their energy amazing. I tried to communicate this respect for their experiences and feelings in Jeremy's story.

Juanita: Your book is a loose reinvention of the classic Pinocchio story. Would you tell us a little more about your connection with the Pinocchio tale, and your decision to work it into your story "Strings Attached"? Who is struggling with "strings attached"?

Nick: *Pinocchio* is a great tale, which is why everyone remembers it; I think it reflects the pan-human desire to become a better version of ourselves - the wish to become our ideal. So I studied the original story, written by Carlo Collodi many years before that famous cartoon movie. His book seems like a fairy tale, but scholars will tell you that it is steeped in social commentary - and so is my book. Jeremy really is a puppet of the adults around him - with the exception of Arthur, who plays the Blue Fairy; Arthur anticipates his every need, and at the end of the book when we find-out his true identity we learn how important his contact with Jeremy truly is. I have a villain who echoes the original antagonist in Collodi's book, and I've made more plausible that wishing on a star business - I draw a parallel between that and the old Greek and Roman belief that the constellations *were* the gods, to whom they prayed for protection and guidance. And finally, there is a very believable twist on the original puppet's nose-growing; something similar happens when Jeremy

lies...but that's a bit graphic for this interview. Suffice to say that the *Pinocchio* parallels are there, but the similarities are subtle - and the story stands on its own without revealing them. And as for who is struggling with 'strings attached' ...at first one thinks that these bind Jeremy only, and then it becomes clear later on that *everyone*, except Arthur, in the story struggles against them, because every major theme in the story – beauty, wealth, love, betrayal, lust, greed and temptation – has consequences, or 'strings', attached to it.

Juanita: Nick, who is your target audience? Who would enjoy reading your book?

Nick: Initially my target audience was youngish gay men, but I've been pleasantly surprised that the appeal of *Strings Attached* crosses boundaries of age and gender and sexual preference...probably because it's a coming-of-age story; this particular genre endures because those years are burned into every adult's psyche. And who doesn't relate to struggle, and misfortune, and learning to stand up for yourself? Enjoying a good read has little to do with how old you are or whom you sleep with - everyone loves a page-turner when the hero stands victorious at the end.

Juanita: Nick, what do you ultimately want readers to understand by reading your new novel, "Strings Attached"?

Nick: Primarily, I'd like my younger readers to appreciate the importance of pursuing their own dreams and being true to themselves, and also to remind my older readers of what they experienced when they were a teenager. And I'd like to de-stigmatize what a young gay or lesbian feels; I think that many straight people don't understand gay folks, and they don't want to because of what they've been shown - for the most part - on TV and in movies, or have been told in church. I want to show that we are just like everyone else, except that our brains are wired differently than the majority of folks on this planet. And finally, I'd like my readers to believe that wishes can come true; after all, publishing this book was a dream of mine.

Juanita: What has been your career aside from your writing pursuits?

Nick: I spent 15 years in retail, first delivering and then selling furniture in Los Angeles while going to college; one of the firms I worked for sold fantastic European antiques, so the Tyler's mansion is filled with them. After finishing my degree I did the aforementioned social work, which was extremely rewarding initially, and then became extremely stressful – so I got burned out. So I decided to do what I love, which is to write.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Nick: Readers may read a synopsis, as well as a chapter sample of *Strings Attached* on my website, nick-nolan.com. They can even email me with comments or questions through the 'Contact Us' link. I'll be having book readings and signings from time-to-time, and I'll post those on my site as well. And there's a sequel involving Jeremy and Arthur and Carlo in the works, so watch out for news about that on my website. There's so much more that's about to happen to Jeremy and his loves – now that he has 'cut his strings', his 'real life' is just beginning!

Strings Attached is available now from Amazon.com, and from select bookstores.