

10 Questions with Nicole Evelina
About her romantic comedy *Been Searching for You*

1. You are best known as a historical fiction writer. What inspired you write a contemporary romance?

I never thought I'd write a romance. I actually swore I'd never write romance because I really disliked romance books for a long time – until I realized what I really hated was the traditional “bodice ripper.” Other romances are pretty darn good – I'm especially a fan of contemporary, paranormal and romantic suspense.

But I still had one pet peeve: most heroines, especially in romantic comedies, are under 30. If there's a wedding involved, it's “OMG, I'm going to be 30 and not married!” As a 36-year-old single girl, allow me to smack you. So, what did I do? I went and wrote my own love story, one for those of us who are over 30 *gasp*, still single and still romantics at heart. I wrote it because I wanted to write the happily ever after I haven't yet experienced.

The book came to life because of the Civil Wars songs “To Whom it May Concern” and “Dust to Dust,” both of which my best friend introduced me to. They seem to be bookends to a love story to me, so I swore I'd write a book that began with the words “To Whom it May Concern” and ended with the words “Dust to Dust.” And I did.

2. Why did you choose to write a sweet novel instead of a more traditional steamy romance?

A few reasons. First, sexy/steamy/graphic romance has never been to my taste. Even as a reader, I prefer to use my imagination. After all, a good writer can do a lot with some sexual tension and the power of suggestion. If I feel that way, chances are good that a portion of the reading audience does as well.

Second, romance novels are widely believed (rightly or wrongly) to be all about sex. I wanted to prove that you could have a very romantic storyline that goes beyond the “will they or won't they” or “when will they” questions in its plot into deeper issues (in this case the value of liberal arts education, the power of trust in yourself and others, and the sometimes conflicting nature of friendship).

And most importantly, **I miss old-fashioned love stories.** I grew up on romantic comedies like *Pretty Woman* and *Bridget Jones' Diary*, in the halcyon days of the late 80s and 90s when you couldn't go to a movie theatre without tripping over a Gary Marshal or Nora Ephron film. I like the meet-cutes, goofy heroines and the inevitable happy ending. I like leaving the movie or closing the book feeling like love, peace and romance still have a shot in modern society. However, I'm not a big fan of the obviously contrived deception, so you won't see much of that. (You know the storyline: the fake boyfriend/fiancée, the woman pretending to be rich when she's not, the person with a lie that will have to come out in the end.) There

is a plot line toward the end that involves deception, but it's on the part of a villain, not the hero or heroine so it's not the typical trope.

3. How long did it take you to write *Been Searching for You*?

The first draft took only three months, which is was mind-blowing for me because my historical novels take a good six to eight months. However, it took another year or two of refining through contests and professional feedback before it was ready to publish.

4. Did any of your inspiration for this book originate in your real life experiences?

Yes. Chicago is my favorite city, and some of Annabeth's crazy dating experiences come from things I or my friends have experienced, but no one situation is 100% true to reality.

5. Why choose Chicago for a setting?

As I said, it's my favorite city in the country. I've been there many times, and it's not too far from where I live now, so plot-specific research was easy.

Besides my own predilection, I chose Chicago specifically because it isn't New York or the typical small towns you see in romance. As someone in the prime demographic for romantic comedies who can't afford to live in New York, I find it frustrating that so many are set there. All that says to me is I somehow missed out on something in life since that's obviously where all the young women are, or at least I feel like I'm being told that's where I should be. New York is used as a setting so often it's becoming cliché, plus it's not realistic or relatable to most of the target audience. As for small towns, again, not all readers live in one of those and there are so many out there (fictional and real) that you can't twirl your earbuds in a bookstore without hitting one. (Plus, small towns give me panic attacks – true story – so I don't know that I could set one there.)

To me, Chicago was the perfect compromise. It's cosmopolitan enough to have the glamour of New York, yet small enough to be relatable no matter where you live. Demographically, it's a young city, so it's a logical place for two never-marrieds to fall in love. There are a multitude of cultural options so my characters would never lack for things to do, plus there are the lake, beaches and parks to add variety. I knew my hero was going to be a literature professor, and with the Chicago area being home to more than 119 colleges and universities, I had plenty of places to employ him. In the end, the city of Chicago became almost a character and the novel became my love letter to my future home town, much like *Lost in Translation* was Sofia Coppola's ode to Tokyo.

6. Tell us a little about the characters and what/who inspired them.

Annabeth

Who she is: Our heroine. Annabeth is a hopeless romantic who has never given up on her dream of finding her one true love. She wants to get married to someone for whom love and fidelity have meaning. Because of that, she can be seen as naïve, even old-fashioned in this world where hookups are normal and sex doesn't mean what it used to. But she's also dealing with the emotional fallout from a traumatic experience years before with Nick, so she has trust issues when it comes to men and sex that she needs to get over.

Why I made her this way: I felt like a lot of women have trust issues, so that was something readers could relate to. I also wanted to show a character who is a virgin far later in life than most people deem acceptable. They do exist. I know a few. She's not waiting for marriage, but she also has her reasons being the way she is. Plus, most romance readers are romantics at heart, so they would be able to relate to her desire to be with her soul mate

What she looks like: Average height, slender, freckles, brown hair and eyes.

Who I imagine playing her: Ashley Clements from *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (who also happens to be the narrator of the audio book version of *Been Searching for You*). The character was originally inspired by British actress Nadine Lewington, whom I saw on an episode of *Inspector Lewis*.

Mia

Who she is: The frienemy. Mia was rich from birth thanks to her lawyer father. If that wasn't reason enough to always want her way, she's a supermodel. She does what she wants, when she wants, no matter who she hurts in the process. Mia is Annabeth's close friend since Annabeth moved to Chicago, but also because Mia is Miles' girlfriend. She thinks Annabeth is backward and needs to join the 21st century in her thinking about love.

Why I made her this way: Everyone loves a bitch, right? Well, we have one in spades with Mia. The snarky nature of the relationship between Mia and Annabeth reflects an interesting trend between young women, the likelihood that at least one in their close group will stab them in the back at some point in their friendship. I've had a few friemies in my time and Mia is partially based on those experiences.

What she looks like: Very tall, long read hair, long legs, thin.

Who I imagine playing her: Kathleen Robertson (with the red hair she had in *Scary Movie 2*)

Alex

Who he is: Our hero. Alex is a literature professor who just got out of a long-term relationship, which ended very badly. He's about as romantic as Annabeth is and is fond of grand gestures to show his love.

Why I made him this way: I needed Alex to be both relatable and the reader's dream guy, so I made his previous relationship end in a way we are all too familiar with: cheating. But because he's a romantic, he won't let that stop him from grandly pursuing the women he's interested in. I am not a fan of alpha males, so I made him more beta on purpose so that women like me had a hero that didn't make them roll their eyes. Alex is sensitive, educated, cultured and rich. What more could a girl ask for?

What he looks like: Tall, slightly muscled, but not like a typical alpha. Dirty blonde hair, blue eyes, a bit of stubble.

Who I imagine playing him: I actually based his looks on a model whose name I can't remember. The closest celebrity I've found is Bradley Cooper, but even that's not quite right.

Nick

Who he is: The villain. Can we say bad-boy? That would be Nick. He's Annabeth's ex, the one who made her have trust issues. Now he's back, bringing his signature blend of charm and jackassery (Yes, that is word. I made it one.) with him. He's a "sorry, not sorry" type who is really all about what benefits him. His relationship with Annabeth is complicated because they've known each other since they were kids and he was her first love.

Why I made him this way: I think a lot of women know this love-to-hate type of man. Many are even drawn to him, perhaps even dated a version of him. He's the kind of guy we think we can fix, and even looking back years later, we wonder if there was something we missed. I needed a foil for Alex, but I also wanted to show how Annabeth's taste in men has evolved over the years.

What he looks like: He's a cross between James Dean and Christian from Clueless. Average height, trim, brown hair, bright blue eyes, dimples.

Who I imagine playing him: Sebastian Stan.

Miles

Who he is: The best friend. Miles is both Annabeth's co-worker and best friend. They've known each other since college, so they are totally comfortable with one another, but there's no attraction between them. He acts more like a big brother than anything else to Annabeth. He also lets Mia, his girlfriend, walk all over him.

Why I made him this way: Every heroine needs a best friend and I wanted Annabeth to have someone solid, someone who wasn't the stereotypical gay best friend that every rom-com seems to have. Miles is a great guy, funny, charming, and loyal. In many ways, he's everything Annabeth is looking for, but

the neither of them have the attraction which is so key. I wanted him to be someone every woman would want as her friend.

What he looks like: African American, tall, big muscles, brown hair and eyes.

Who I imagine playing him: Charles Michael Davis, Marcel on *The Originals*

7. How did you come up with the title?

The title comes from a song called “The Search” by Setting Fires, a side project of Mat Devine, lead singer of Wrongchilde and the recently-retired band Kill Hannah. ([Listen to the song.](#))

I picked it from the chorus: “I’ve been searching for you, And I keep looking for you, I’ve been searching for you, Since the day, Since the day that you were born.”

FYI – The band Kill Hannah is actually mentioned in the book twice because they are from Chicago and their lyrics influenced some of the plot.

8. What is the book about, beyond romance?

- A woman’s struggle to overcome her past hurts, heal and learn to trust again.
- The struggle to connect in a meaningful way in the modern world, which seems to value hookups more than relationships with actual lasting meaning (part of the reason why I chose to have the sex take place off the page).
- Friendship and the ways we support or harm one another through our interactions, ulterior motives and positive and negative reactions to life.
- Strong themes of the power of education (especially in literature and writing) to affect students and positively change the world.

9. Will there be more books set in this world or is this a standalone novel?

It was meant to be a standalone, but I know some of my beta readers wanted more. I have ideas in my head for Miles’ story and of course, Mia and Nick. I think it would be fun to see how all of them end up, but it’s not top on my priority list. So if you want to see more books with these characters, tell me!

10. What’s next for you as a writer?

Next is the publication of *Madame Presidentess*, which is historical fiction about Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for President of the US in 1872.

Beyond that, I’m not sure. I should write the third and final book of the Guinevere series, *Mistress of Legend*, but I need a break from that series. Plus, Guinevere isn’t talking and I can’t do this series justice without her.

So I may be starting research on a dual-POV WWII story. I don’t want to name who it’s about yet, but I can say she’s a Catholic nun who should be a saint and is an overlooked hero.