

Fodor's Travel



Beaufort, North Carolina, is a romance novelist's dream setting.

If a book is hot and trending, chances are I will not want to read it.

But then I traveled to Beaufort, a town of around 4,000 people in North Carolina's Inner Banks. And on a walking tour with [Hungry Town Tours](#), I could definitely see myself living here. I'd shop for flowy dresses emblazoned with tropical-flower motifs at [Island Proper Boutique](#), decorate my dining table with linens scooped up at [Beaufort Linen Co.](#), and learn to build wooden boats at the [Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center](#). (For real: there's a "build-a-boat-in-a-day course.") I'd stroll the waterfront or Front Street at sunset with my boyfriend.

Wait, wait! I'm married and own a home in Wisconsin. I have two golden retrievers and drive a hatchback.

But before I get into how I immersed myself in Nicholas Sparks after visiting the town that inspired two of his books (*The Choice* and *A Walk to Remember*), it's important to know how resistant I was before this. After all, *The Notebook*—Sparks' first big hit, which he published in 1996—became a symbol for the ultimate romance film. The messages were enough to keep me away. Girls, if you can get your guy to watch this, he's a keeper. And if you find yourself in a *Notebook*-like romance, you've got it made. Ugh. I'd take *Sweet Valley High* over that.

About five years ago, on our last night in a Riviera Maya, Mexico, all-inclusive, my sister-in-law and I were packing up and flipping through television channels. We settled on *The Notebook*. In Spanish. And as a testament to how formulaic this plot is, my sister-in-law translated for me what was happening. Neither of us understood Spanish, and she'd seen the movie only once. Years ago. Knowing a book-made-for-film plot could be translated by someone who is not a fluent speaker didn't inspire me to pick up a Sparks book at the airport for my flight home.



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Fast forward to this past spring when I found myself in Beaufort, North Carolina. Hungry Town Tours' co-owner Betsy Cartier led me and a group around town, and every 50 feet, it was "hi" and "hello" to everyone. Including Christina Cuninghame, playing with her young children in the front yard of her home just off Front Street. Cartier introduced our walking-tour group to Cuninghame. As a co-owner of Beaufort Linen Co. (with her husband), she was featured in *Southern Living Magazine* in 2019. In that article, she talked about how Beaufort was her dream town and inspired her and her husband to quit their jobs in Raleigh and move here.

Chatting with Cuninghame allowed me to quickly tap into how friendly and laid-back people in Beaufort are. At one point, I even wondered if she was a "plant" from the local chamber of commerce, with a realtor waiting in the wings—er, bushes—to help us buy our first home here. But nope. This was the real deal: Southern friendliness at its finest. At the next house down were two women walking by with their beach cruisers, one a British woman who owns a local art gallery, said Cartier, as they greeted one another. Clearly, no one was in too much of a hurry not to stop and chat. I can't say that's the case for even my Midwestern city!

Being immersed in this small-town utopia—with amazing old-house architecture to match, some of these properties nearly as old as the town itself, which dates back 300 years—led me to read *The Choice* and *A Walk to Remember* after I got home. As expected, I turned the pages fast. Very fast. But not because I was in suspense or a particularly quick reader. The writing is, as I predicted, formulaic. I read the first 68 pages of *A Walk to Remember* in under 90 minutes. The Cliff Notes version is that a Beaufort High School senior needs to find a date for the homecoming dance, and the only person he can go with is the local Baptist minister's daughter.

Although there are fewer connections in this book to modern-day Beaufort, as it's set in 1958, there are mentions of restaurants like Cecil's Diner and Flauvin's, no doubt inspired by Beaufort's real-life dining scene. I was more easily drawn into *The Choice* as the protagonist, Travis Parker, notices the hot woman moving in next door, and—in a convenient twist—he's the only one in his group of friends who is not married. Oh, and her dog is pregnant, and wow, he just happens to be a vet. We can see where this is headed, right? Beaufort mentions include Front Street, Shackleford Banks, the hospital in Carteret (not that you'd go there on a fan trip!), Atlantic Beach, and Cape Lookout.

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As I learned on the walking tour, Sparks isn’t the only author to set novels in Beaufort. We walked past Kristy Woodson Harvey’s adorable Victorian house on the waterfront—she’s the author of *The Peachtree Bluff* series, set in Beaufort—and, according to Cartier, no stranger to the locals. It’s not uncommon for Cartier to bring people past, and she’ll wave from the porch. Just as incredible is Cartier’s own journey. In 2013 she and her husband moved from Virginia after a long search for a place that hit two key points: year-round tourism (they were seasoned hospitality veterans already) and on the waterfront.

One of their tours actually focuses on *A Walk to Remember* (the tour is named “A Ride to Remember”). It’s on a bicycle, covering more ground than a walking tour might.

“I’ve had a family of four from Dubai fly in just to do the tour,” says Cartier. “I don’t think Nicholas Sparks gets enough credit for the amount of tourism he brings. Beaufort is kind of like a Hallmark movie.”

Indeed, *The Peachtree Bluff* series will be adapted into an NBC series, proof of Beaufort’s story-like ambiance. In fact, according to Cartier, the most-visited grave in the town’s cemetery is that of “Abigail,” a young girl who died at sea in the 1700s while returning home to Beaufort from London.

When fiction has a strong sense of place, that grabs readers. They can easily fill in a novel’s setting based on travels to that region. Nicholas Sparks isn’t the first person to do this. All but three of Elin Hilderbrand’s 32 novels are set in Nantucket, Massachusetts. Each winter, there’s a wait list for “Elin Bucket List Weekend,” where activities include a book signing, cocktail party, dinner, and yoga with Hilderbrand. Fans of L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* fly to Canada’s Prince Edward Island to step into her shoes.

Despite my new love for Sparks’ novels, I don’t think I’ll be picking up another blockbuster place-centric book anytime soon—such as *The Shining* by Stephen King (Stanley Hotel is a real hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, fictionalized as the Overlook Hotel) or *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (where “Robert Langdon” tries to solve a Paris murder). Unless I find myself in the Colorado mountains or on another jaunt to the Louvre? In that case, I might be willing to re-immense myself in the setting, just as I’ve been doing with Beaufort, sipping iced tea on my Wisconsin porch as I become obsessed with the romantic dilemmas of Sparks’ characters.