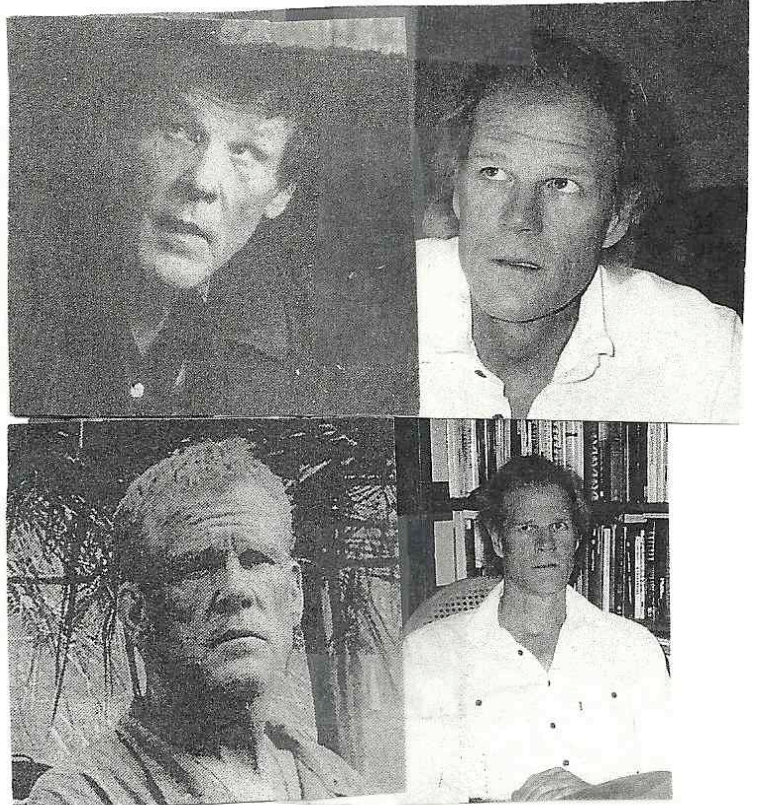
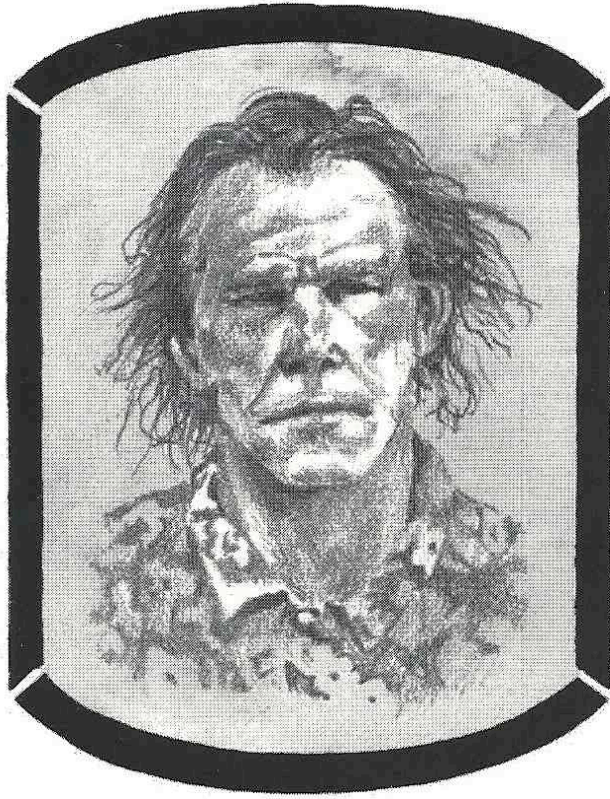


WRITING IS A MUG'S GAME:
My Life as a Nick Nolte Look-alike
By Richard Taylor
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Writing Is a Mug's Game: My Life as a Nick Nolte Look-alike

BY RICHARD TAYLOR

IN 1992 WHILE SITTING AT THE BACK OF A ferry churning through the South China Sea, somewhere between Lantau Island and Hong Kong, a big man with a ruined face lumbered up the stairway and sat beside me. He was drinking a can of beer from a paper bag. We were up on the top deck, mesmerized by a turbulent backwash of water, lost in private reveries. I was in Hong Kong with my wife Dale, who taught at the Delia School of Canada, while I failed to write the Great Canadian Novel. I ended up spending a lot of time with an unemployed Australian architect because we ran a bogus househusband play group for our two daughters. Surrounded by hyperventilating babies, psychotic toddlers, Filipino caregivers and neglected pilots' wives, the sad-sack Aussie and I hunched over miniature chairs and tables and sang falsetto

nursery rhymes, nervously kneading Play-Doh, worrying a little about our manhood.

Suffering from the heat, the big man on the ferry was having trouble breathing. On each plump hand he wore rings with sparkling diamonds. Around his thick neck was a hefty gold chain. He took another moody slug from his bagged beer. "You know," he said in a mournful American drawl, "you look a lot like an old buddy of mine."

I knew what he would say next.

Since the seventies, whether in Hollywood or Hawaii, Australia or Europe, at home or anywhere else, I'd been hearing about how much I look like Nick Nolte. For years, friends and strangers had described me as the Guy Who Looks Like Nick Nolte, or Rick Nolte.



We're both born in February and share the same Neanderthal demeanour: a long, Frankenstein head, penetrating stare with hooded eyebrows, and wispy blond hair — though mine is thinner and he's ten years older.

In 1992 while I was singing songs in a Hong Kong play group, my veritable double, that ruggedly handsome Hollywood leading man known for his brute masculinity, had just been named the Sexiest Man Alive by *People* magazine. Being an almost penniless, monogamous, teetotaling lapsed surfer from Ottawa who happened to share his face, I felt a sense of ownership over Nick's newly affirmed status as an international sex symbol. Yet in my mind, all I could hear was my keening play-group voice as it led a rousing chorus of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," and it became clear that Nick and Rick were leading very different lives. I wasn't the Sexiest Man Alive, not even the Second Sexiest Man Alive. I didn't have Nick's money, celebrity and gravelly Midwestern voice. But I also didn't have the trips in and out of rehab for drug and alcohol addiction. Regardless, I still felt a connection to the man behind my face. After all — and I'm basing this almost entirely on my own investigations and reading supermarket tabloids over the years — we both possess a Zeppelin-sized angst and struggle to cope with the real world through our high romantic souls and a kiss-my-ass hubris.

At the back of the ferry, Nick Nolte's friend said, "We both tried out for the same part in Irwin Shaw's TV miniseries, *Rich Man, Poor Man*. I didn't get the part, but Nick did. It was his first big role. Nick blew everyone away with the intensity of his performance, and then went on to stardom."

The big man seemed a little pissed, his bloated face caved in from too much living.

"Oh yeah, I acted in a lot of two-bit roles on TV and a string of B movies you never saw," he said, shaking his head. "So I gave up the Hollywood dream and became a rock promoter in Asia. Right now I'm on my way back to the States to the Betty Ford Center."

Listening to the big man, I realized he shared more with Nick and me than he probably knew. Because the gnarly genes of unhappy drunks lurk in my family tree, my first Nick Nolte train wreck happened in 1971 before anyone had even heard of him. After dropping off two cute girls from a party while driving drunk, I slammed my orange Volkswagen Bug into a telephone pole. I got forty-five stitches in my face, my knee rammed through the radio, the steering wheel broke on my chest, I got two black eyes, and my forehead and face were embedded with splinters of glass that months later worked their way through the skin. It took a couple more Nick Nolte years of losing friendships, getting into fights and

bedding the wrong women before I finally realized I had to quit drinking forever.

For various reasons, Nick hasn't been able to shake his addictions, confessing in an interview: "I'm in AA but I'm not the greatest example of AA. Unfortunately, I have relapses." Over the years it has been instructive to watch someone who looks and acts like me continue to drink and misbehave. And I must confess, I've been drawn into the lurid tales of his life journey when they appear before me while I stand in line at checkout counters. Nick's face has often stared back at me, and I've felt compelled to buy the magazine. Through those stories I've been able to see what might have gone down if I hadn't quit drinking, or if I hadn't stayed married to Dale for over three decades and worked out my own demons through writing, surfing and open-water swimming.

To be fair, Nick's badass behaviour is not as sordid or weird as many other Hollywood actors, like Dennis Hopper or the dearly departed Marlon Brando. Along with my Protestant inclination to behave even though I'm a closet lunatic, I've had to learn how to contain my inner Nick Nolte.

My journey as the less famous but perhaps tad more serene Nick Nolte began in the late seventies, when Dale and I travelled in a renovated hippie van, surfing the perimeter of North America. We parked it with friends in Vancouver and flew to Hawaii for three months so Dale could paint while I wrote and surfed. One night we met a teenage couple with a puppy who had been sleeping under catamarans at the yacht club. They'd fled Los Angeles but discovered living without money in paradise was dangerous. He was a laid-back surfer and she needed an abortion, so we took them into our apartment and talked them into flying back home to their worried families in LA. When they couldn't stop telling me how much I looked like Nick Nolte, who often came into the store in West Hollywood where they worked, something clicked inside. They said I was a dead ringer for Nick, especially with my tanned Tarzan weightlifter's body and my long bleached hair from surfing the reefs, though at the time I wondered how looking like an up-and-coming Hollywood actor would shape my life.

As strangers continued to stare at me before asking, "Are you . . . Nick Nolte?" friends kept urging me to cash in on my resemblance to the actor. Of course, I got all kinds of bizarre suggestions about how I might monetize my resemblance to the sexiest man of 1992. Being a scrawnier, cinematic kaleidoscope of Nick Nolte characters, I'd daydream about moodily hulking around like him, perhaps holding a cigarette, gun or drink. One friend suggested I actually fly down to Hollywood and offer my services. Because of Nick's unhealthy lifestyle, perhaps I could do a stand-in for him whenever he went into



rehab or had to take time off because of personal setbacks. Another friend suggested I offer my bony ass as a double for a nude scene, speculating my body resembled Nick's less svelte, drug- and alcohol-tuckered butt. But I have an Australia-shaped strawberry birthmark on the back of my left thigh no Hollywood makeup artist could disguise. So as much as I would have loved to work as Nick's body double — jumping in bed with gorgeous actresses for blistering sex scenes he might not be able to handle, or valiantly stroking across open stretches of ocean — I guess in the end it was a nagging sense of self-worth that kept me from packing up my life and moving to Hollywood. The world already had too many Elvis and Hemingway impersonators, and it certainly didn't need a Nick Nolte impersonator. But there were definite perks related to drafting off Nick's rising fame.

In the early eighties, while struggling to publish my first book and tackling parenthood and home ownership, I also worried about my father-in-law Ernie. He wasn't too impressed with a non-drinking, unemployed aspiring writer for a son-in-law, especially since he was a hard-drinking ex-Spitfire pilot concerned about his daughter's future.

But Nick Nolte and his movies rescued me. When I visited my in-laws, instead of being grilled about my shaky future plans, Ernie would gleefully describe how much I looked like Nolte in *48 Hrs.* or *North Dallas Forty*. Almost through osmosis, my rough-around-the-edges surfer-writer persona was transformed in his eyes through my resemblance to this larger-than-life Hollywood actor.

During a late eighties trip around the world, we lived with my sister-in-law and her husband Vic on the French Riviera for a month, close to the villa where F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald resided in the late twenties.

After a September day of topless beaches and swimming the warm Mediterranean, Vic and I were nursing sunburns and early pangs of mid-life angst. We ended up on the promenade at Juan-les-Pins strolling with our two daughters in their prams. Two young French women, so sexy they could hardly stand up, approached, giggling and pointing at me. When we drew abreast of them, one boldly asked in a seductive French accent, "Are you Neek Noltay?" Before I could answer, Vic said in his suave French voice: "*Absolument, mesdemoiselles! C'est mon copain. Je le connais depuis son enfance.*" We grew up in Nebraska together. We are staying with Madonna at Hotel du Cap Eden Roc."

Later, Vic said, "Big guy, if we weren't happily married men with our two daughters, we could have scored big time." Although it did little for me that day, my impersonation brought a small amount of joy into the hearts of two French beauties

who, to this day, probably remember the day they met Nick Nolte along the Riviera.

On screen you can always catch a flick featuring Nick Nolte: bird-doggin' and bangin' babes, punching someone out, and delivering cryptic one-liners in that growly voice and personality that can change from goofy, charming sweetness to a berserk rage. If you look closely you can observe Nick working out demons while he portrays a two-fisted, womanizing drinker. A Zen poet. A sinew-popping warrior, Texas Ranger or corrupt forties detective. No matter the character, he always carries the burden of a tender-hearted hulk of a man who looks as though he has been punched in the face too many times. Metaphorically and literally.

In September 2002, the same month I published my balls-out surfing memoir *House Inside the Waves* that deals with mid-life blues, hopeless romantics, the "sharks happen" metaphor and other Nick Nolte themes, Nick acted out his most infamous role that catapulted him back into the limelight and inadvertently helped to promote my book. He was arrested for impaired driving on his way back from an AA meeting. Nick's police mugshot revealed him to the online world in a wrinkled Hawaiian shirt that made him actually look like Rick Taylor, a washed-up surfer.

Nick's thinning, scraggly hair was a halo surrounding the lopsided, busted face of someone masking bottled-up pain, sadness and vulnerability, qualities that have made him a tremendous actor but a tormented man. This image was so iconic that six months later, when Steve Martin hosted the Academy Awards, he smirked in front of Nolte's blown-up mugshot, joking about it to a billion viewers around the world. TV weather stations used Nick's bad-hair-day photo whenever they were expecting heavy winds. For years my cheekier friends would often quip, "Hey Rick, love that cool mugshot of you in the Hawaiian surfer shirt. Nice."

Nick claims acting is his redemption, and I suppose writing is mine. So I made a laminated bookmark from the famous washed-up surfer image of Nick with the caption "For some, acting is a mug's game" and rewrote it as "For some, writing is a mug's game." It's a reminder of who I might have become, and in no way slurs the reputation or achievements of a fine actor who will live on in film history despite his sometimes messy life.

A lot of other people I know almost look like someone famous: If I squint, a neighbour kind of looks like Sting; a hyperactive friend looks like Conan O'Brien; naked, my wife looks like Botticelli's Venus. Now that I'm older, aside from looking like Nick Nolte in severe decline, I look more like leathery-faced Keith Richards' ugly brother. And so it goes.

