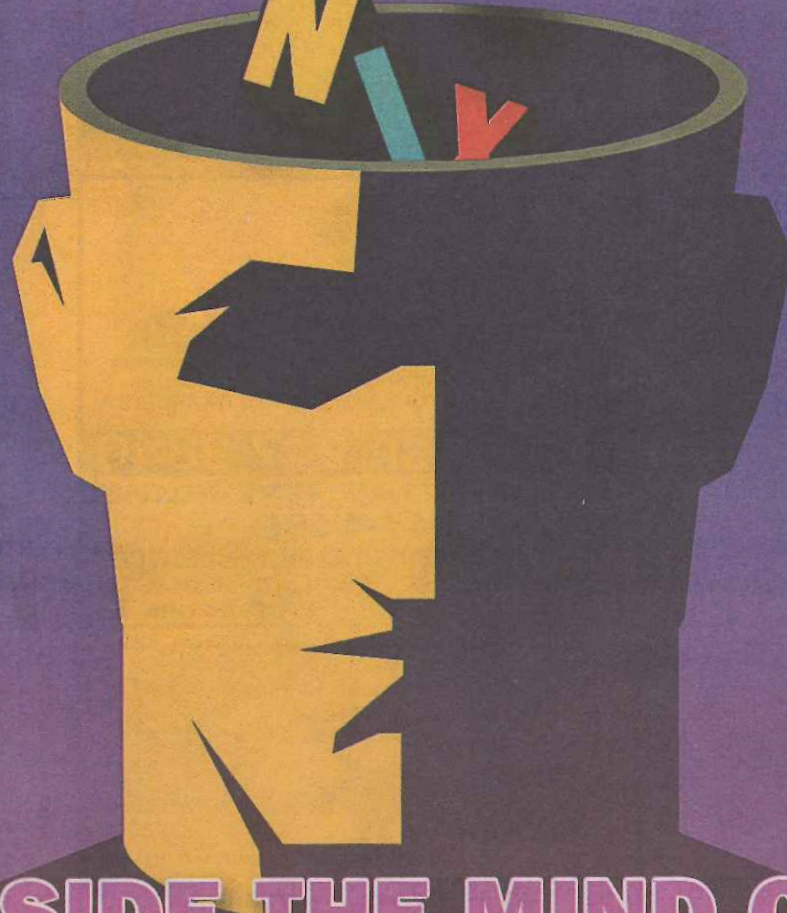


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Cover story



Gulf Coasting's guide to this weekend, the next 10 days and a month ahead. Go to [gulfcoastinglive.com](http://gulfcoastinglive.com) to see full, searchable calendar of events for this week and beyond.

Nathan Hill will meet fans, sign books and talk about "The Nix" this Saturday at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival in downtown Fort Myers.

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

# MEET NATHAN HILL

## Naples author talks about hit 'The Nix,' TV series, Reading Fest

CHARLES RUNNELLS  
THE NEWS-PRESS

Nathan Hill never thought "The Nix" would get published. It's just something he did on his own, typing away for 10 long years.

The Naples resident had given up his dream of being a published novelist.

This was just for fun.

Then things started happening. He finished "The Nix." His debut novel got published August 30, 2016. Great reviews began rolling out nationwide. Producer JJ Abrams signed on to do a TV series adaptation with Meryl Streep.

Then the end of the year happened, and "The Nix" wound up on many book critics' Best of 2016 lists.

Hill couldn't believe it: "The Nix" was officially a runaway success. And despite the long odds, he'd finally arrived as a literary superstar.

The result: A busy but exciting year for the former FGCU professor.

"There's almost been no let-up," he says. "One amazing thing happens after the other."

"The Nix" has been described

as a book about everything, and Hill crammed all sorts of ideas into it: A mother who abandons her family, a sour college professor, Norwegian ghosts, first love, the video game World of Warcraft, Occupy Wall Street, a college scandal, the 1968 Democratic National Convention riots, classic Choose Your Own Adventure kids

See Hill, Page 19W

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books, and a whole lot more. Plus a heaping helping of humor and satire.

The 620-page book has drawn comparisons to John Irving, Charles Dickens, Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace.

Not bad for a book Hill never thought would see the light of day.

"That's true!" he says. "I was like, who's going to publish a 600-page book that has a Choose Your Own Adventure baked into it?"

Hill will meet fans, sign books and talk about "The Nix" this Saturday at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival in downtown Fort Myers. The 18th annual fest features book signings, lectures and other events. The lineup also includes thriller novelists James Grippando (the Jack Swyteck series) and Gregg Hurwitz (the "Orphan X" series), young-adult-fiction author Sara Shepard (the "Pretty Little Liars" and "The Lying Game" series) and kids author Chris Grabenstein ("Word of Mouse," "Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library").

The News-Press chatted with Hill recently about the fest, "The Nix" and his unexpected new literary career. Here's what he had to say.

**I've been looking forward to talking to you for months! I love "The Nix," and I've been excited to see all the attention it's been getting. What's the last year been like for you?**

I've said this before: My house was an optimism-free zone for the year before the book came out. My wife was really excited about it, and she read it a couple of times and thought everyone was going to love it.

And I know, because I have a lot of friends who are writers, that not every great book finds its audience right away. And not every book gets the kind of support that mine's gotten. I've learned through many painful rejections and seeing my friends go through this process to not expect the world.

And so to have all this happen has just been kind of extraordinary and exhilarating and exhausting, all at the same time.

**How has this changed your life?**

It is life-changing. I have taken a leave of absence from teaching

## If you go

**What:** Southwest Florida Reading Festival

**When:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Centennial Park, 2000 W. First St., downtown Fort Myers

**Cost:** Free

**More about the fest:** The 18th annual event is organized by the Lee County Library System to promote reading and the library. It features book signings, contests, meet-and-greets, author talks, readings, activities and free books for kids and teens, a teen battle of the bands and more.

**Info:** Readfest.org

(the former FGCU professor was teaching at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, but now lives in Naples again), and I'm trying to make a go of it as a full-time writer now.

So obviously, in my day-to-day life, that's a radical change. I no longer have 100 essays to grade every weekend. But at the same time, I also have nowhere to go except the office and my house. So I'm seeing fewer people.

**It's sort of like this big yawning chasm.**

Yeah, right! Exactly! It's both a blessing, but also a little lonely.

**What's going on with the Netflix series with Meryl Streep?**

Well, we're actually waiting to see where it will land: Netflix, Amazon, Showtime. I have been in contact with the guy who's going to be our showrunner and is doing the adaptation. His name is John Logan (creator of the Showtime series "Penny Dreadful") and he's a fantastic guy and an incredibly talented writer.

I'm really excited. We have a lot of firepower behind it. Nothing in Hollywood is set in stone until it's actually made, so we're kind of circling around it. But hopefully, we'll get the green light.

We've got Meryl Streep (as Faye), we've got JJ Abrams, we've got John Logan. We've got such wattage and I'm super excited about it.

**Tell me about writing the book. It started life as a short story, and then it just kept snowballing. You had a rule**

See Hill, Page 20W

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Continued from Page 19W

**when writing it: You'd allow yourself to follow any tangent as long as it interested you.**

For better or worse, it kind of wiggled a lot during the writing process. Now, after several hearty revisions, it feels all of a piece. But it didn't feel like that for a very long time. I had all of these things sticking out sharply. It was like a bag of misshapen sticks for a long time.

I allowed myself to go down whatever rabbit hole I felt like. And that's fun in the process. But the problem there is that everything needs to be justified within the world of the book. You can't just have something in there because it's funny. It has to be funny, but also needs to be relevant. That was probably why the first draft was a thousand pages and also why we managed to cut 400 pages out of that first draft. A lot of that stuff was there. It was maybe interesting but didn't belong in the book, thematically.

**"While I was writing it, I made this deal with myself along the way: If I'm going to put all this time into this book, and there's no guarantee that the book will ever get published, I might as well have fun doing it. A lot of the humor, a lot of the satire comes from me, frankly, trying to entertain myself along the way.**

NATHAN HILL, AUTHOR OF "THE NIX"

While I was writing it, I made this deal with myself along the way: If I'm going to put all this time into this book, and there's no guarantee that the book will ever get published, I might as well have fun doing it. A lot of the humor, a lot of the satire comes from me, frankly, trying to entertain myself along the way.

**something like 20 pages long. It's just epic. It's like a short story, itself, within the context of the novel. Where did that come from?**

I had this student one time at FGCU who had plagiarized an essay and just copied and pasted it from a website or two. So I asked her to come into my office to talk about it. And I showed her the website and I showed her the paper, and I said, "These things are identical." And she just looked me straight in the eye and she said, "That's weird..." [Laughs] And that was it! Like it was just some *incredible* coincidence.

And I guess that combined with 10 or 12 other challenging episodes with students gave birth to Laura. Part of what I taught in those first-year writing classes at FGCU was logical fallacies, logical thinking, argumentation. And it was a real challenge. Because first year students — we're talking 18, 19 year olds — found it very difficult to identify logical fallacies, but found it very, very easy to use them.

So we spent a lot of time going

See Hill, Page 21W

**I love the chapter where the college student, Laura, gets caught with a plagiarized paper and tries to argue her way out of it using one logical fallacy after another (classic flawed arguments such as false analogies, loaded questions, non sequiturs and circular arguments). I laughed so hard. It's**

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over this kind of stuff and making arguments. They would make arguments, and then I would pick them apart until their arguments were cleaner and more well-sourced.

When I decided to put Laura in the novel and I was writing that first scene, I decided that Samuel — because he's sort of a crusty professor — would in his mind be internally picking apart all her arguments. So that's where that came from. I decided to use all these things I'd been teaching and put them in the book.

**Let's talk about the autobiographical nature of the book. You were a World of Warcraft addict at one point, for example. And you've said that you had to reassure your mother that she's NOT Faye (although it sounds like maybe she is, in some ways).**

Well, I think what a lot of fiction writers do — and what I do, certainly — is you take a fictional character, but while you're constructing that character, sometimes, in order to make them more convincing or in order to give them the kind of energy you need to give them, you surround them with details from your life.

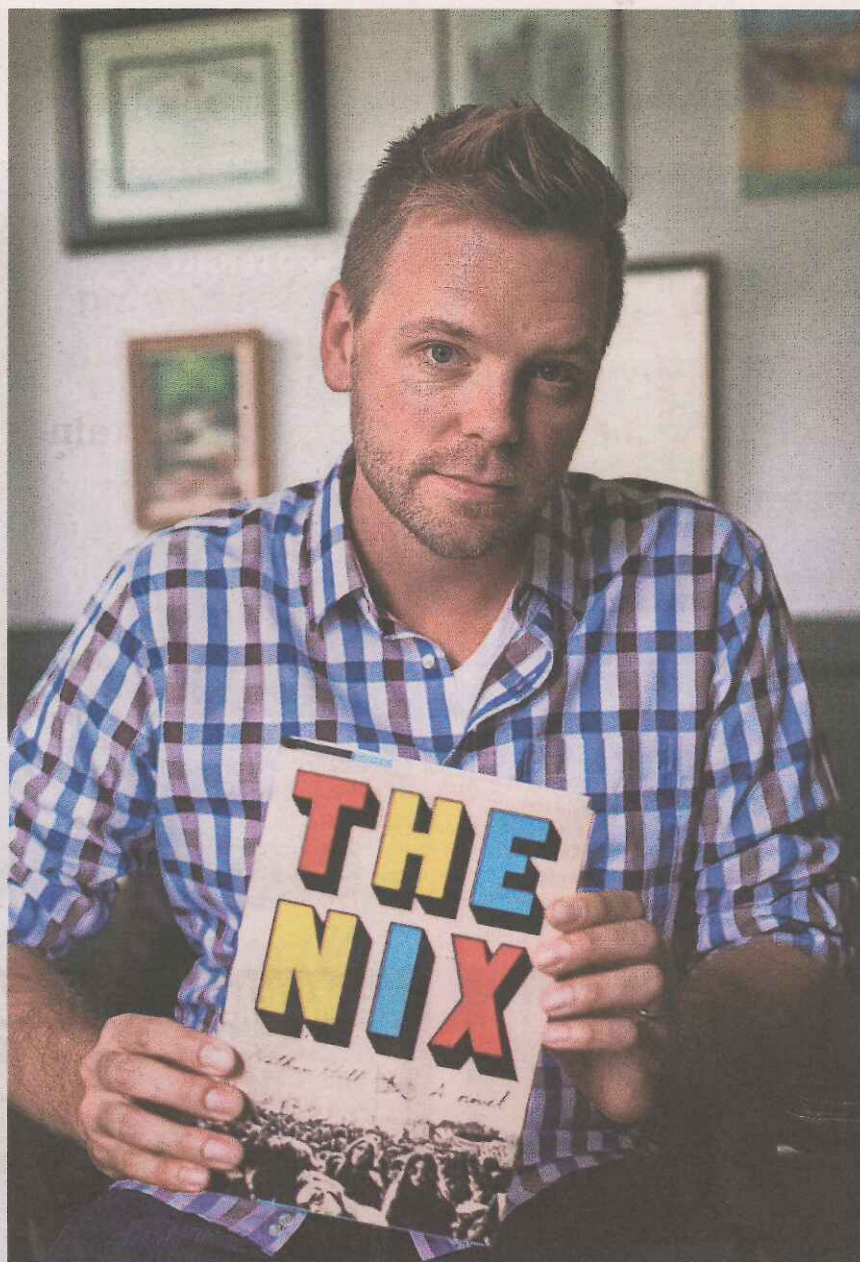
And sometimes that's autobiographical, and sometimes that's stuff I stole from my friends or stuff I stole from my parents. You surround them with details that you know well and have some kind of beating heart for you.

So I guess it's fair to say that there's a lot of autobiographical material in "The Nix," even though none of it is, per se, true. So my mom never abandoned me. She's a great person, and my parents are still together, and they're awesome. But I did give Faye my mom's biography. My mom and Faye grew up in the same town. That kind of stuff. I would tell my mom, you're going to find some of this very familiar, but of course, she's not you.

And so Samuel is a college writing professor, and I gave him a lot of details from my own career. But he's very sour on it, and he really dislikes his students. And I happened to LIKE teaching.

**So you didn't hate your students the way he does?**

No, no! I find it incredibly rewarding and challenging, and I hope to get back to it at some point.



DAVID ALBERS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS  
Naples resident Nathan Hill's debut novel "The Nix" wound up on many book critics' Best of 2016 lists.

Unless of course, hiring committees across the country now think I hate my students.

But any job has its frustrating moments, and you take those frustrating moments and build on them. So all of the characters have some biographical elements. I take just a part of my life and give it to them and amplify it.

**Choose Your Own Adventure stories are a big theme in your novel, and they've also been a part of your life for a long time. You wrote a Choose Your Own Adventure book in the second grade. Was that your first at-**

**tempt at fiction?**

Yeah, it's called "The Castle of No Return." And on a recent trip back home, my parents and I went through boxes from my childhood and found it. So I have it now. It's in Naples in my office.

It was the first thing I wrote. It was a class project. Everybody was writing a story, and mine was a Choose Your Own Adventure book. My mom helped me bind it. It's bound and it's illustrated in colored pencil. And I won! I won the all-class, write-a-story contest.

**That's adorable! Did you always know you wanted to be a**

**writer?**

Well, it's funny. It's one of those things I always did. I always made stories for my friends, like Choose Your Own Adventure stories or games, like role-playing games, or mazes. I always create the funhouse rather than go through the funhouse, you know?

And as I got older, I started writing all these stories, and I'd do it on my mom's old typewriter. But it wasn't something that I even know you could do for a living until I got to college.

It's something I always liked doing, but didn't know I could do it for real until very late in life.

**Is the Choose Your Own Adventure story in "The Nix" the same one from second grade?**

It's based on it. I was drawing from memory. They're both called "The Castle of No Return." The only difference is, in "The Nix," I added all those Norwegian ghost stories. I, of course, didn't do that myself when I was in the second grade.

**First-time authors hate this question, but I'm going to ask it anyway: What's next for you? Are you working on another book?**

[Laughs] That's a very common question, and it's a great question! Because it implies that somebody might be eager to read the next thing. So I don't mind it! I should have a different answer every time, so nobody can hold me to anything.

Well, let's see: I haven't really been able to make any progress on the new thing for the last six months or so. It's just been too busy! But it looks like around about July, things are going to calm down a little bit. I think I'm going to go dark for a little bit and retreat into my cave and try to make some progress.

I'm working on a new novel. I have a couple of characters in mind and I have a setting. I don't know what the plot is, but I kind of never know what the plot is until I figure it out. I'm exploring my characters right now. I have 50, 60 pages of material. So we'll see where it goes!

**Can you tell me anything about it?**

I think it's going to be a novel about marriage and, weirdly, gentrification. And maybe the 90s. [Laughs] That's about all I can do!

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