

BOOKS & AUTHORS

While growing up in Tarzana, Nikki Nash gained entry into the world of Hollywood figures like Ann-Margret through her father, a musician who socialized with actors while working on their films.



In memoir “Collateral Stardust,” Nash tells how she stayed in the entertainment world by working in TV production with actors like Martin Mull. **PHOTOS COURTESY OF NIKKI NASH**

THE REALITY OF A movie star fantasy

Nikki Nash crushed on Warren Beatty as a teen, then struck up a lifelong relationship

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As a teen growing up at the end of the '60s, Nikki Nash had a celebrity crush like young people do, but hers was something different, Nash writes in her new memoir.

Where her girlfriends got dreamy-eyed over Paul McCartney, the cute Beatle, or Davy Jones, the cute Monkee, the 14-year-old Nash fell for film star Warren Beatty one night while watching “Splendor in the Grass” on television at home in Tarzana.

This is the one, Nash decided when the movie ended. When I grow up, I will meet him and will know him for the rest of my life, she promised herself.

Teenage crushes — how cute, you may be thinking.

But five years later, in 1974, when Nash was 19, Beatty walked into the Old World restaurant in Beverly Hills, where Nash had gotten a job based on the far-fetched thought that one day Beatty might turn up.

When he returned a few weeks later, they talked again, and later that night they began a relationship, sometimes intimate, sometimes not, that lasted for decades.

“I don’t know what possessed me at 14,” says Nash, 70, on a recent phone call. “I mean, I know what possessed me to have a crush on him. But to think that I could actually make that happen?”

Maybe, she says, the idea that she and Beatty could meet and connect came from her uncertainty about what else to do with her life. Or maybe it came from a sense that an unattainable romance wouldn’t hurt as much as a real one when it inevitably crumbled.

“I think maybe the deeper point of it is that I didn’t have to actually prove myself unlovable,” Nash says of the insecurity she felt at home growing up. “If I had an obsession with somebody more stellar, more distant, more unavailable, I could have feelings of love without wondering if it was going to go away when he knew me better, you know?”

“That, of course, harkens back to just parental stuff and wondering if you’re lovable without all the tap dancing.”

In the memoir, titled “Collateral Stardust: Chasing Warren Beatty and Other Foolish Things,” her connection with Beatty is the through line, and the foolish things provide the context of her life.

“Sometimes we just seek the things that might complete us or heal us,” Nash says of the decision to write the book. “I’m not all feely-touchy, but I do feel a lot of my life I spent with an outside persona and an inside persona. Whether it was based on ‘Some day I’ll be famous,’ or ‘I have a secret life no one knows about,’ or ‘I have to be perfect,’ I think all of those things were chewing me up, and I didn’t realize it.”

ON HOLLYWOOD’S EDGES

Her mother embraced radical politics to cope with her frustration with contemporary expectations of wives and mothers. She hosted Black Panthers such as Huey Newton and political activists such as Robert Meeropol, son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg,



A head shot from Nash’s attempts to become a professional actor after developing a crush on Warren Beatty at age 14.

which led to regular FBI drive-bys of their suburban home.

Her father was a studio musician who’d bring home friends from the movies he worked on, such as director Robert Altman, composer John Williams and actor Vic Morrow. He often embarrassed his daughter with his fondness for swimming nude in the backyard pool, no matter who or how many were socializing at the Nash home.

Her parents loved her in their way, Nash writes in the book. But her mother, in particular, was not suited for parenting, and the impact of this ripples throughout her story.

At some point, a pair of politically active nuns started hanging out at the Nash home, eventually leaving their formal nun habits, cast off as part of their activism, at the house. Nash inherited the clothing as a teenager and soon discovered that liquor store clerks never carded someone in nun’s clothing.

A decade or so ago, Nash decided that instead of just entertaining friends with such stories at parties and other settings, she wanted to tell them in a book.

“That was the seed of having to think about things a little more deeply,” she says. “Because I’m smart enough to know I didn’t want to write, ‘Then this happened, and I kissed this guy, I (bleeped) this guy.’ I mean, that’s a big snore, and no one learns anything, including me.

“Right around that time, I had been reading Colette, and I came upon that quote that’s the epigraph: ‘You will do foolish things, but do them with enthusiasm,’” Nash says. “I love that so

much that it kind of reflected a love onto myself and all the foolish enthusiasm I had for saying yes to all these adventures.”

After early dreams and years of acting classes, she decided the role of professional actress was not for her. Nash shifted into television production, starting as a gofer for the mid-’70s alternative soap opera “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman,” working as a production coordinator on awards ceremonies including the Oscars, and later as an associate director on shows as varied as “Love Connection” and “Soul Train,” with a yearslong run on Conan O’Brien’s talk show “Conan.”

The book includes chapters on boyfriends — actor Robert Hays of “Airplane!” for one — and a fiancé who worked for both Ann-Margret and Frank Sinatra. The marriage was called off, but before that, it led to the surrealness of being summoned to Mr. Sinatra’s hotel room in Las Vegas by his pal Jilly Rizzo to watch “Monday Night Football” with the boys.

“I recounted some of these things and as I got going, I saw, of course, that to make this interesting to me, primarily, I had to see emotionally what was under it all,” Nash says.

Most importantly, she realized she needed to understand why Warren Beatty had become such an outsized figure in her life.

“Why did I pursue Warren?” she asked herself. “Even if I had never met him, would I have kept that obsession going just to pull me forward through life? So that was sort of the beginning.”

FLIRTING AND PHONE CALLS

For a memoir about a relation-



Nash writes how as a teenager, she got a job at a Beverly Hills restaurant in hopes she would run into Beatty, and it actually worked. They went on to have an occasionally intimate lifelong friendship.

ship with a movie star, especially one like Beatty whose love life is legendary, “Collateral Stardust” is practically chaste. Yes, Nash writes of nights spent together when neither she nor Beatty were in serious relationships, but not in lurid detail.

“I don’t talk about a lot of intimacies with Warren,” she says. “I was trying to frame everything from my point of view, and anything that was a little more — and I don’t even think much is scandalous — was usually in the company of other people. I’m not a kiss-and-tell kind of person.”

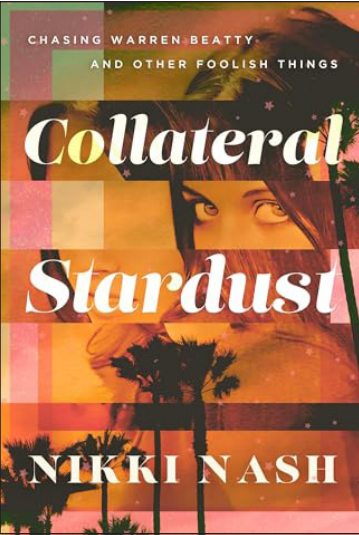
More than sex, there’s the intimacy of a strange kind of friendship. Of long phone calls at any time of day or night — one of Beatty’s favorite pastimes, according to numerous books and articles, including a 1990 Rolling Stone profile that referred to the telephone as Beatty’s “second-most legendary appendage.”

“It was something like a drug,” Nash says of the phone conversations that continued for several decades after any physical contact ended when Beatty married actress Annette Bening in 1992. “That if I got bored or I got sad or nothing was going on, I’ll call Warren, and it’s like just a little dose of juice, just to remind me that this man, from when I was 14, still takes my calls or wants to chat.

“Granted, he may have had those kinds of relationships with lots of people, but at the time he was on the phone with me, it felt special,” she says. “And there were times in my life, honestly, like when I got married, that I thought, OK, and I went through sadness, like I guess I’ll never talk to Warren again; isn’t that an interesting part of my life?”

“It’s not like this was the love of my life. He was more of a barometer for my growth, because every time I did go back out of boredom or curiosity, I found I was more mature. I didn’t revert to the unseen dependence that I might have had on him. I was now a full woman.”

That realization, that she’d grown independent of the movie star who had a telephone voice that Rolling Stone described as “a velvet purr,” came one night in the early 2000s when Beatty called as Nash was settling in to watch the TV thriller “24.” As the usual flirty banter began, Nash told Beatty she’d rather watch her show if they weren’t going to talk about something real.



“That was a small but very big turning point for me to realize I didn’t have to step back into the needy girl, woman, that had this secret whatever with Warren,” she says. “I’m just a person eating toast, watching ‘24,’ and that was the turning point where I could feel on equal footing with him.

“He didn’t throw me away then, either,” Nash continues. “I’d grown up thinking my sexuality was the entree to many situations, and ironically it took someone like Warren Beatty to prove to me that I didn’t have to be that. He still took my calls.”

A FINAL CHAPTER

When Nash got an agent for the book, she called Beatty to let him know. He didn’t seem thrilled, she says, but then noted lots of people had written books about him, and the conversation shifted to something else.

Later, when she had a good draft, she told him that, too. He asked to see it, and she mailed it to his home.

Last year, she called to let him know the book was finally to be published and asked what he’d thought about her draft. He said he’d never received it.

“So I told him about the book, and I said, ‘You’re more of a vehicle, you know. My obsession with you kind of pulled me through life. And I’m always grateful you answered my call, because you might have kept me alive a few of those times.’” (Other chapters in the book describe her struggles with an eating disorder, drug addiction and depression.)

Beatty asked to see the book now, and later that day, Nash drove it to his home to leave it with his assistant. The assistant invited her in to visit with Beatty.

“We talked for about an hour about Elaine May, because I’d just read that biography,” Nash says. “(Beatty) looked through the book, and he had me tell him what every chapter was about.

“He admitted he’d probably just read the parts that were about him,” she says. “I said, ‘Please, I beg you to read it from the start because you’ll miss the tone otherwise.’”

Beatty called the next day and offered a few notes, most of which Nash says she agreed with.

“He called a week later and I said I’d made those changes, does he want to see them?” she recalls. “He didn’t, and then he was talking about something else. And so I left it at that.”