

# Local writer Scott Edwards explores Nicholson's films for new book

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Scott Edwards can pinpoint his first exposure to Jack Nicholson.

It was prior to the 1970 Academy Awards, when Nicholson was a best-actor nominee for "Five Easy Pieces."

"Anytime there was a program leading up to the awards, they always showed that diner scene from 'Five Easy Pieces.'" Edwards recalled. "I must've seen it 100 times."

In the now-classic diner scene, Nicholson attempts to order a side of toast and winds up telling the impatient waitress to hold the chicken salad between her knees.

It enticed Edwards to see "Five Easy Pieces," and he became an avid fan of Nicholson through four decades. A creative director and copywriter at Innis Maggiore Ad Agency, Edwards has authored a new book, "Quintessential Jack: The Art of Jack Nicholson," that explores Nicholson's diverse film roles and performances. The fluidly structured book is detailed, insightful and packed with Nicholson lore, touching upon every title in the Jack filmography.

About Nicholson's performance in "The Shining," Edwards writes: "As Jack Torrance descends from sanity, he becomes a nightmare, a scared animal bleating non-verbal growls as he falls out of his chair, and awakens with saliva falling from his mouth, as he collapses into a tearful state while retaining enough self-awareness to wonder if he is losing his mind. The actor's interpretation, in my belief, is that he doesn't become uncontrolled or insane, but rather an actual monster."

In preparing the 288-page book, Edwards interviewed various figures from Nicholson's career (Peter Fonda, Shirley Knight, Bruce Dern, three members of The Monkees), did

plenty more research, and screened all of Nicholson's films. "I wanted to cover everything, even the smallest roles," Edwards said.

"Quintessential Jack" is available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) for \$35 (\$18.99 Kindle). Edwards will sign copies of the book after a Cleveland Cinematheque screening of Nicholson's 1982 film "The Border" on March 11 at 3:15 p.m. at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

### **1. First off: What is your favorite Jack Nicholson performance?**

"'Five Easy Pieces' made me know about that guy, and it turns out to be my favorite of all his films. There's something about the anti-establishment aspect of it that I found appealing — this lost figure running away from something and he didn't know what. That and 'Easy Rider' were really the ones that made it all happen. It's easy to forget when someone is a superstar who needs one name only, but in reality (Nicholson) struggled for a decade, taking roles that weren't good to pay the bills and get some credits. He gave himself one more year and the next film was 'Easy Rider,' another biker exploitation film that turned out to be a happy accident. My other favorites are the obvious ones. 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' is probably his best-loved role. 'Chinatown' is an explosive film."

### **2. How did you decide to write this type of book about him?**

"I wanted to write it in a way that I didn't see happening beforehand. There are books that celebrate the work of directors, but actors, not so much. I didn't want to do 'The Films of Jack Nicholson,' where there's a synopsis of each movie, a list of the cast and crew and a couple of pictures. I wanted to write something with a greater degree of depth — analytical, but also accessible. The book can be used as a viewer's guide, because a lot of these movies people do not know. It's not very biographical in nature, but I wanted to work in things I got out of my interviews and research that affected his acting and career choices."

### **3. You interviewed some very interesting people for the book. How did you find them?**

"One of the ways I was able to make contact was going to fan conventions. That gave me the kind of access where I could introduce myself to people, whether it was a full, formal interview or an opportunity to ask a question or maybe talk for a few minutes in person. Peter Fonda (Nicholson's 'Easy Rider' co-star) started at a convention. I knew enough to not

ask the same dumb questions he always gets, so I asked him about his (LSD-themed) movie 'The Trip,' which Nicholson wrote the script for. I asked, 'What did you think of the script for 'The Trip' the first time you read it?' He said, 'I thought I was going to be making the first great American art film.'"

#### **4. You also talked to Sonny Barger of the Hells Angels for the book. Why was that?**

"Sonny Barger is probably the most famous of the Hells Angels. I interviewed him at a motorcycle run fundraiser at the Lake County Fairgrounds. He gave me some very interesting insights about working on (Jack Nicholson's 1967 movie) 'Hell's Angels on Wheels' for which the producers hired the actual Hell's Angels. He talked to me about how Nicholson knew how to handle a bike so well people thought he was in one of the (motorcycle) clubs. I talked to Apollo astronauts about the way Nicholson's astronaut character was depicted in 'Terms of Endearment.' I talked to an NPR reporter about Whitey Bulger, who Nicholson's character in 'The Departed' was based on. I talked to a private detective who worked on the Michael Jackson case about the relationship P.I.s have with the police, which was a big part of 'Chinatown.'"

#### **5. How long did it take you to write "Quintessential Jack"?**

"The whole project was over a decade, but the real work on it was three solid years that had to do with research, interviews and watching the films over and over again. I've seen every one of his films, some weren't available officially, some are now. I also saw all of his TV appearances except for two that are considered lost. The book originally was 250,000 words, 107,000 is what I delivered to the publisher. The book is not self-published. McFarland & Co. is an academic publisher that specializes in film studies."