

Devotee Romance

Interview with Ruth Madison

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I first met Ruth Madison (<http://www.ruthmadison.com>) through the Romantic Friday Writers group (<http://romanticfridaywriters.blogspot.be>), and the romance and sensuality in her short snippets blew me away. Through her, I've learned about a whole new world, that of able-bodied men and women who are romantically drawn to those who have physical disabilities.

In a romance universe that includes interspecies love (human/werewolf), interracial love, and BDSM love, isn't the most important part of the equation the word love?

1) Devoteeism. This sounds like an Eastern religion, with chanting and incense. What is it, and do you have any estimates on how many devotees there are - either in numbers, or as a percent of the population? One in twenty/in a hundred/a thousand...?

It does sound like that! Such a dumb word, but somehow the one that got attached to us. Not that there are any better words that I've heard. The first thing people tend to say when you say "Have you ever heard of devotees?" is "You mean like Krishna devotees?" And no, I don't. I guess the word came about because someone liked the rhyme of "amputee devotee" and it used to be thought that there were only devs of amputees. Now we know that's not true. I've also heard the word "admirer." I don't know, they all make it sound like we're zombies, slavishly obsessed.

So right, to answer your question, a devotee in this context is a person who is attracted to people with physical disabilities. The distinction of physical disability is important here. Devs are not people who are preying on people with diminished mental facilities who might be unable to understand or consent to a relationship.

There's no telling how many of us there are. People usually start having these feelings as teenagers (though I was a young child when I started experiencing it) and it tends to be a source of guilt, fear, and secrecy. There are very few people who are going to willingly come forward and say that they are a dev. There are also probably many who know that they like books about disabled heroes but they don't know or think about why. I don't think we'll ever know how many there are.

- 2) Would you consider devoteeism a preference (like I prefer dark-haired men, but will date blonds or redheads), a fetish, a kink, or a perversion? Is there a spectrum, that for some people the erotic need for disability is stronger or weaker than for others? Are there people who are "locked in" to a particular disability - for instance, they would date a man with cerebral palsy, but never a blind man?

I do like to use the hair color example a lot to explain it. It helps non-devs kind of begin to get the idea, but it is a lot more complicated than that. There is an enormous variety in the experience of devness. For some people they are not able to be turned on by anything that does not involve disability. To me, that's a fetish. But a lot of people don't like to use that word. It has the connotation of being something so freaky and inhuman in a way. Also I know some people think that fetish happens because a person is so promiscuous and wild that normal sex no longer satisfies them. That is not at all true of devs and from other fetishes I've examined, I think that's very rarely the case.

The hair color example falls apart because there is a power dynamic issue that's going on in a relationship between a non-disabled and a disabled person. That has to be acknowledged and worked through. I don't think it's always the case that the person who doesn't have a disability has more power. It really depends on the couple and the situation. But I know there is a concern particularly for women who have disabilities that the power dynamic with a non-disabled man could be very skewed.

The thing that devs most want you to know is that they are interested in the whole person. Just because they are physically drawn to someone because she is an amputee doesn't mean that they aren't paying attention to the rest of the girl as well. There are a few devs who have some kind of social disorder and are not able to treat human beings with respect, but I am absolutely convinced they are in the minority.

Some people are perfectly satisfied to read books with disabled characters and have no desire to try out dating people with disabilities in real life. Others do try, though it's very difficult because there is a lot of prejudice and hatred against us. I have dated several men with various disabilities, though none turned out to be the right match for me personality-wise and I'm now marrying a non-disabled man.

Yes, there are some devs who fixate on a particular disability and others who are turned on by many different kinds of physical disabilities. Some like many disabilities but are most attracted to a particular one. It can mutate too. I started out being only attracted to paraplegics and the older I got, the more it grew. I have a friend who particularly likes blind guys and another who particularly likes amputee guys. Both have had successful and honest relationships with men who have those disabilities.

When people first hear about the existence of devs there tends to be a negative gut reaction, but from the devs I have met and communicated with, it seems like we are in a great position to understand disability and to even see it as an advantage. Sometimes people with disabilities will say to me "I don't want to be with someone who can look past my disability, I want someone who enjoys all of me."

- 3) In (W)hole, Elizabeth has always, even as a young child, had erotic fantasies centered around male disability. She also felt great shame, because she knew/feared if her secret was revealed, her parents and everyone around her would despise her as a pervert. In your research, have you found this is the most common experience? Or do some people fall in love with a person who happens to be disabled, and after that relationship ends, find themselves more drawn to disabled persons?

I would say that people who happen to fall in love with a person with a disability and then date other disabled people are probably not devs. Unless there was some deeply buried reason why they got into the first relationship. It can definitely happen that someone falls in love with a person who has a disability and they realize that it's not a big deal and it's fundamentally a relationship like any other. So then they aren't intimidated or scared of the idea of dating someone else with a disability.

The people I've met who identify as being dev had those feelings of attraction years before they even knew anyone with a disability. (W)hole is very closely related to my own experience, particularly how Elizabeth felt as a child. Her family is not like mine and I never had a relationship like hers with Stewart (I never date anyone without telling them I'm a dev, even the non-disabled guys). But from talking to people, it sounds like the very young age that I experienced it was unusual. Most start noticing it around puberty as their sex drive begins to develop.

There's a lot of theories floating around about what causes devness and where it comes from, but there has never been sufficient research on the subject. It's all just gut reaction and misunderstanding. For example, some believe that as a child I must have had some experience of admiring a person with a disability and it turned into a fetish. But I had no such experience. I had dev feelings before I met anyone who had a disability. I had a very normal and happy childhood and the feelings were with me from such a young age that I really feel like I was born with it.

- 4) Traditional YA often allows unspeakable violence, but little to no erotic sex. Think Hunger Games. When I read (W)hole, I felt that it had a very YA voice, but that the sensuality would keep it out of the YA section of a bookstore. In what genre would you shelve this, and why?

Oh, so true! This was the biggest challenge in publishing the book. No one wanted to touch it because it was too risqué for YA but too tame for adult. It's classified now as Romance, though it's really a Coming of Age tale. This inability to find a genre for it has, I think, held it back. No one quite knows what to make of it. Though, I think it's a fascinating read for people who are curious about other people's deepest, darkest secrets! (Bev: [An idea - there's a up-and-coming genre now called New Adult... perhaps it would fit there?](#))

- 5) Let's talk movies and the disabled. I remember how blown away I was by the sex scene between Jon Voight and Jane Fonda in *Coming Home*. *fans self* Did you see *The Sessions*? What did you think of it? (I particularly enjoyed the actress in a wheelchair who portrayed disabled people having rather wild and crazy sex lives.)

I have not seen *The Sessions* yet! I really want to. It's definitely on my list. I've heard such good things. Money is tight these days, so I'm waiting for a free RedBox coupon or for it to come up on Netflix.

The first movie for me that I found really sexy was *Born on the Fourth of July*. I was probably way too young to be watching it! I also found *Avatar* ridiculously sexy.

I'm happy to hear about the actress you mention. I think it's great that we're starting to see stories of people with disabilities being regular people. Because they are! In fact, I really dislike the "us" and "them" language that I feel kind of forced to use. I wish there were more roles given to actors who actually have the disabilities being portrayed. Too often in movies the experience of the character with the disability is given a really cliché and insulting portrayal. I'm excited to see Teal Sherer build her career as an actress who uses a wheelchair. I think she brings a great nuance to characters.



- 6) When people write paranormal romance, nobody asks if they have personally had sex with a vampire or werewolf. When people write murder mysteries, nobody asks how many people they have killed. It's all presumed to be fantasy and imagination. But when people write erotic romance, like BDSM or menage, for example, they are often asked how closely the material is modeled after their own sex lives. Are you comfortable discussing whether there is a personal experience factor in choosing to write stories with this common thread? Or, could you share what is the weirdest or worst assumption people have expressed to you?

Hahaha, that's true! It's all about fantasy when you write Romance. You're just telling yourself a story that makes you happy and feel good. I'd say that my characters are more comfortable in their own skin than most people who have the same disabilities in real life.

Realism in certain aspects is very important to me. I want to give realistic portrayals of how sex works with spinal cord injury and not just gloss it over. Because if I do my job right, then I'm showing women that they totally could have a great relationship with a paralyzed guy and there's no need to turn down that person in real life. So I want them to see the real challenges and how they are overcome.

I started writing my stories because I ran out of books in the library that had disabled guys in them. I started creating my own, writing what I wanted to read. Later in life I did start dating men with disabilities and that has allowed me to add some more realistic detail. But the guys in romance novels don't tend to be real guys and they're not supposed to be. What I love in books I wouldn't really want in real life. For example, I like books about bad boys. In real life, I love geeky, kind, gentle men.

I'm sure people have made some nasty assumptions about me, but none that I've been directly told! I guess people expect me to be more sexual and promiscuous than I actually am.

- 7) Dev Dreams is a collection of short stories and novellas, which range in heat level from sweet to super-spicy. Who's your favorite couple in this set, and why will a reader love them?

Tough question! I love all my couples. I guess I have a particular fondness for Ember and James from *On Saturday Afternoon*. Em is definitely a side of me, trapped and debilitated by her shyness. She has to choose whether to follow her heart or give in to what others want from her and that's a struggle I can relate to.

- 8) On your website, you have short stories that people can read for free, or donate. I've heard of restaurants like that, but not writing models. Do people donate, or just help themselves?

You know, the donation button was something that I thought I'd try, but it hasn't been successful. I like to experiment with different ways of bringing stories to people, so it was worth trying out, but I'm going to take that down. I like to give away the shorter stories so that people have a chance to see what my writing style is like and they will then have an idea if they would like to read my books.



- 9) What project are you currently working on, and when you expect to release it?

I have so many ideas and it's really hard to prioritize and focus on one until it's done! Currently I'm working on a novella that is a twist on the classic romance plot of a rich man and a young secretary. In mine, the rich man is a quadriplegic. That will be going to my editor and proofreader within the next couple of weeks. I'm so looking forward to sending out an email to my list subscribers when that's ready because I haven't had anything new in a while!

I'm also working on something really different for me, which is a cozy murder mystery with a girl detective who is in a wheelchair. My writers group is helping me to polish that one.

Then there's the story of Dylan Sinclair that I think people are really going to like. It's about a young man who is paraplegic and dreams of a career in music. He has the talent, but not the look. So he convinces his brother to impersonate him and the scheme works a little too well. I'm so excited about this story, but I'm having trouble moving forward with it because I want to make it perfect!

10) What question has no one ever asked you (and what is your answer)?

Ooo, another tough one. I'm such an open book and I always encourage people to ask me anything they want. Yeah, I really can't think of anything! [Okay, readers, it's up to you to pose a question for Ruth in the comments.](#)

Want to read one of her stories? Here's some to choose from:

http://www.amazon.com/Ruth-Madison/e/B004FVNL3S/ref=src_tc_2_0?qid=1368785787&sr=1-2-ent



There isn't enough fiction out there with characters who have disabilities. Ruth Madison aims to fix that. After years of combing through the dusty back shelves of libraries looking for her elusive, imperfect hero, she started writing her own.

Ruth's romantic tales are full of wounded heroes: men physically challenged by life, but not defeated. These men overcome the difficulties of amputation, paralysis, or cerebral palsy to find acceptance, happiness, and heroines who love them exactly as they are.

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