



## Authentically Ace and Anxious: How a Fanfiction Series Embodies #OwnVoices Storytelling

Review by Kate Fortner

rufeepeach. *Red Lights*. Archive of Our Own, last modified July 23, 2016.

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/7563763>.

rufeepeach. *White Flags*. Archive of Our Own, last modified February 4, 2017a.

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/9565145>.

rufeepeach. *Blue Lines*. Archive of Our Own, last modified November 12, 2017b.

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/12703503>.



The above image is a still from the television show *Once Upon a Time*. It depicts Mr. Gold, a middle-aged white man with shoulder-length brown hair who is wearing a suit, and Belle, a younger woman with auburn hair who is wearing a blouse. The camera faces their sides and shows them from the shoulders up, and they are caught mid-kiss with Gold's hands around Belle's neck. He has a ring on the hand facing the camera, and they are standing in a pawnshop.

Stories focusing on a-spec (aromantic and/or asexual spectrum) experiences can be hard to come by in popular culture. As a result, many a-spec individuals feel the need to create those stories themselves, sometimes without even realizing that is what they are doing. One such example is *Red Lights* by rufeepeach, a series of transformative novellas, colloquially known as fanfiction, that center on two characters from the ABC melodrama *Once Upon a Time*, a show about classic fairytale characters being robbed of their memories and sent to live in modern day Maine because of the Evil Queen's Dark Curse. The exact definition of fanfiction is a matter of some debate, but it can be understood as "derivative amateur writing"

in the sense that these are stories based on other stories and not professionally published or as the broader category of "imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 5 – 6). *Red Lights*, a series of three novella-length stories, was self-published on Archive of Our Own, a noncommercial and nonprofit website run by the Organization for Transformative Works which hosts millions of fanworks, particularly fanfiction. *Red Lights* focuses on a romance between the characters Rumplestiltskin (in this story, Isaac Gold) and Belle (in this story, Belle French who is masquerading as a woman named Lacey). It takes place in a modern alternate universe—the characters live in contemporary Maine without the fantasy elements of the original show. But perhaps the most compelling aspect of the story is that it reinterprets Rumplestiltskin as demisexual and Belle as



demiromantic and that this did not become clear to even the author herself until after she had written the first story in the series.

The first installment in the series, *Red Lights*, was written for a fandom gift exchange event on Tumblr called “Rumbelle Christmas in July.” This annual event involves two fanfiction writers who enjoy stories about the same couple (also called a “pairing” or “ship”), agreeing to exchange prompts and write stories to be published on a set date. rufeepeach, often referred to as Ru, received the prompt “virgin Gold, waiting for marriage” from another fanfiction author, and “sort of bent the prompt a little,” (2016, n.p.). The result is a story about Isaac Gold hiring the services of an escort to take his virginity. The escort, who introduces herself as Lacey to preserve anonymity but turns out to be named Belle French, is nothing like he expected, and the two form a deep connection. This premise is relatively simple, and in the wrong hands, it could be trite or even offensive, but Ru handles the subject matter with extreme care, sensitivity, and warmth. She takes care to present Lacey, whose name is a reference to the canonical alter ego of the show’s Belle but whose employment as a sex worker was fabricated for the fic, as a fully realized human with a life and personality outside of being a sex worker, instead of reducing the character to a stereotype or sexualized cliché. In fact, this proves to be critical for the success of their night together. And Ru presents Isaac as a complicated, compassionate, demisexual man who also happens to have an anxiety disorder.

Isaac’s demisexuality and anxiety are traits he shares with the author herself, who self-describes as “bi/ace” and has shared her experiences with anxiety and depression on social media. This authenticity permeates the entire series, but it is especially noticeable in the titular *Red Lights* which discusses how Isaac’s lack of interest in sex combined with his anxiety around intimacy have resulted in him reaching forty-five years of age without having had sex—and that this need not be a source of shame:

“[Isaac] chanced a glance at her when she squeezed his hands with hers, and found her blue eyes deep and warm with understanding. “Why would I laugh?” [Lacey] asked, gently. “I think it’s very romantic, wanting to wait. My best friend made the same decision. She didn’t sleep with anyone until her wedding night, and she and her wife are blissfully happy together.” (rufeepeach 2016, n.p.)

In *Red Lights*, Lacey/Belle provides a source of incredible comfort and knowledge to Isaac about sexuality and anxiety—the title derives from the safe word system that uses the colors green, yellow, and red to indicate emotional boundaries. Readers who also struggle with these issues can feel represented in Isaac’s struggles and empowered by seeing him grow and be supported. This treatment of Isaac’s character is refreshingly different from the way that adult virgins are usually treated and represented in stories. Characters with these experiences are far too often the object of pity and scorn, depicted as immature and unattractive, or otherwise written as offensive stereotypes rather than fully realized characters. These depictions are especially harmful for the way they enforce compulsory sexuality, suggesting that not having had sex is shameful and a sign that something is wrong with a person.

In between writing *Red Lights* and the sequel, Ru realized that her story was about demisexuality and demiromanticism and added those tags to the publication of the sequel, *White Flags*, cementing that Isaac is meant to be interpreted as demisexual, and revealing that Belle is meant to be interpreted as demiromantic. Belle’s demiromanticism takes the spotlight in *White Flags*, which picks up four months after their meeting in *Red Lights* as she realizes she has fallen in love for the first time. In *Red Lights*, Belle walks Isaac through the ins and outs of



sexuality, but in *White Flags*, the role is reversed, and Isaac helps Belle come to terms with her feelings on romance and commitment. The parallelism is highlighted when Isaac says, “I just thought you sounded an awful lot like me when we first met.” (rufeepeach 2017a, n.p.) The series concludes with *Blue Lines*, which sees the two of them happily engaged with a baby on the way.

The *Red Lights* series highlights the incredible work that fanfiction can accomplish by reimagining stories with presumed heterosexual characters as queer, teaching the importance of communication and consent, challenging the stigmas that surround disability and sexuality, and accurately reflecting some of the author’s own experiences as an a-spec, disabled individual. The story does have some limitations in that it may not be as easily understood by or accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with the show *Once Upon a Time*, but I believe it holds value even without that additional context. A considerable amount of the backstory of the characters is both established in the novellas and wholly original to it. Furthermore, the issues of mental health and sexuality are relevant to everyone and stand on their own. Additionally, the characters never use the words demiromantic or demisexual to describe themselves in the text, though their experiences are obviously in line with those labels, and the author has confirmed them both on social media and in the tags on the website to which it was posted, Archive of Our Own.

Finally, I would like to mention that this work includes explicit depictions of sex—albeit through a demisexual lens. For readers who are not comfortable with this, I would advise steering clear because the depictions of sex are extremely integral to the plot. It also features internalized ableism and acephobia which, while extremely accurate to the experiences of many disabled and asexual people, could be triggering for some readers. These limitations aside, the entire series is available to read for free on Archive of Our Own as a heartwarming a-spec love story and a positive example of well-written, subversive fanfiction written by an ace and bi author. Just be sure to leave comments and kudos.

## Works Cited

- Hellekson, Karen and Kristina Busse. 2014. “Introduction: Why a Fan Fiction Studies Reader Now?” In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 1–17. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

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