

By Mara Sassoon

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Emily Deschanel ('98), left, and Daria Polatin ('00) attended CFA together and have reunited to turn Polatin's novel *Devil in Ohio* into a Netflix series.

**ACTOR EMILY DESCHANEL AND SCREENWRITER DARIA POLATIN TALK ABOUT COLLABORATING ON THE NETFLIX LIMITED SERIES *DEVIL IN OHIO***

Ben Trivett

Patrick Stratner



**IN DARIA POLATIN’S DEBUT** YA thriller, *Devil in Ohio*, teenager Mae escapes from a satanic cult and moves in with her psychiatrist, Suzanne Mathis. Mae is supposed to live with Mathis and her family for only a few days, but her stay turns longer and longer—to the dismay of Mathis’ 15-year-old daughter, Jules. Mae starts wearing Jules’ clothes, attending her school, and dating her crush. Then, the cult attempts to get Mae back, putting the Mathis family in danger.

The 2017 book is inspired by real-life events. Polatin’s manager, producer Rachel Miller, brought the story to her attention, and she was riveted by the dynamics at play between patient and psychiatrist. “I thought, ‘I *need* to tell this story,’” says Polatin (’00), an accomplished playwright and screenwriter who has written for Amazon’s *Hunters* and *Jack Ryan*. She tracked down and interviewed a source closely involved in the incident and began writing. “A novel seemed like the best format to tell the story initially,” she says. “Novel writing and TV writing are very different. Novel writing can be very interior—you can really live inside the head of the character. But I always had it in the back of my mind to also adapt it for the screen one day.”

In 2019, Polatin began working on a pilot script in earnest. Later this year, *Devil in Ohio*, a limited series starring Emily Deschanel as Mathis, will begin streaming on Netflix. Polatin, the showrunner and executive producer, and Deschanel (’98), known for her role as forensic anthropologist Temperance “Bones” Brennan on the long-running Fox series *Bones*, go way back. Both studied acting at BU and quickly became friends while in the program. They reconnected over Zoom in January, just as *Devil in Ohio* was in post-production, to discuss their memories of BU, what it’s like playing a man onstage, and how actors and screenwriters can work together to produce great film and TV.

**Daria Polatin:** Emily, remember when we were in *A Tale of Two Cities* together at BU? **Emily Deschanel:** Yes, how could I forget? Wait, who was the British woman who directed that? **DP:** It was Caroline Eves. **ED:** Oh my gosh, you have a great memory. I think Caroline Eves directed that junior

year Shakespeare project. Was she doing that when you were a junior?

**DP:** Yeah, I loved the Shakespeare project. It was basically making a new piece by taking story lines from different Shakespeare plays.

**ED:** Yeah, it was a Shakespeare patchwork quilt kind of thing. And I think it gave the opportunity for women to play a variety of roles. I think we probably both played men quite a bit in college...

**DP:** Because we’re tall! Yes, I played a lot of men in college.

**ED:** What men did you play?

**DP:** I played Guildenstern. We also adapted the book *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, and I played the lead woman’s husband—walking stick and all. I can’t remember what else at the moment, but it was definitely a thing.

**ED:** Oh, that’s fun. Yeah, you played men more than I did. But, you’re how tall?

**DP:** I’m six feet.

**ED:** And I’m five-foot-eight. I think I was in an all-female cast in a production of *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, but we all played men at some point in that. Such is the experience of a theater student.

**DP:** I liked it because it was almost easier to dive into something so different. I also liked playing characters with dialects or accents. It helped me embody something different.

**ED:** I totally agree. It’s fun to dive into a role with a different dialect or accent, or different physical qualities. I don’t get to do that as much now. I mean, I’ve done dialects, but it’s not like in college when it was like, you will play an 80-year-old man with a limp from Austria.

**DP:** It was such a great artistic playground to be in during that period—to get to explore all different kinds of characters and play all

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DARIA POLATIN

kinds of roles without any pigeonholing or judgments. I really loved how intensive it was.

**ED:** I also loved the intensity of the program. We were in class from early in the morning through rehearsals late at night. For most of us, this was all we wanted to do. And I guess it prepared us for working in television.

**DP:** One hundred percent. It prepared us for 18-hour days.

**ED:** Except it’s a lot easier when you’re 20. Daria, you had told me that [the late CFA professor of playwriting Jon] Lipsky’s class was one thing that made you interested in writing. I want to hear what that experience was like.

**DP:** He had seen some of my work, and [during] my senior year at BU, he found me in the hallway and said, “You are a writer, and you need to take my playwrighting class.” I enrolled, but almost dropped the class because I was so busy. I filled out my drop form and brought it to Lipsky. And I remember he said, “I’m not signing that.” I begrudgingly finished the play, an adaptation of Chekhov’s short story *The Lady with the Pet Dog*, turned it in, and the school ended up producing it for the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. It won the regional contest, and then it was performed at the Kennedy Center and got published.

**ED:** Wow, that’s so interesting to hear. And to think if Jon Lipsky wasn’t your teacher. For the record, I took his playwrighting class, and he did not tell me that I am a writer.

**DP:** Well, I’m glad to know he didn’t just say that to everybody and I just fell for it. [Laughs.]

**ED:** Do you miss acting at all?

**DP:** The last play I was in was an Off-Broadway production in the Summer Play Festival. I played an Italian actress/model with this great accent. It was so fun. But after that I was like, “I’m done.” I haven’t really looked back. Acting onstage made me very nervous. There’s no net—if you forget your lines, what do you do? I enjoyed it, but it gave me a lot of anxiety. Not that writing doesn’t give me a lot of anxiety.

**ED:** It’s funny because those kind of moments—being onstage or on set and you forget a line or someone else forgets a line, and you don’t know what to do next—they terrify the hell out of me, but they are also some of my most favorite moments in acting. It’s this crazy thrill of anything could happen. I thrive on that. I totally get the

anxiety-producing part of acting, but I somehow love it.

**DP:** Well, you’re very good at it. How did you find transitioning from mostly doing theater in school and then moving into TV and film?

**ED:** I didn’t have that transition some people have where they’re in New York doing theater first, even though theater was my first love. But I realized that there were so many more opportunities for me as an actor in LA. I found a manager in LA and then I started auditioning for film and TV roles. A few months later, I got my first job, a Stephen King miniseries called *Rose Red*. Scary stuff. I actually still use some of the script analysis things we learned at BU, and I think it’s helpful to have the background I got from BU to play different parts.

**DP:** The script analysis classes were so good at BU. I learned so much about storytelling and breaking down a story. I think what that gave me as a writer are the tools to know the kind of information the actor needs—the character’s motivations, backstory.

**ED:** Yeah, and us actors appreciate that. You can make lines work, but when you have the background to understand why you’re saying what you’re saying, it makes a huge difference. I’m thinking of our time on set. I got as much information as I could from you, both on the real story and your novel. I feel like I was always hounding you to give me more and more information. What was it like making your own book into a TV series?

**DP:** I have adapted other books for TV before. I worked on *Jack Ryan* for two seasons and the season of *Castle Rock* that adapted *Misery* and tells the Annie Wilkes backstory. But getting to adapt my own novel was so interesting. I just knew the characters and the world so intimately. For the TV version, we really wanted to go into it primarily through Suzanne’s eyes and experience the story from Suzanne’s perspective. Why does Suzanne take this girl home? Why does she want to help her? **ED:** I found that fascinating too. It was really helpful that you had so much time with the characters and the story from writing the book and writing the series.

**DP:** When you’re storytelling, it’s not only about what you’re showing, it’s also about what you’re not showing. So knowing what you’re not showing is helpful and adds that extra layer to creating well-formed characters

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EMILY DESCHANEL

whose world you’re just happening to get a glimpse into certain parts of.

**ED:** That’s a good point. There are always things the audience is not seeing. That’s so interesting to think about. Do you want to write another novel?

**DP:** I do. But novel writing is extremely time-consuming, and I’m always thinking about what medium is best for a story.

**ED:** A novel is no joke. I mean, not that TV writing is an easy feat in any way.

**DP:** It’s all very time-consuming. It just takes so much physical and mental energy when you’re really giving your all to a project. You spend years working on these things, so it has to be something that continues to bring you joy and be interesting. I first started the pilot with Netflix, like, three years ago at this point.

**ED:** And when did you start writing the novel?

**DP:** I think in 2013. The novel came out in 2017. All in all, with the show coming out, it’s

been almost a 10-year process that the story has lived through.

**ED:** I think it’s interesting for people to understand how long some of these things can take. That’s not always the case. Most of my career was in network series. So it was grind, grind, grind. Sometimes I’d finish an episode and it would air, like, two weeks later.

**DP:** Oh wow! One of the advantages to writing a show for a streaming service is that usually you will finish writing the season before you film it. Of course, there are always things that you learn on set, and you still have to pivot for all the production issues, like weather...

**ED:** Weather? What? [Laughs.] Yeah, we definitely had to deal with our share of weather in Vancouver while shooting *Devil in Ohio*. Some bomb cyclones, atmospheric rivers...

**DP:** Snowstorms.

**ED:** That was nerve-racking when it snowed because it wasn’t going to match what had already been shot, and there were these consecutive things that we had to shoot.

**DP:** Yeah, we had to heat blast an entire field to get rid of the snow. It was a fast shoot.

**ED:** It was so great to have this shorthand with you on set, Daria. It was like, okay, we know each other. Let’s just dive into the work part.

**DP:** And you brought such a beautiful, intense focus to this role, and really graceful empathy to this character.

**ED:** Thank you. That’s very kind. It was really lovely to work together after so many years in such a different way than doing *A Tale of Two Cities* at BU.

**DP:** We’ve come a long way since *A Tale of Two Cities*. ●