

# ACTING UP

Film star Kathleen Turner has found it difficult to come to terms with her rheumatoid arthritis as **Juliet Stephens** discovers

It's not every A-list Hollywood superstar that can step outside the glitz and glamour and discuss their life, warts and all. But Kathleen Turner has done that – specifically about her struggle with rheumatoid arthritis (RA). In her recently published autobiography, *Send Yourself Roses*, she talks about the highs and lows of her life. The book reinforces her image as a strong, sexy, confident woman, but also explores some of the struggles in her life – her father's death when she was a teenager, her relationships, her marriage and her arthritis. Most celebrity autobiographies play on our lust for gossip, and Kathleen Turner doesn't avoid sharing her thoughts, but she doesn't dwell on tittle-tattle. She has overcome some huge obstacles in her life and feels she has something to share with others.

## Body image

Kathleen Turner is famously sexy – from her breakthrough film *Body Heat* in 1981 (which won BAFTA and Golden Globe nominations) to playing the voice of cartoon diva Jessica Rabbit in the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Working in an industry so driven by physicality, she struggled with accepting her diagnosis on a personal and professional level. Not uncommonly, RA attacked her confidence terribly. 'I lost belief in my own attractiveness, my own desirability, everything,' she says in her book.

Equally, for her career Kathleen Turner had to maintain contacts, but the film industry is merciless when it comes to disability. Thankfully her then husband, Jay, was very supportive. She describes Jay's strategic chivalry – when having lunch with a studio boss, he would help her to stand up by pulling the chair out for her and subtly helping her up.

## Fame and fortune

She acknowledges that her fame and money have been invaluable in securing a correct diagnosis, and continuing support with her condition. In an interview with *Arthritis*

*Today*, the magazine for American charity The Arthritis Foundation, she says: 'I have access to the best doctors in the damn country. Can you imagine what happens to the average person [with RA] – who happens, most often, to be a woman? She's not going to be diagnosed. Or she's going to be diagnosed incorrectly. She's going to be treated as if she's experiencing the change of life or just being vain.'

## The long road to diagnosis

But like a lot of people with arthritis, the journey to diagnosis was long and drawn out. She first felt the symptoms of RA while filming *Serial Mom* in 1991. She described it to *Arthritis Today*: 'My feet became extremely painful and swollen. The shoes I had bought two months before started to feel very tight and uncomfortable. I thought maybe I was just overworking, that my feet were swelling from being on them too much. It got to the point where all I could wear was a pair of sneakers – unlaced.'

She saw a podiatrist, who suggested that she simply buy bigger shoes. When symptoms started appearing in her neck, so she could not turn her head from side to side, an X-ray revealed that she had lost the curvature of her first four vertebrae, but was given no recommendation from the doctor as to what might be causing the pain. Next her elbow became inflamed and she was unable to straighten her arm, but an X-ray and MRI scan revealed nothing. After a year of symptoms and no diagnosis, she was at her wits end and went to her GP of 20 years, saying that she thought she was dying. He phoned her with her blood test results, a scene she describes in her book. 'He called me up and said: "Kathleen, most people have a rheumatoid factor of maybe 60. Yours is 16 hundred.'" He explained that she had RA but not how to deal with it.

Though initially she was relieved to have a diagnosis, the fear of the condition emerged as she learned more about it. She talks about this in her book. 'It got increasingly scary. I



went to an RA support group, and it was terrifying to see this as my future. All the people I'd met up to that point with RA were disabled and disfigured for life.'

## Acceptance

Kathleen Turner is a very physical woman, proud that she always does her own stunts, so to face the reality of the diagnosis was extremely tough. 'It was a complete and total nightmare. My physical ability was the basis of my confidence,' she says. 'Suddenly all of it was stripped away. My body could only respond with excruciating pain. The joints in my hands were so swollen I couldn't hold a pen. Some days I couldn't hold a glass to get a drink of water. I couldn't pick up my child.'

Like so many people with RA, she felt vulnerable and dependent. She describes one occasion when her hands could not squeeze the moisturiser from the bottle and her daughter had to help her, 'I hated so much for her to see my weakness. A mother is supposed to be strong for her child. I felt a constant sense of letting her down.'

Equally hard was the journey to finding



Kathleen Turner with *Romancing the Stone* co-star Michael Douglas above, and before her diagnosis with RA (bottom right) and at a recent book signing for her autobiography (top right)



appropriate medication. Following what she describes to *Arthritis Today* as ‘several years of drug cocktails and conflicting advice – heat or cold, rest or activity, food or not. What they all agreed on was medication. I took prednisone for years, as well as methotrexate.’ Of course medications have side effects and she describes being swollen, bloated and depressed. ‘I read up and found that prednisone can be a serious depressant, which no doctor ever told me. I was trying to say to myself: “I am not in a rage. This is not me, it’s the medicine”, but of course you forget. You’re in such pain.’

### A new battle

The press was cruel about behavioural and physical changes, which were a result of medication she was taking. But still she didn’t speak up about arthritis because, as she says in her book: ‘They’d hire me if they thought I was a drunk because they could understand drinking, but they wouldn’t hire me if I had a mysterious, scary illness they didn’t understand.’

Ironically, Kathleen Turner did turn to alcohol to cope with her arthritis. She says:

‘When my pain from the illness was at its worst, I discovered that vodka killed it quite wonderfully. I didn’t want to take painkillers because I didn’t like the way they mucked up my mind. Stupidly, I didn’t consider that alcohol mucks up your mind too.’

### The turning point


A momentous event in her journey with RA was the recommendation of a doctor from a friend. He suggested she was eligible to take part in a medical trial, for an anti-TNF drug (etanercept) that had not yet had FDA (Food and Drug Administration) approval. He also urged her to swim, no matter how much it hurt, just to get the blood flowing and encourage movement in the joints, and to use light weights to build up her muscles and take pressure off the joints. She describes this as a real turnaround for her. ‘Gradually we began to determine a course of treatment that worked for me and would eventually put me in remission,’ she says.

### Lessons learnt

In recent years Kathleen Turner’s career has focused on theatre work – huge successes

like *The Graduate* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Though physically demanding, she has tackled chronic pain for several years now and says: ‘I’ve learned simply not to let pain take charge of my life. You learn a lot from pain. Too bad you don’t learn as much from being happy.’ She has a healthier lifestyle now, avoiding pain medication but exercising regularly, eating healthily, having massages and warm paraffin baths for her hands and feet.

She is also committed to raising awareness of the condition. ‘I want people to know that they can get information, to know that they can manage this disease, and they can fight for their lives and their lifestyle. I want them to know that there is help.’

Her book describes the journey with arthritis, but also what she has learnt. ‘The most significant thing that having RA taught me was to prioritise. I’d always been superwoman. I thought I could do anything but once I knew the RA would be part of me forever, I sensed that I’d lost control of my life, and I had to sort out the competing priorities if I wanted to regain control. Prioritising helped me to know what is important to me. My family is important. My relationship with the people I work with is important. What gossip columnists say is not important. What’s important is to endure. And sometimes, simply to endure is the greatest victory of all.’ 

**We are giving away a copy of Kathleen Turner’s autobiography *Send Yourself Roses* to one lucky reader. For your chance to win, send a postcard with your name and address to *Arthritis News*, 18 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD. The winner will be drawn at random. Closing date: Tuesday 30 September.**