

# Normal People

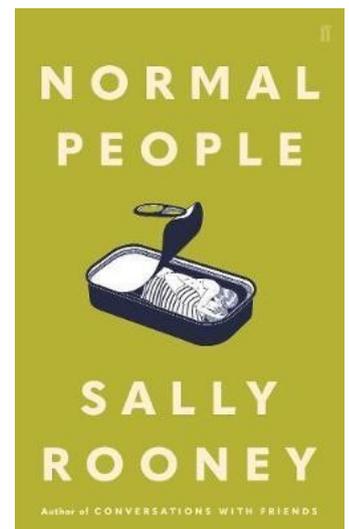
Sally Rooney

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A COCKTAIL OF HIGH INTELLIGENCE, TRUTH AND HUMANENESS, AND ALL THREE OF THESE THINGS ARE SO PROPERLY CONTEMPORARY AND ATTUNED, NOT JUST TO NOW BUT TO NOW PLUS THE HISTORY OF THOUGHT AND POLITICS, THAT IT BECOMES APPARENT AS YOU READ HER THAT SHE'S UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING HAPPENING IN BOTH LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY WITH A BREADTH THAT WORKS LIKE [AN] UNDERCURRENT IN THE BLOOD OF A READER

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ALI SMITH ABOUT *NORMAL PEOPLE*



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## Sally Rooney: “I don’t respond to authority very well”



Among the advice traditionally handed out to newbie writers are two classic injunctions: write what you know, and go out into the world to find out more. Sally Rooney, by her own admission, has observed the former to the exclusion of the latter. “I’ve never attempted to write from the perspective of someone older than me so my novels are all about my cohort,” she says. “That’s not about making a statement but it’s what I can do.”

Given that she had written two novels by her mid-20s, her cohort was inevitably limited. The main characters of both are Dublin university students – as Rooney herself was when she began to write them. Frances and Bobbi, from her debut ***Conversations With Friends***, are ex-lovers with a burgeoning performance poetry partnership, while Marianne and Connell, in its follow-up ***Normal People***, are “culchie” schoolfriends who, like their creator, move to the big city from small-town Ireland.

The history of fiction is littered with callow university novels, so what happened next was extraordinary: almost as soon as ***Conversations with Friends*** appeared in the spring of 2017, Rooney was being hailed as the voice of the millennials, a Snapchat Salinger. It was an intensity of acclaim that happens once or twice in a generation, placing her alongside Donna Tartt or Zadie Smith as a writer who appeared to emerge fully formed, not only in her craft but as a literary celebrity and a mouthpiece for something in the culture that needed to be articulated.

Unlike Tartt or Smith, she already had a second novel ready to roll: in a rare state of excitability, the literary world held its breath for the arrival of ***Normal People***, and before it had even been published it was longlisted for the Man Booker prize. Though it didn’t make the Booker shortlist, it has just been announced as Waterstones book of the year and won Rooney the award for international author of 2018 at the Specsavers national book awards. It is also shortlisted for the Costa book awards.

The woman who arrives to meet me at a stylish new coffee and yoga joint around the corner from the flat she shares with her maths teacher partner, is now all of 27 years old. Neatly and unobtrusively dressed, she talks rapidly in a manner that is simultaneously confident and self-deprecating.

How does it feel to be on such a rollercoaster? “There’s a frisson of weirdness of seeing your name mentioned and someone you don’t know talking about you. I have to discipline myself not to look at it, but obviously it’s on a very, very small scale – it’s not like you’re a Premier League football player,” she says, briskly. Yet the reception of her novels has taken seasoned commentators beyond the usual literary compliments. ***Reviewing Normal People*** in the Irish Times, Anne Enright wrote that it “adds, fearlessly, to an unsettling discussion about submission – I felt I understood something, at the end of it, that I had previously pushed away”. Ali Smith, who picked her out for a panel of debut writers, regards her writing as “a cocktail of high intelligence, truth and humaneness, and all three of these things are so properly contemporary and attuned, not just to now but to now plus the history of thought and politics, that it becomes apparent as you read her that she’s understood something happening in both language and society with a breadth that works like [an] undercurrent in the blood of a reader.”

Her characters drift in and out of relationships and talk earnestly of politics and literary theory; they holiday in France or Italy but sometimes don’t have enough money to eat. But Rooney is quick to brush away any suggestion that she is a cultural

pundit, saying: “I certainly never intended to speak for anyone other than myself. Even myself I find it difficult to speak for. My books may well fail as artistic endeavours but I don’t want them to fail for failing to speak for a generation for which I never intended to speak in the first place.”

So what was the journey that brought her to this destination? “I can’t look back and say I was clearly on a trajectory. For ages it just seemed I was going round and round in circles, getting nowhere,” she says. Her biography, for someone who only broke the surface less than two years ago, is well rehearsed. In her own construction: “I was born in the same year a Virgin megastore was raided for selling condoms without a pharmacist present. Two years before the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Four years before the legalisation of divorce.”

In a more prosaic version, she was the middle of three children born in the county town of Castlebar to a father who worked for Telecom Éireann and a mother who ran the local arts centre. There were always books around the house and they encouraged her to read but, though she joined a creative writing group at 15, she didn’t take to school. “I think a large part of it was that it was being a teenager, which I didn’t enjoy,” she says. “But I don’t respond to authority very well. I

fundamentally don’t agree with accepting authority that you haven’t agreed to in some way. As a funnel – as a way of making children into adults – I don’t think it’s good practice.”

She did not see herself as a high achiever. “I was not a precocious child. Before I went to do my degree I told my mother I was never going to read anything written before 1920. School was all about learning by rote and I can do that to a very passable degree, but I’d never do homework or assignments. I wasn’t failing, but I didn’t have any opportunity to pursue what interested me.”

She nevertheless won a place at Trinity College Dublin, which – numbering Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett, not to mention Enright, among its alumni – must surely have seemed pretty prestigious. Ah, she parries, but she didn’t get on to her first choice of course, being consigned to English literature when she had elected to study English and sociology. “I guess in a way maybe I was lucky. It was a completely new way of thinking about books and literature and it felt intellectually challenging. I was grappling with the modernists and 19th-century novels and even now I’m still developing the ability to read intelligently, which I hope will continue for the rest of my life.”

In her second year she took up debating, which took her on a

team outing to Manchester, where she won the 2013 European University Debating Championships. But once again she is keen to play it down. “It was definitely interesting, though my experience with the competitive side of things is that it’s actually like a game. I was going to say like football but I think it’s less intellectually involved than football. Really it’s more like Scrabble.”

Her writing life also began to take shape in her second year, after – like the two central characters in *Normal People* – she was awarded a scholarship that would pay her food, rent and tuition and enable her to stay on for an MA. In the novel this experience is bisected along class lines, with well-to-do Marianne accepting it as a personal validation, while for Connell – whose single mother cleans for Marianne’s family – it is an intellectual lifeline. Which was it for Rooney herself? “It meant a huge amount to me,” she says. “My parents had been supporting me and I don’t think it would have been realistic for them to go on doing so for a master’s degree. It gave me a sense of security, and permission just to keep my place there for a longer period of time.”

She enrolled for a master’s in politics but dropped it after a few weeks in favour of American studies, completing a draft of *Conversations With Friends* in three months. “But it was a very drafty draft,” she says,

so she put it away and wrote the first of two Connell and Marianne stories, in which they were in their mid-20s but clearly had a backstory dating to their school days. That first story went nowhere but the second, **At the Clinic**, was published in a literary magazine.

After she went back to **Conversations** and knocked it into shape, things began to move quickly: it was snapped up by Faber in a seven-way auction, and a month after delivering her MA thesis she began work on **Normal People**. “I thought of **Conversations** as my trial novel,” she says drily, “so it gave me a huge amount of permission to write the same thing over again.”

Student milieu aside, **Normal People** is not in fact the same novel over again. If Jane Austen could construct worlds on “two inches of ivory” Rooney has built them on a wafer of silicon: her characters are inhabitants of the networked society: they communicate by instant messaging, texts and email, but what it means to them is singular. For Frances, the scratchy first-person narrator of **Conversations**, it’s a way of keeping control when both her emotions and her body are in constant danger of letting her down, while **Normal People**’s Connell perceives it as a loss of autonomy. “He and Marianne can only talk over email, using the same communication technologies they

now know are under surveillance, and it feels at times like their relationship has been captured in a complex network of state power, that the network is a form of intelligence in itself, containing them both, and containing their feelings for each other.”

The one area of personal relationships that cannot be electronically controlled is sex, which links lovers to friends in shifting and unpredictable combinations. The style in which Rooney writes about it is disarmingly plain. “In bed he asked me what felt good a lot,” says Frances, when she first sleeps with the married actor Nick, in **Conversations With Friends**. “I said everything felt good, I felt very flushed and I could hear myself making a lot of noise but only syllables, no real words. I closed my eyes. The inside of my body was hot like oil, I was possessed by an overwhelming and intense energy which seemed to threaten me. Please, I was saying. Please, please ... But I surrendered without a struggle.”

“So much of our sexual culture and vocabulary has the potential to be degrading,” says Rooney, “There’s an archaic language which is guaranteed to sound false or the language of pornography which is not actually true. I was trying to be true. What I’m interested in to a large extent is intimacy, the discomfort, the loss of self – of being penetrated literally and

also psychologically.”

Both novels are, to some extent, accounts of sexual obsessions. “Some people feel the sex isn’t very sexy but I’m not writing them for that,” she says. “Perhaps I’m trying to learn something about the characters through it, so it would be coy to have the scenes all off page.” Yet when her editor suggested that the sex in **Normal People** was a little too coy, Rooney resisted, arguing that, in the early stages of their relationship at least, Connell and Marianne didn’t have a sexual vocabulary “so to over-literalise would be to put ways of thinking into their heads that they wouldn’t have been able to articulate for themselves. On the other hand,” she says, “I was probably trying to avoid writing it. That’s the gift of being able to come up with a plausible argument.”

The politics of surrender is a recurrent theme, though the symmetries in which her characters find themselves are far from templates of #MeToo injustice. Nick might be older and married but he is in some ways weaker, less fully formed, than Frances; Connell might betray Marianne early on, but he is also her saviour. The monsters – a fascist boyfriend, an abusive brother – are pushed firmly to the margins. “There’s so much fiction and general cultural discourse around #MeToo, but it’s something I just don’t find very interesting to explore. I’m not interested in the psychology

of cruel, abusive, exploitative people.”

But there’s something else going on too, which is central to how she identifies her cohort: “Men,” she says, “are not so dissimilar really. It didn’t feel that writing about them was a leap because the thing about gender is that I don’t really believe in it. It’s a series of cultural practices, whereas being in your 40s and with children, for instance, is something I can’t imagine myself to be.”

Both novels have a moment in which a character thinks they, or their lover, might be pregnant – and it’s here that they are in some ways at their most culturally particular. When she wrote the books, abortion was illegal in Ireland. This spring, a referendum changed the law so, for all the apparent currency of their fears, her characters already occupy a space that is sealed in the past.

The long-running debate over abortion gave Rooney her political voice as a teenager outraged by activists who rolled up at her school to show pro-life propaganda videos. In a powerful essay for the *London Review of Books* earlier this year she deployed the full might of her debating skills in articulating her rage, concluding a thorough demolition of the case against abortion with the conclusion that “in the relationship between fetus and woman, the woman is granted fewer rights than a corpse”.

On the eve of the referendum she tweeted: “Two weeks ago I wrote that we would not see a Yes vote over 67% – God please let me eat a gigantic portion of this unbelievably delicious humble pie.” In her heart of hearts, she says now, she believed that the change would get through and felt validated when it did. It reassured her that, for all that she now found herself part of a metropolitan commentariat, she was still in touch with the Irish heartlands from which she came.

Shortly after the referendum she announced her decision to stop tweeting, saying “novelists are given too much political prominence”. Several times in our conversation she invokes footballers as an elite that puts writers in their place. When I point this out, she explains that it is because “through no fault of their own they have a sublime gift and there’s nothing in their personality that would necessarily mean they enjoy fame. They don’t choose to be celebrities in the way that actors do. They just have it heaped on them.” For all her demurrals, it’s an analysis that clearly speaks for her own anxieties.

In *Normal People*, Connell is scathing about literary celebrity. At a lecture by a writer of “uneven, but sensitive in places, perceptive” short stories, he finds himself surrounded “only by people who wanted to be the kind of people who attended [literary events]”. It’s not a

coincidence that, as the editor of the literary journal *Stinging Fly*, Rooney spends much of her time in just such literary circles, and several writers of sensitive, perceptive stories are among the dedicatees of her novels. “I’ve been blessed by feeling I’m with a group who read each other’s work.”

How does she account for the way that Ireland’s literary culture has not only survived the economic crash but flourished in it? “I’m assuming that there are weirdos everywhere who like writing prose and poetry but not everywhere has the literary heritage and the support for little magazines that enables them to be published,” she says. “Then there’s the particular nature of the crash, which came out of our first ever period of prosperity and revealed it to be a mirage.”

“Capitalism is to Rooney’s young women what Catholicism was to Joyce’s young men, a rotten national faith to contend with,” wrote one reviewer. Rooney is happy with that. For all her fascination with the human condition, with the pain and pleasures of the romantic merry-go-round, one thing’s for sure: “As a writer in Dublin it’s hard not to think about property.”

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/02/sally-rooney-interview-dont-respond-authority-normal-people>]

## The cult of Sally Rooney

Earlier this summer, I attended a lunch for people who work with children's books. As is usually the case at such events, everyone was talking about one particular book, the hot book of the moment, the one no one could stop thinking about — but for once, at this lunch full of people who have devoted their careers to making books for children, the title everyone was talking about wasn't a children's book. It was **Normal People** by Sally Rooney.

"I can't put it down," said the woman next to me.

**Normal People** sucked all the air out of the room when it came out in the US in April, building on the success of Rooney's much-buzzed-about 2017 debut, **Conversations With Friends**. For a while there, **Normal People** was the only book that people who talk about books seemed willing to talk about.

According to the industry tracker NPD Bookscan, **Normal People** has sold just under 64,000 units in hardcover in the US in the four months it's been out, not including e-books. **Conversations With Friends** has sold just under 78,000 in hardcover and paperback since 2017. Those aren't blockbuster numbers (Michelle Obama's **Becoming**, which sold 3.5 million copies in 2018, is a blockbuster), but for literary fiction, a genre in which 25,000 units sold can count as

"sensational," Rooney's sales are more than a sensation. They mean that her books are now bona fide literary events.

When it came out in the UK in 2018, **Normal People** won the UK's Costa Book Award, the populist alternative to the Man Booker Prize. (It celebrates high literary merit, but also books that are fun to read.) **Normal People** was also longlisted for the Man Booker and for the Women's Prize for Fiction.

In the US, **Normal People** became an Instagram status symbol endorsed by celebrities like Lena Dunham and Taylor Swift and Emily Ratajkowski. Articles emerged calling Rooney "the first great millennial novelist," mostly written by the kind of people who took a great deal of pleasure in immediately following up that phrase with a parenthetical about how it is a meaningless collection of words. When Rooney came to speak at the Brooklyn bookstore Books Are Magic, interest was so high that the bookstore moved the event to a nearby church to accommodate the crowds. Other New York booksellers grew tired of keeping up with the demand.

The result is that it is now aspirational to be the kind of person who has read Sally Rooney. She is a signifier of a certain kind of literary chic: If you read Sally Rooney, the thinking seems to go, you're

smart, but you're also fun — and you're also cool enough to be suspicious of both "smart" and "fun" as general concepts.

That's the kind of balancing act Rooney is able to pull off in her books. What animates both **Normal People** and **Conversations With Friends** is an intellectual rigor that distrusts pleasure on principle — whether it's coming from reading a novel or romantic intimacy — but then allows that pleasure to triumph regardless.

Rooney's books think novels are decadent, but they are also genuinely fun to read. They think romantic intimacy is impossible at best and dangerous at worst, but they are also genuinely moving love stories.

And **Normal People** seems to have emerged as a status symbol in part out of a hopeful belief in sympathetic magic: If Rooney's books can pull off this balancing act, then surely, surely her readers can too. Can't they?

Both **Normal People** and **Conversations With Friends** share an essential DNA, in that they are both about young Irish intellectuals studying at Trinity and involved in complex romantic entanglements. **Conversations With Friends** deals with a love quadrangle between two best friends (and ex-girlfriends) and a married couple; **Normal People** centers on an on-again/

off-again romance between two high school and then college sweethearts.

What unites these novels more closely than their shared collegiate setting and focus on romantic drama, however, is the way Rooney's characters process their feelings. Her characters are forever trying to analyze their own emotions, primarily as a form of self-protection: If they can fully understand what they are feeling and why, they seem to believe, their emotions will no longer be able to hurt them. Inevitably, their emotions end up hurting them anyway. Also inevitably, when it happens, the characters feel both shocked and betrayed.

"I tend to write characters who are roughly as articulate and insightful as I am about what they think and feel," Rooney explained to the *New Yorker* earlier this year. "In other words, they are sometimes perceptive but more often crushingly unable to describe or explain what is going on in their lives."

Because Rooney's characters are so smart and so given to self-analysis, they are all fully aware that their romantic relationships are bad ideas that will not lead to happy endings, that said relationships are doomed. And that understanding is fairly par for the course in contemporary literary fiction, which often tends toward the cool and analytical.

In contemporary literary fiction, stories about two bright young college students in love,

like **Normal People**, tend to look like Elif Bautman's *The Idiot*, in which one of the two people inevitably turns out to be an asshole who breaks the other person's heart. Stories about infidelity, like **Conversations With Friends**, tend to look like *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, in which the point is that the one who cheats is a terrible person who is dishonest about their own desires and will never truly be satisfied.

None of this means that either *The Idiot* or *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* are bad books, or that they are glibly cynical or lazy (for my money, they're both brilliant). But it does mean that they're part of a genre that overwhelmingly distrusts the idea that stories can be emotionally truthful and also genuinely romantic.

Love stories with real romantic oomph are for commercial genres like romance, is the going implication. Literary fiction is for stories about all the many and terrible ways people in relationships hurt each other.

And Rooney's characters do indeed hurt each other, in manifold and terrible ways. In **Conversations With Friends**, college student Frances casually breaks her married boyfriend's heart because she assumes that since he is older and married, she can't possibly have any power over him, and so the way she treats him does not matter. In **Normal People**, Marianne

and Connell's relationship never fully recovers from the fact that when they first started dating in high school, Connell wanted to keep their relationship a secret because he was ashamed to be associated with unpopular Marianne, and Marianne agreed because she would do anything for Connell.

Where Rooney veers away from the expected course is in the way she makes her readers fully aware of all the ways in which her romances are unhealthy and unbalanced, while also allowing them to feel tender and loving. Her books are restrained and analytical, but they are never chilly.

"I don't really believe in the idea of the individual," Rooney told the *New York Times* earlier this year. "I find myself consistently drawn to writing about intimacy, and the way we construct one another."

Perhaps for that reason, the heart of her books tends to lie not with the way people in relationships hurt each other, but with the way that hurt goes hand in hand with intimacy, and with the idea that intimate relationships reshape the self.

Toward the end of **Conversations With Friends**, Frances's best friend and true love Bobbi sums up their fraught quadrangle with Nick and his wife Melissa as a mistake. "They were only ever in it for each other," she says. "Ultimately they were always going to go back to this

fucked-up relationship they have because that's what they're used to. You know? I just feel so mad at them. They treated us like a resource."

There's a version of ***Conversations With Friends*** that ends with that scene, with the lesson that adultery ends badly and people in relationships use each other — but that's not what Rooney does. Instead, she extends the book for another spare 17 pages, just long enough for Nick and Frances to have one last conversation.

"It never would have worked," they tell each other, and then Frances offers, "If two people make each other happy then it's working." To herself she thinks, "You live through certain things before you understand them. You can't always take the analytical position." And this analytical adultery novel ends not with the affair's conclusion and the punishment of all involved, but with its conscious, deliberate continuation, and with the rejection of all analysis.

In ***Normal People***, Marianne and Connell spend years coming together and then drifting apart from each other over and over, forever reenacting the trauma of that high school betrayal of Connell keeping Marianne a secret from their classmates. And Rooney makes it clear that the power dynamic of their relationship will never really change, that Connell will always have a power over Marianne,

even in moments that might otherwise play as straightforwardly romantic. When Connell saves Marianne from her sadistic older brother and then tells her, "No one is going to hurt you like that again," Rooney immediately informs us that "in a rush he feels his power over her again, the openness of her eyes."

But in the end, Marianne and Connell don't resolve things by deciding that their relationship is not healthy and cutting all ties with each other, or by somehow recreating the power dynamic of their relationship so that Connell no longer has control over Marianne. Instead, they resolve things by drifting apart again, this time without bitterness or rancor, and with the knowledge that if they come together again, Marianne's submissiveness will be intact. "I'll always be here," Marianne tells Connell in the novel's last line. "You know that."

The romanticism of this way of writing about love — in which people can hurt each other but still mean a great deal to each other, and even relationships that are clearly doomed can go on and on and on beyond the novel's last page — feels both wholly fresh and also a little old-fashioned, like something out of a 19th-century marriage novel. That's a fact of which Rooney is fully aware. Her books tend to wink gently at their forebears, which Rooney seems to consider both deeply important and

humiliatingly trivial.

Early on in ***Normal People***, Connell is reading *Emma* in the library and has to put his book down right at the point when it looks as though the hero is going to marry Emma's best friend instead of Emma. He walks home "in a state of strange emotional agitation," but he's also "amused at himself, getting wrapped up in the drama of novels like that. It feels intellectually unserious to concern himself with fictional people marrying one another."

Rooney's characters don't marry, but "fictional people falling in love with each other" is a pretty good summary of her novels. And she approaches that fact with a strange helplessness, as though she is throwing up her hands and repeating the line Connell thinks to himself when he can't stop worrying about Emma: "But there it is: literature moves him."

The idea that fiction truly does move people, and also that this fact is a little embarrassing and "intellectually unserious," is the second fundamental tension of Rooney's novels, a kind of mirror of the way they distrust romantic love but allow it to triumph regardless. Both Rooney and her characters are fully aware that the world is in a state of monumental crisis, that the polar ice caps are melting, that democracy is in danger and fascism on the rise. They also believe novels are not going to

do anything to help solve these problems.

And yet Rooney keeps writing novels — and in those novels, her characters keep finding themselves drawn to books, shamefully and against their will.

“I feel like I could devote myself to far more important things than writing novels. And I have just failed to do that,” Rooney said in an interview with the *Irish Independent* in 2018. She added, “There is a part of me that will never be happy knowing that I am just writing entertainment, making decorative aesthetic objects at a time of historical crisis. But I am not good at anything else. This is the one thing that I am good at.”

In her novels, Rooney tends to split her characters into dyads. One half of a pair is intellectually serious and devoted to politics and making a difference in the world, and the other half finds themselves turning their intellectual energies toward reading. The character who reads generally feels themselves to be inferior to the political character — but there’s also a sense that the political character is naive and will have to learn to temper their expectations.

In *Conversations With Friends*, Frances writes poetry and is studying English, while Bobbi studies history and politics and identifies as a communitarian anarchist; Frances notes that Bobbi’s areas of interest are “subjects my mother considered serious,” while her own are not.

Frances considers Bobbi to have “ferocious and frightening power over circumstances and people,” and when Bobbi suggests that after school she might “work in a university if I can,” Frances can’t face the idea of Bobbi spending her life doing something so “sedate and ordinary.”

“I just don’t see you as a small-jobs person,” she tells Bobbi.

“That’s what I am,” Bobbi responds.

Frances, meanwhile, sells a short story to a prestigious journal for £800. She is on track to become a successful writer, while Bobbi is keeping her expectations low.

In *Normal People*, Connell is the English student (“I don’t care that much about getting a job anyway,” he says), and Marianne is the one studying history and politics because “she wanted to stop all violence committed by the strong against the weak.” Marianne is so obviously brilliant that at first it seems as though she might be able to achieve such a goal, but by the end of the novel it has become clear that she can’t, that “she would live and die in a world of extreme violence against the innocent, and at most she could help only a few people.” And while Marianne is reaching this realization, Connell is acquiring a reputation as a literary genius, publishing his short stories and getting accepted into prestigious MFA programs.

This character split is intrinsic to Rooney’s novels, and it’s the same split Rooney tends to speak to in interviews: There is what should be done, politically and morally, to make the world a better and more just place, and there is “the one thing that I am good at.” Connell doesn’t think writing is politically important — but he can do it and he’s good at it, where Marianne finds herself realizing that any political activism she does will have minimal effects on the world. *Conversations With Friends*’ Frances thinks Bobbi does much more important work than Frances herself does — but Frances’s writing attracts the attention of important people, while Bobbi is resigning herself to a life that Frances thinks of as “small.”

That divide has animated Rooney’s writing since before she was a published novelist, when she burst onto the literary scene with a widely shared essay in the *Dublin Review* in 2015. It’s about her career as a college debater, and how she became the No. 1 competitive debater on the continent of Europe before she quit, disgusted by the amorality of the whole process. “I no longer found it fun to think of ways in which capitalism benefits the poor, or things oppressed people should do about their oppression,” she writes of her decision. “Actually I found it depressing and vaguely immoral.”

But the essay doesn’t end with a moral invocation, a reminder that debating is an empty pursuit in

which the facts don't matter and rhetorical tricks are everything. It ends with a reminder that regardless of everything else, what really matters is that Rooney was very, very good at it — and that she won.

"I did it. I got everything I set out to get," she writes, with palpable joy. "I was number one. Like Fast Eddie, I'm the best there is. And even if you beat me, I'm still the best."

Rooney got a real aesthetic pleasure out of debating, out of entering a state she calls "the flow." And she liked that it satisfied her personal ambitions of being good at something and being liked for it. She just also found it immoral.

The core tension here, as in Rooney's novels, is the tension between duty and pleasure: between the duty to enact political change and the pleasure of luxuriating in aesthetic objects instead; between the duty to make the world a better place and the pleasure of achieving personal ambitions; between the duty to be emotionally truthful about the ways people hurt each other and the pleasure of letting characters fall in love with people who hurt them regardless. That's the problem her books wrestle with, over and over again, obsessively.

And that is, in many ways, the problem of our historical moment, this time in which it is so, so difficult to find ways not to

be complicit in terrible things, when ordering a chicken sandwich can mean taking a side on LGBTQ rights and choosing an expensive exercise class can mean deciding whether or not to support the Trump administration and ordering a book from the company with 65 percent market share means supporting sweatshop-like conditions in warehouses. The political has become so overwhelming and inescapable that it has come to feel irresponsible to think about things like art and love through any lens other than the political. It is exhausting.

What makes Sally Rooney's books so compelling is that they offer us the possibility of allowing pleasure to be important, even above our better judgment. We can recognize a relationship is doomed and still let it make us happy for the moment. We can be smart enough to recognize

the historical calamity of the moment and still care about art. It's a vexed compromise, it's fraught, and it's unstable — but it's what the books are able to put in front of us.

And if Sally Rooney can find a way to relax into that pleasure, even when she knows how many problems there are with it, then surely, surely we can too. Can't we?

[<https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/9/3/20807728/sally-rooney-normal-people-conversations-with-friends>]



