**Identifying with Our Contemporaries - Richard Bingham (University of Birmingham)**

If the hype is to be believed, "millennials" have finally found their literary standard-bearer in Irish author Sally Rooney. Born in 1991, she is "millennial fiction's most important voice", a "Salinger for the Snapchat generation" who "teaches us millennials should be written about, not ridiculed". Such declarations assume "millennial" to be a recognisable social identity, one whose characteristics exceed the term's dubious origins as a demographic cohort born between 1980 and 2005 (Fineman 49). Driving the idea of "millennial" identity are online platforms' commercialised circuits of affective expression and representative politics, or what Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism" (55). The widespread sharing of business "guru" Simon Sinek's 2017 defence of millennials and Anne Helen Petersen's 2019 article "How Millennials Became The Burnout Generation" demonstrate the potency of the "millennial" label for generating attention, debate and advertising revenue. Carrying its own generational baggage, from Stein and Hemingway's "lost generation" to Coupland's "Generation X", western literary media settles comfortably into this lucrative discourse. As Nathalie Olah comments, "[w]here is the great millennial novel, you, them and pretty much everyone else with half a vested interest seems to be asking?"

Is generational discourse merely a racket? New Formalist scholar Caroline Levine writes that, as well as deconstructing conceptual forms such as hierarchies, rhythms and networks, we must "intervene in the conflicting formal logics that turn out to organize and disorganize our lives", locating "opportunities for social change in a world of overlapping forms" (22–3). Following a brief history of the generation, I will analyse how its formal logic manifests in Sally Rooney's work and consider where it might prove useful as a tool for thinking through the contemporary.

Western thinkers began adapting the idea of biological generations to describe entire societies in the eighteenth century. The generation offered a nimble alternative to the "age" or "period" for giving conceptual form to the accelerating technological, economic and political changes they witnessed (Kriegel 23–4). In 1921, Karl Mannheim's influential essay "The Problem of Generations" proposed that generations emerge when societal crisis or institutional shift stratifies a population by age: military conscription, for example, may stratify a public into those of fighting age and those officially considered too young or too old to fight. This splitting of a population into different "generational locations" breaks the "transmission of common cultural heritage", producing distinct "generational consciousness[es]" (Edmunds and Turner 4). According to this understanding, generational identities do not arbitrarily change every 15 or 30 years but are produced in reaction to disruptive events and societal traumas.

Demographers William Strauss and Neil Howe's bestselling 1991 book Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069 introduced American readers to the "millennials", a cohort "born in the mid-1980s" that they predicted would display "an instinct for teamwork and cooperation", a result of a 1980s cultural emphasis on good parenting (14). This optimistic projection fits with the "civic" archetype of the writers' dubious cyclical framework of "idealist", "reactive", "civic" and "adaptive" generations, with "millennials" expected to re-embody the characteristics of the civic "G.I. Generation" (422–3). Howe and Strauss's ideas sparked renewed interest in generational theory, coinciding with the rise of political demography, commercialised international communications, accelerating capitalist globalisation and declarations of the "End of History". In this context, the generation perhaps offered a flexible form for conceptualising a "noncontemporaneous contemporary" in which different experiences of history and temporality come to exist in ever-greater proximity (Harootonian 486).

Decades later, generational theory remains largely structured by Howe and Strauss's America-specific cohorts: "Silent", "Boomers", "13-ers" (now more commonly "Gen X") and "Millennials". As a result, it often strains to read disruptive events through these pre-existing categories rather than divining new generational identities from them. Nevertheless, popular conceptions of the "millennial" have altered since Howe and Strauss's initial projections. In 2006, psychologist Jean Twenge painted a portrait of an entitled, individualistic, isolated and anxious youth uncomfortable with authority (Generation Me). Over the following decade this developed into the dominant archetype of "millennials", providing a sense of scientific weight to articles such as Joel Stein's 2013 "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation". However, another shift has occurred in recent years as those labelled "millennials" have begun to gain more prominent platforms. Cultural theorists such as Malcolm Harris and Shaun Scott have centred definitions around material circumstances, arguing "millennials" are the first generation to inherit a neoliberal gutting of social institutions and to enter an overcompetitive post-crash labour market.

Sally Rooney's debut novel, Conversations with Friends (2017), tells the story of Frances, a 21-year-old student and aspiring poet, as she begins a sexual relationship with Nick, a 32-year-old actor married to a successful writer. Frances and Nick communicate via text and email, concealing the affair from her best friend and ex-lover, Bobbi, and his wife, Melissa. Alongside themes of miscommunication and embodiment, the novel explores how subjectivities emerge through their entanglement with others and how a neoliberal individualist ideology forecloses the creation of alternative social bonds based on this knowledge. Rooney's follow-up, Normal People (2018), covers several years in a turbulent romantic relationship between Marianne and Connell, two young adults from Sligo. Whereas the students at their school ostracise Marianne due to her spontaneous behaviour, Connell, the son of Marianne's family's cleaner, enjoys popularity and a firm sense of belonging. This social hierarchy shifts dramatically when they both attend Trinity College Dublin, where Marianne becomes popular and Connell's working-class background leaves him isolated among his privileged peers. As in Conversations, the novel ties the lasting impacts that Connell and Marianne's smallest actions have on each other with broader, socioeconomic anxieties.

Rooney's novels do not once include the word "millennial", yet the tropes of contemporary generational discourse are abundant in her work if one is looking for them. Her protagonists use digital media as basic tools for developing relationships, interpreting one another's intentions through their Facebook profiles and feeling more relaxed conversing via email than in person. They are resolutely leftist in a way that resists common cultural narratives about "growing up", maintaining materialist perspectives on economic inequality and mocking liberal feminist demands for "more female CEOs" (Conversations 64). The narrator of Rooney's short story "Concord 34" describes flying to London to have an abortion, a late experience of Ireland's now-repealed Eighth Amendment. The Catholic Church, meanwhile, is a holdover whose teachings and institutional power are to be analysed and understood, rather than followed or even rebelled against:

Melissa asked us if we were religious and we said no. She said she found religious occasions, like funerals or weddings, 'comforting in a kind of sedative way'. They're communal, she said. There's something about that for the neurotic individualist. And I went to a convent school so I still know most of the prayers.

We went to a convent school, said Bobbi. It posed issues.

Melissa grinned and said: like what?

Well, I'm gay, said Bobbi. And Frances is a communist.

I also don't think I remember any of the prayers, I said (Conversations 6).

The flat, dry tone of Rooney's narrators and deadpan, unmarked dialogue blends these various experiences of being young in twenty-first-century Ireland into what could be mistaken for a unified, generational aesthetic.

Rooney herself dismisses the idea that her novels represent unified experiences or an aesthetic particular to "millennials". However, she does assert that the economic situation of young people following the financial crisis has produced an identifiable generational cohort, insofar as it has disrupted the expected life stages of entering employment and home ownership for individuals approaching or passing through them (Nolan). Her claims resonate in her characters' hauntological distaste at a neoliberal ideology they cannot quite shake. They balance their reluctance to contribute to the existing system with their desire for financial independence. In Conversations,Frances works a part-time, low-wage internship for a job she has no interest in, briefly entertaining a dream of "accumulating income just by writing and talking and taking an interest in things", only to end up working in a sandwich shop, embarrassed about "how deluded I had been" (291). Frances accepts this deflated expectation for herself, yet when Bobbi tells her she hopes to "work in a university if I can" after graduating, Frances feels "[t]his phrase, 'if I can'" indicates "something serious […] a shift in the way we related to one another" (228). Bobbi's abandoning of creative pursuits challenges Frances's beliefs about the value of labour. She views "small jobs, like raising children, picking fruit, cleaning" as "deserving the most respect of all", yet she finds herself unwilling to imagine Bobbi doing "something sedate and ordinary" (229). The scene might be said to express a generational consciousness, with a meritocratic neoliberal ideology ingrained in both characters from childhood breaking against the material constraints of the post-crash labour market.

Elsewhere, however, Rooney's texts undermine notions of generational identity. Her characters' encounters with entrenched cultural and material hierarchies like gender and class accentuate the divisions within generations, as well as connections across them. In Normal People, Connell and Marianne's school peers enforce strict gender roles, often through characteristically "millennial" means: Connell's friend shows everyone naked pictures of his girlfriend on his phone, accusing Connell of having "gotten awfully fucking gay about things lately" when he objects (76). In Conversations, Frances is treated for undiagnosed Endometriosis at a hospital by a male doctor who "didn't look much older than I was" and who refuses to believe that she is not having a miscarriage from unprotected sex. She recounts, "[w]e hated each other energetically, I could see that" (167). These moments challenge teleological assumptions that gender equality will naturally improve as more generations that are egalitarian come of age. Reading Rooney's novels, the appearance of generational change only highlights the resilience of ingrained hierarchies rather than foreshadowing their deconstruction.

A similar dynamic occurs in Rooney's representation of class. Clarke et al. note that a combined mythos of "affluence, [political] consensus and embourgeoisement" in post-war Britain contributed to a displacement of class by generation as a primary "index of social position" (21–22). Commercially accessible youth cultures embraced this, exhibiting a "generational consciousness" that "served unwittingly to repress and obscure the class dimension" (Clarke et al. 51). This mythos replaces the notion of a fundamental material opposition between classes with a liberal teleology

in which each new generation benefits from and improves reforms to existing institutions, provoking patient passivity rather than collective action. Conversations challenges this view by foregrounding the material distance between Frances and Nick, both of whose ages would classify them as "millennials". Frances is struck by the size and solidity of Nick's home and later tells him she feels "different from you […] I feel self-conscious about the nice things I have" (250). Similarly, in Normal People, Connell is unnerved by his peers at Trinity, who have "identical accents", "carry the same size MacBook[s] under their arms" and take higher education for granted (68). Connell's material circumstances clearly differ to those of Jamie, a student whose father "was one of the people who had caused the financial crisis – not figuratively, one of the actual people involved" (124). Such moments tie inequality to a socially-enforced hierarchy rather than a natural biological rhythm or any generational identity centred around a common material location.

Yet to insist that there is no shared essence to the generational identity can miss the point. As Judith Halberstam argues of gender, it is perhaps the very imperfection and amorphousness of today's generational identities—"boomer", "millennial", etc.—that ensures their longevity (20). Moreover, dispute its artificiality, generational identity is produced through real material relations. Clarke et al. observe that post-war generational consciousness "did have a 'rational core' in the very experience of working-class young […] the institutions in which post-war changes were encountered, and above all, in the way this sphere was reshaped by changes in the leisure market" (51). Whether it is real or not, efforts in today's media to define the "millennial" mark it as a terrain of struggle.

Julia Kristeva understood the generation as "not a chronology but a signifying space, a both corporeal and desiring mental space" (33). Rooney's novels begin mapping such spaces by challenging the individual and the family as the basic units of society. In Conversations, Francis resists her mother's desire for her to be "the kind of person who loves her parents", describing how she sees her distant father as "another normal person rather than my distinguished personal benefactor, or a minor celebrity" (175). Later, Frances composes an email to Bobbi that claims "nothing consists of two people, or even three. My relationship with you is also produced by your relationship with Melissa, and with Nick, and with your childhood self, etc. […] Is it possible we could develop an alternative model of loving each other?" (299). The generation might offer a stepping stone towards this possibility if understood as a conceptual form for producing new identities, rather than describing existing ones.

Normal People demonstrates how, as the economy continues to undergo postindustrial restructuring, the generation might serve as "an increasingly important mediation of class […] structuring both the forms of class experience and the ways in which these experiences are worked through" (Murdock and McCron 199). Weighing up his prospects as he considers what to study at university and where to apply, Connell reflects that "he could go to Trinity like Marianne. Life would be different then. He would start going to dinner parties and having conversations about the Greek bailout" (26). Connell and his parents' generational locations, their different experiences of educational institutions, reflects a restructuring of class relations. Unlike his mother, Connell equates his projected middle-class future with neither success nor security:

she doesn't want him having to work too much through college, she wants him to focus on his degree. This makes him feel bad, because it's not like English is a real degree you can get a job out of, it's just a joke, and then he thinks he probably should have applied for Law after all (48).

Connell foresees that his degree will not constitute a vertical move up the class hierarchy but rather a lateral move into an emergent, uncertain set of relations.

For all the generational claims about their author, Rooney's stories highlight the inconsistency of the generation as a conceptual form. On the one hand, they reject any essentialist application of the generational identity, foregrounding its reductions. Nonetheless, they also suggest that the generation might serve as a tool for separating the way we speak about the emergent hierarchies of late-capitalist societies from traditional identity formations that no longer reflect them. As Conversations closes, Frances describes how "Things and people moved around me, taking positions in obscure hierarchies, participating in systems I didn't know and never would. A complex network of objects and concepts. You live through things before you understand them" (321). In examining the overlapping of concepts, of generational rhythms with longstanding hierarchies like class, we might discover how they continually adapt and shape us, as well as how we might change them.

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To listen to Sally Rooney, you would guess she has always been a great talker. As an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin, she became Europe's No 1 student debater. Now she has written her debut novel – Conversations With Friends – which motors along thanks to its brilliant, funny and startling dialogue, most of which is played out between two college students (ex-girlfriends, now best friends) and an older married couple.

One of the students – Frances, the narrator – specialises in barbed retorts and has an affair with the husband. "You're really handsome, you know," she tells him. "Is that all I get?" he says. "I thought you liked my personality." "Do you have one?" she asks. None of Rooney's characters is ever lost for words, though quite often they find the wrong ones. Their exchanges revolve around what they withhold as much as what they share.

"Dialogue is the most fun to write," Rooney says. "It's kind of like a tennis match. Do the first one," and then ping, ping, "it has to go back and forth." Across instant messenger, email, text and face-to-face exchanges, her four protagonists play out their relationships, sometimes interested, sometimes opposed, yet as stitched into each other as a thread drawn through a four-hole button. In some ways, these characters are all victims of their own irony. A chasm grows between the spoken and the thought word: "I tried to explain that I felt vulnerable," the narrator says, "but I did so without using the word 'vulnerable' or any synonyms."

Rooney and I are sitting in the lounge of London's Grosvenor hotel (she has just flown in from Dublin where she lives) and Rooney's coffee isn't getting much of a look-in. Has she always liked to talk? "That's an interesting question," she says, which sounds like the sort of reply you might find in a champion debater's armoury, but in fact she is endearingly open. "I'm very introverted. Easily a few days could go by where I would not really leave the house or talk to anybody other than my partner." But she has "always been drawn to intense people who like to talk". Conversations with friends, as well as discussions of feminism, masculinity, gender and politics, helped to fuel the book

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Rooney is 26 and her youth, and the youth of her sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued narrator, have led her editor at Faber to describe her as "Salinger for the Snapchat generation". The older characters have money, hold parties "full of people wearing long necklaces" (a brilliant condemnation of a generation's approach to day-to-night dressing), and cook with aubergine and chorizo. But in their use of technology, the generations are more intricately bound, surprisingly conservative. All age groups favour email, as does Rooney. No one has Snapchat. No one takes a selfie. And young Frances is 21 but likes linen dresses and blouses. In many ways, she is an old head on young shoulders.

The book sold in a seven-way auction last year and Rooney, perhaps with the same energy she has in conversation, worked with "huge speed", writing 100,000 words of Conversations With Friends in three months, while also meeting the deadlines for her master's in American literature. She had been approached by Tracy Bohan of the Wylie literacy agency, who represents Eimear McBride and Ali Smith, but held off sending her the manuscript.

I would rather do two things really well than do 16 and have 14 of them fail

"I would rather do two things really, really, really well than do 16 things and have 14 of them fail," she says. "I wanted to get the novel as perfect as I could. I think it's an aversion to failure."

This is surprising, because perfectionists tend not to be so prolific. But Rooney has been writing constantly since late 2014. She thinks she was able to write so fast because she allowed her mind "to lie fallow for several years producing nothing, just kind of having experiences and thinking about them". By "experiences", she means having a coffee with a friend or reading a book – not backpacking in Peru.

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Still, she is only 26, so this fallow period couldn't have been that long. Before the master's, she dropped out of a master's in politics, also at Trinity. It was the year between then and starting to write the novel – the one with the coffees and the reading – that allowed her "to go on this incredibly prolific streak" in which she worked 16 or 18 hours a day, not even planning or plotting, just writing. "I can feel that winding down now," she says. "I feel it's going to be difficult to convince myself that I'm allowed to just not do anything."

Why so busy? "I don't think of myself as busy," she says, "because I don't even have to get dressed most days." She sits at her desk in dressing gown or pyjamas or big jumper. "I guess I'm producing a lot, but I don't look like I have a very active life to the outside observer." I am wondering if that should be the other way round: that to the outside observer she seems incredibly productive, but "constantly castigates" herself for not doing enough.

Rooney grew up in Castlebar, “a run-of-the-mill small town in the west of Ireland”. Her dad worked for Telecom Éireann, her mum ran the arts centre. The Rooney children – Sally, her younger sister and older brother – “were always going to see plays and interpretive dance and visual arts”. At 15, she completed her first novel, and while she cheerily calls it “absolute trash”, it is a pretty impressive feat.

I suspect she has always been a high achiever, because at Trinity she won a “very lucrative” scholarship, which gave her space to write. Then, when she decided she wanted to enter into the “glamorous” world of debating, she became No 1 in Europe. “God, I know! I’m such an intense person,” she says. Her story Mr Salary, was shortlisted for the Sunday Times short story award. Trusted friends are already reading her second novel. It’s hardly surprising that Rooney is always being described as “precocious”.

Is there, I wonder, a cut-off for that – an expiry date for precocity? She does not hesitate. “I can get more mileage out of it. Definitely!”