Normal People by Sally Rooney (Goodreads Author)

At school Connell and Marianne pretend not to know each other. He's popular and well-adjusted, star of the school soccer team while she is lonely, proud, and intensely private. But when Connell comes to pick his mother up from her housekeeping job at Marianne's house, a strange and indelible connection grows between the two teenagers—one they are determined to conceal.

A year later, they're both studying at Trinity College in Dublin. Marianne has found her feet in a new social world while Connell hangs at the sidelines, shy and uncertain. Throughout their years in college, Marianne and Connell circle one another, straying toward other people and possibilities but always magnetically, irresistibly drawn back together. Then, as she veers into self-destruction and he begins to search for meaning elsewhere, each must confront how far they are willing to go to save the other.

Sally Rooney brings her brilliant psychological acuity and perfectly spare prose to a story that explores the subtleties of class, the electricity of first love, and the complex entanglements of family and friendship.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41057294-normal-people>

The cult of Sally Rooney.How reading Sally Rooney becamea status symbol.By Constance Grady@constancegrady Sep 3, 2019, 3:00pm EDT <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/9/3/20807728/sally-rooney-normal-people-conversations-with-friends>

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?

"I find myself consistently drawn to writing about intimacy, and the way we construct one another"

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.

"But there it is: literature moves him"

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?