

## Sally Rooney's *Normal People* will be tough to beat as book of the year

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*Normal People*, the new novel by *Conversations with Friends* author Sally Rooney, is both so tender and so intellectual that I held my breath as I read it, waiting for the balancing act to fail. It never did.

Never once does *Normal People* try to prove its intelligence with coldness. Never once does it allow its romance to overwhelm the clarity of its prose. It takes a knife to its central relationship, slicing it apart to examine its dysfunctional power dynamics and never flinching away from the mess it uncovers — but it also allows that relationship to feel genuine and meaningful and even sweet.

The relationship in question is between two teenagers in Ireland in the early 2010s. Marianne is wealthy and despised, considered “an object of disgust” at school, where “people have said she doesn’t shave her legs or anything.” Connell is poor — his mother is a cleaner at Marianne’s house — but popular. They are both very bright, Marianne openly and Connell secretly, which explains part of the popularity gap between them.

When Marianne first suggests that she might like Connell, he assumes that she’s flirting with him as a mean-spirited joke, “to degrade him by association.” Gradually, it dawns on Connell that Marianne genuinely likes him and that he likes her back, but he still insists on keeping their relationship secret, lest the disgust that his classmates feel for Marianne transfer to him.

Marianne accepts this secrecy without question and finds it both exciting — “their secret weighed inside her body pleurably, pressing down on her pelvic bone when she moved” — and shameful. She also believes it is what she deserves because there is something wrong with her. “In a way she feels sorry for him now,” she muses of Connell, “because he has to live with the fact that he had sex with her, of his own free choice, and he liked it. That says more about him, the supposedly ordinary and healthy person, than it does about her.”

That power dynamic remains even after Marianne and Connell take off to Trinity College and swap social statuses. At college, Marianne’s eccentricities and open brilliance, plus her wealth and privilege, make her sought after and admired. Connell’s blue-collar reticence, meanwhile, leaves him friendless and ignored.

But when Marianne and Connell find their way back into a string of clandestine hookups, Marianne continues to suggest that she will submit utterly to Connell, and Connell continues to find the power he has over her alternately gratifying and frightening. “She had been sad before, after the film, but now she was happy. It was in Connell’s power to make her happy,” he thinks with pride after cheering her up one night with a little joke — but then, a page later, “he has a terrible sense all of a sudden that he could hit her face, very hard even, and she would just sit there and let him.”

Driving Marianne and Connell’s chemistry is their ability to talk with each other. The pages of *Normal People* are strewn with their conversations about books and movies. We know that they are right for each other at the beginning of the book; when Connell recommends Marianne read *The Communist Manifesto*, she sniffs that of course she knows about it already, and then they both crack up when he points out, “You’re trying to act superior but like, you haven’t even read it.” This book takes place in a world where discourse is what creates sex, and Marianne and Connell have the most impressive discourse of all, simultaneously erudite and sweet.

Outside of this central relationship, however, the characters are often flat. Marianne is surrounded by monstrous sadists with no discernible personality traits beyond their sadism, the better to put Connell’s earnest sweetness into contrast. Connell is surrounded by dull and angelic women, the better to highlight Marianne’s spiky brilliance. And the twists and turns of their relationship are occasionally spurred by miscommunications and misunderstandings that verge on sitcom wackiness.

Still, it’s not necessarily a bad thing that *Normal People* has little life outside of its central relationship. The connection between Marianne and Connell is supposed to be all-consuming, so overwhelming that it almost annihilates everything around it. Of course everything outside of its boundaries would feel a little flat, a little less exciting in comparison.

Reading *Normal People*, you can luxuriate in the romance of the love story. But you are also never allowed to stop analyzing its power dynamics, to stop thinking about who is subservient to whom, and why, and how.

The miracle of this book is that the romance and the analysis aren’t in opposition to each other. Instead, each amplifies the other, bringing the whole to a roaring crescendo. It is impossibly intellectual, impossibly tender. Impossibly beautiful, too.