Life and LettersJanuary 7, 2019 Issue

# Sally Rooney Gets in Your Head

*The Irish writer has been hailed as the first great millennial novelist for her stories of love and late capitalism.***By Lauren Collins** - December 31, 2018

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Rooney's second novel, "Normal People," was nominated for the 2018 Man Booker Prize, and will be released in the United States in April. According to *The Bookseller*, it was the year's most critically praised book in the United Kingdom. Like "Conversations with Friends," it is basically a romantic tragicomedy. The point is not so much the plot as the characters, and the heady relationships in and out of which they move "like figure-skaters, improvising their discussions so adeptly and in such perfect synchronization that it surprises them." In the opening chapters, Marianne, a smart and unpopular high-school student whose single mother is a lawyer, begins a secret relationship with Connell, a smart and popular high-school student whose single mother cleans Marianne's family's house. "She just acted the same as always, like it never happened, reading her book at the lockers as usual, getting into pointless arguments," Rooney writes. One of the unusual pleasures of Rooney's novels is watching young women engage in a casual intellectual hooliganism, demolishing every mediocrity that crosses their paths, just for the fun of it.

The quality of thought eliminates the need for pen-twirling rhetorical flourishes. Rooney's most devastating lines are often her most affectless. In "Conversations with Friends," a party at Melissa and Nick's is "full of music and people wearing long necklaces." Read that sentence and you may never want to wear jewelry again. In "Normal People," Connell abandons Marianne, fearing the judgment of his peers if they find out about the relationship. He quickly moves on to the queen bee of the class, less out of enthusiasm than out of a passive acceptance of his social predestiny. "He and Rachel started seeing each other in July," Rooney writes, in the close third person. "Everyone in school had known she liked him, and she seemed to view the attachment between them as a personal achievement on her part." A mean girl is no match for an incandescently intelligent one.

Rooney pulls and twists sentences as though they were pieces of balloon art. Words are her superpower, but she is suspicious of them. In "Even if You Beat Me," she writes about having to extemporize on "the secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina" in front of a group of Serbian debaters, and being unsettled by "the composed self-assurance with which we fabricated the history of their region." She eventually quit debating, finding it "vaguely immoral." She's not much more convinced about the social value of the novelist. "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," she told the *Irish Independent*.

The day after the supper in Castlebar, Rooney and I took the train to Dublin, where she lives. We sat facing each other across a table. The night before, she had mused aloud about her attitude toward interviews. "There are two warring aspects of my personality," she said. "One of which is a desire to be friendly and nice, because I know journalists don't love you to give monosyllabic responses. The second is: don't tell them anything." Now she had a question for me. She asked it politely but seriously. Why did I think that a profile of her was worth writing? If this were a debate, the motion might have been: This house, while honored, fundamentally believes that we are wasting our time.

I said that I thought her books meant a lot to readers, who would understand them better by hearing what she had to say. I brought up something that she had written on Twitter, before she temporarily shut down her account: "novelists are given too much cultural prominence. I know you could point out they're really not given a lot of prominence but . . . it's still too much." I didn't necessarily agree, I said. I rambled a little.

Rooney leaves you with a lot to think about. Your *esprit de l'escalier* doesn't kick in until you're well out the door. When she was a teen-ager, she joined a writing group at a local arts center. One of its organizers, Ken Armstrong, said that, even then, there was "a thread of steel running through her." I wanted to know where Rooney got her mettle, how a Marxist ended up writing a book that sits alongside body lotion and silk pajamas in *GQ's* "30 Fail-Safe Gifts for Her" guide; how she upended the conventional wisdom that a writer should show and not tell, that characters shouldn't say what they think, in the process creating some of the best dialogue I've read. There is a quiet but insistent sense of challenge in her writing. It makes you wonder whether you're wearing the moral equivalent of a long necklace.

We are living in a great epistolary age, even if no one much acknowledges it. Our phones, by obviating phoning, have reëstablished the omnipresence of text. Think of the sheer profusion of messages, of all the things we once said—or didn't say—that we now send. "You don't have any news you've been waiting to tell me in person, do you?" Nathan, a software developer, asks Sukie, his much younger roommate, upon picking her up at the airport, in "Mr Salary," a short story that Rooney published, in 2016, in *Granta*. "Do people do that?" she says. "You don't have like a secret tattoo or anything?" he continues. "I would have attached it as a JPEG," she replies. "Believe me." Rooney told me, "A lot of critics have noticed that my books are basically nineteenth-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing."