The First Time

Adam Mars-Jones

In London Review of Books,
Vol. 40 No. 18 · 27 September 2018
pages 34-36 | 4304 words
https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n18/adam-mars-jones/the-first-time

The blandness of Sally Rooney's novels, last year's *Conversations with Friends* and her new one, *Normal People*, begins and ends with those oddly non-committal titles. Inside the books her territory is classic – the love relationships of young people – but mapped with an unusual scrupulous smoothness. The characters are brainy, even startlingly so, but she doesn't exalt their intelligence or flaunt her own. At the beginning of *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne are contemporaries at school in Carricklea, Sligo, but hardly friends, partly because Marianne is used to abrasive dealings with the world, and may actively prefer them that way. Rejected by her mother and brother (her father is dead), she can hardly be said to have such a thing as a self-image. She sees her reflection in the mirror in virtually non-human terms: 'It's a face like a piece of technology, and her two eyes are cursors blinking … It expresses everything all at once, which is the same as expressing nothing.'

Connell's mother, though not indulgent, is loving towards him, even if she withholds from him any information about who his father might have been. At school his talent as a footballer is a reliable guarantee of status, though it isn't enough to give him much respect for his own physical presence – he imagines he looks 'like an artist's impression of a criminal'. If Marianne is flirting with him, early on in the book, her style is unorthodox. When he says, not joking, that she's smarter than him, she says: 'Don't feel bad. I'm smarter than everyone.' Giving a good impersonation of adulthood like this is easier in speech, even for the most sophisticated teenager, than it is in body language. Marianne and Connell can't look at each other when they're laughing – 'they had to look into corners of the room, or at their feet.' The two become sexually involved, though they keep their relationship a secret at school, where Connell's status would suffer if it became known. Marianne doesn't seem to mind this arrangement, but then her financially comfortable background would give her a certain immunity to gossip even if she didn't take active pleasure in an obscurely scandalous reputation. (Though the story everyone at school tells about her isn't exactly sulphurous: she once spilled ice cream on herself at lunch, and took off her blouse in the girls' bathroom to wash it in the sink.)

Rooney's preference, when exploring Marianne's style of feeling, is for effects whose exaggeration is so carefully controlled that it somehow disappears: 'She was attuned to the presence of his body in a microscopic way, as if the ordinary motion of his breathing was powerful enough to make her ill.' Or: 'Their secret weighed inside her body pleasurably, pressing down on her pelvic bone when she moved.' The expressive style she gives Connell is less turbulent, even when everything is in flux, as it is when he's very drunk: 'As an experiment he tried to sit up, which confirmed he was in fact sitting up already, and the small red light which he thought might have been on the ceiling above him was just a standby light on the stereo system across the room.'

The moment Connell caught Marianne's eye is easy to pinpoint. She was watching a football match in which the school team was playing and saw that he had better posture than anyone else on the pitch ('his figure was like a

long elegant line drawn with a brush'). When he scored a goal after seventy minutes the explosion of celebration somehow didn't make her feel separate: 'They were cheering together, they had seen something magical which dissolved the ordinary social relations.' And that was when she realised how much she wanted to see him having sex with someone. It didn't even have to be her – perhaps a sign that the sudden inrush of a sense of belonging didn't really change anything fundamental.

Connell's intelligence has never been in doubt, but it's Marianne's idea that he shouldn't go to college in Galway like all his friends but apply instead to Trinity College Dublin, where she herself is headed. When they start their studies there, their social roles are more or less reversed. In Sligo, Marianne's prosperous background was a socially and even geographically isolating factor: 'She's never been inside the sports centre. She's never gone drinking in the abandoned hat factory, though she has been driven past it in the car.' In Dublin, Connell is intimidated by his fellow students, who express themselves passionately in seminars and launch into impromptu debates, until he realises that unlike him they haven't done the reading and are perfecting the useful technique of making the projection of entitlement stand in for the work of understanding. 'They just move through the world in a different way, and he'll probably never really understand them, and he knows they will never understand him, or even try.' At home his shyness was no bar to popularity, since everyone knew him and there was no need to create an impression: 'If anything, his personality seemed like something external to himself, managed by the opinions of others, rather than anything he individually did or produced.' Now he is given no momentum by the social machinery, and starts to worry about things that never bothered him before. How can he be 'objectively worse-looking' than he used to be, when his appearance hasn't changed? Clothes must be part of the answer, and it can't be an advantage to have only a single pair of shoes, old Adidas trainers, but adopting the costume of his cohort, waxed jackets and plum-coloured chinos, is hardly an option.

Over time even Marianne sees him with different eyes, unable entirely to disagree when he is described as a 'milk-drinking culchie … It's true, she has seen Connell drink milk directly from the carton. He plays video games with aliens in them, he has opinions about football managers. He's wholesome like a big baby tooth. Probably never in his life has he thought about inflicting pain on someone for sexual purposes.' (That nudging of the expected phrase 'big baby' into 'big baby tooth' is characteristic and delightful.) When a female friend refers to the plain silver neck chain he wears as 'Argos chic' Marianne winces, though she doesn't really know whether the little stab of pain should be laid to the account of her friend for sneering, or to Connell himself for providing the pretext. No one else in Marianne's life would be given amnesty for naffness.

Irish writing often makes a conscious effort to brand itself as such. Rooney's does not. Her diction is low-key, the rhythms uninsistent. Local variations of vocabulary, preferring 'press' to 'cupboard' or 'culchie' to 'yokel', don't have the sociolinguistic significance here of Stephen Dedalus's 'tundish' as measured against the dean's 'funnel' in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ireland as presented here is in its essentials a modern state, where a custom such as the anniversary mass held for Marianne's father generates a plot point rather than an examination of the role of religion in national life.

Rooney keeps her lyricism and her talent for scene-setting tightly reined in. What Marianne sees out of the bus window on her way to the football match has an almost painting-by-numbers sparseness: 'black cattle, green meadows, white houses with brown roof tiles'. Evocations of atmosphere can be much richer and more complex, to the point of expressionism, but are no more indulgent in terms of the space allotted them: 'Back outside the café

now, the sunlight is so strong it crunches all the colours up and makes them sting.' The fullest passage of evocation in the book may be Marianne's memory of Christmas in Carricklea, sharpened by absence and lost intimacy:

lights strung up over Main Street, the glowing plastic Santa Claus in the window of Kelleher's with its animated arm waving a stiff, repetitive greeting. Tinfoil snowflakes hanging in the town pharmacy. The door of the butcher shop swinging open and shut, voices calling out on the corner. Breath rising as mist in the church car park at night. Foxfield in the evening, houses quiet as sleeping cats, windows bright. The Christmas tree in Connell's front room, tinsel bristling, furniture cramped to make space, and the high delighted sound of laughter.

The withholding of actual human presence stands in, whether she knows it or not, for a single missing person.

Normal People is divided into sections titled according to the lapse of time ('Three Months Later') in a way that emphasises the gaps between them, complete with a real-world timeline ('MARCH 2014') the convention persisting even when the lapse of time is trivial ('Five Minutes Later'). But the book's element of chronicle is slight to non-existent, with national and international events hardly impinging. University students may go on a march against the war in Gaza, but when a young woman gets pregnant late in the book, her choices are discussed ('Do you think she's one of these anti-abortion people?') as if this was, and could only ever be, a private matter. At one point, Marianne goes out with a student, Jamie, whose father was one of the people who caused the financial crisis ('not figuratively, one of the actual people involved'), but he epitomises not so much a historical moment as her desire, having seemingly lost Connell, to choose someone as worthless as possible, someone who will punish her by his character as well as (at her suggestion) in the bedroom. Connell overreacts in a different way by trying more conventional, less obviously challenging partners, who are likely to lose patience sooner or later with his underlying unavailability.

Rooney uses the third person, closely aligned in each section with either Connell or Marianne, porous to one set of emotions. This is an approach to narrative that tends to bring with it a whiff of the arbitrary: there seems no deeper reason than the writer's convenience for any individual encounter to be related from one perspective rather than the other. It also has the effect, here, of undermining the principle it is supposed to illustrate: it offers the reader privileged access to two sets of thinking pattern, while the book goes on insisting that people are always mysterious to each other, however intimate and tenderly disposed they may be. At one point, for instance, Connell moves back home to Carricklea because he can't afford to keep paying for accommodation in Dublin. He would happily stay with Marianne but it doesn't occur to her, insulated as she is from financial pressure, to make the offer. In her world people do things because they want to, and she takes his move as a personal rejection. He in turn is too proud to spell the situation out. His need and her disposition to help seem perfectly aligned but neither can communicate across the gap. A moment of failed imagination (a shared fault) becomes a major impediment to any future understanding. There's some symmetry here: when they were still at school Connell asked another girl to the 'Debs' (a formal ball), a snub Marianne took so much to heart she stopped attending classes.

The aerial view of misunderstandings and overreactions provided by the alternating point of view might suggest a critique of the characters' stubborn and probably unworkable mutual fixation, but if anything the book invites readers to share it. Irony is here something to be damped down rather than played up. There's no invitation to feel superior to Connell, in despair at the library closing while he was engrossed in *Emma*:

It feels intellectually unserious to concern himself with fictional people marrying one another. But there it is: literature moves him. One of his professors calls it 'the pleasure of being touched by great art'. In those words it almost sounds sexual. And in a way, the feeling provoked in Connell when Mr Knightley kisses Emma's hand is not completely asexual, though its relation to sexuality is indirect. It suggests to Connell that the same imagination he uses as a reader is necessary to understand real people also, and to be intimate with them.

Earlier Connell had privately wished he knew how other people conducted their emotional lives, 'so that he could copy from example,' and books seem to be the only portal available to him.

Normal People doesn't bear much resemblance to apprentice work. The evenness of Rooney's attention is a huge asset, page by page, and the sign of an unusual sensibility. The only question is whether she gives quite enough shape to the story of 'the chemistry between two people who, over the course of several years, apparently could not leave one another alone'. The exemplary architecture of sentence and page has no real equivalent on a larger scale, and the meticulousness and lack of hurry that are so effective locally work against a sense of climax or growth, producing a final impression almost of fizzle. In technique and ambition it remains very much in the shadow of Rooney's first published novel, *Conversations with Friends*, which is also preoccupied with identity both as an inalienable possession and something mortgaged to others. But in the earlier book the relationships are within and between two couples rather than two individuals – two women in their early twenties, who used to be an item and are still inseparable, and a married couple in their thirties. First-person narration, used with great resourcefulness, makes the inaccessibility of other minds, a theme of *Normal People* but clashing with its technique, into a principle of the book's construction.

*

Frances, the heroine of *Conversations with Friends*, has great difficulty discerning her own characteristics and moods. She often has to work backwards from physical gestures or reactions to establish what her feelings must be: 'It felt like dizziness, or the strange blurry sensation that precedes being violently ill. I tried to think what might be causing it, things I had eaten, or the car journey earlier. It was only when I remembered the night before that I knew what it was. I felt guilty.' She seems to suffer from a sort of emotional prosopagnosia, in her case the inability to recognise not other people's faces but her own feelings. 'Before that summer I'd had no idea I was the kind of person who would accept an invitation like this from a woman whose husband I'd repeatedly slept with. This information was morbidly interesting to me.' Being praised, other than academically, doesn't consolidate her personality but has the opposite effect: 'I felt a weird lack of self-recognition, and I realised that I couldn't visualise my own face or body at all. It was like someone had lifted the end of an invisible pencil and just gently erased my entire appearance.' Frances, like Connell, is a student of literature, but looks to it for a different set of skills. She doesn't want it to bring her closer to other people but to control her distance from them: 'I lay on my side with *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* propped half-open on the pillow beside me. Occasionally I lifted a finger to turn the page and allowed the heavy and confusing syntax to drift down through my eyes and into my brain like fluid. I'm bettering myself, I thought. I'm going to become so smart that no one will understand me.'

Frances and her ex, Bobbi, in their last year of undergraduate study, team up as a performance poetry double act (Frances the writer, Bobbi the more effective performer). They establish a promising contact with Melissa, a

glamorous essayist and photographer, with the complication that there is also a sexual frisson between Melissa and Bobbi. Melissa's husband, Nick, is an actor, successful up to a point, and a man who leaves the water after a swim looking like an advertisement for cologne. Frances (or so she tells him) considers masculinity 'personally oppressive'. Her scanty erotic experience to date has been with her own gender, and when she has sex with Nick, it's her first time with a man. She gives him due warning of her inexperience, but more out of good manners, since it would be weird for him to find out later, than because it's any sort of big deal. No mention is made at any point of the anatomical difference involved. The true novelty of the encounter is the shock of contact with a mild character like Nick, perhaps even a weak one, after dealings with a fierce person like Bobbi, so enviably sure of her edges. Frances's involvement with Nick is also the first time she has eaten avocado, but this she keeps to herself. That really would be an embarrassing thing to admit.

The characters share an esperanto of badinage, sharper than the style spread worldwide by *Friends* and its successors but not definitively distinct from it. When every exchange is a little stylised battle it's hard to spot the moment when things become more fully charged, flirtatious banter not being a form of dialectic but a strange poker game in which the stakes can suddenly be raised without any apparent choice on anyone's part:

During these discussions, Nick laughed at all my jokes. I told him I was easily seduced by people who laughed at my jokes and he said he was easily seduced by people who were smarter than he was.

I guess you just don't meet them very often, I said.

See, isn't it nice to flatter each other?

Frances's parents, who separated when she was 12, have a different approach to language and even to word order. Her mother says things like: 'It's far from nice houses in Monkstown you were reared.' She also says 'good woman' when she means 'well done', unaware that Frances is in the dark about her own possible virtue or viciousness, following in the wake of her own actions to pick up clues about her nature. Her father's use of reflexive personal pronouns is really only a country habit of emphasis but brings with it an odd philosophical qualm. He starts a phone conversation with the words 'Is it yourself Frances?' – exactly the sort of question she struggles with.

For someone like Rooney, born in 1991, the notion of conversation includes instant messaging, emails and texts. The standard complaint from older people is that such media are ephemeral, but when her bond with Bobbi seems to be fraying, Frances broods over their emails as obsessively as any hoarder of a paper archive. Saving the whole exchange as a text file, she uses the search function to pounce on particular words. There's plenty of forlorn comedy in Frances's attempts – textual analysis being her strong suit academically – to extract proofs of tenderness from the welter of teasing and reheated theory. When she searches for the term 'love' what she gets is mainly intellectual argumentation: 'me: capitalism harnesses "love" for profit/me: love is the discursive practice and unpaid labour is the effect.' The value of the messages for her is less nostalgic than evidentiary: 'It was important to me that Bobbi would never be able to deny that at one point she had liked me very much.'

She applies similar analytics to Nick's past messages, at a time when they're not getting on particularly well, though the material is disappointingly logistical, arranging dates and places to meet. 'There were no passionate declarations of love or sexually graphic text messages. This made sense, because the affair was conducted in real life and not online, but I felt robbed of something anyway.' She blocks out Nick's name with a finger to make sure her critical

faculties aren't being dulled by tenderness. Just as she sometimes pretends, while doing household tasks, that she's wearing Bobbi's face, and is disappointed when the mirror tells her otherwise, she imagines that if she were as good-looking as Nick she would have fun all the time. Seeing him on stage as Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* , before they were intimate, marked an important stage in her feeling for him. He projected a convincing suggestion of sexual brutality, which didn't excite her as such but perhaps reassured her that he did have a personality, if he could use its materials to fabricate another.

She discovers a clip online of him in a different setting, in a long-running crime drama, where in one scene, playing the father of a kidnapped child, he breaks down in tears: 'He cried exactly the way I imagined he would in real life: hating himself for crying, but hating himself so much that it only made him cry harder.' She takes to watching this sequence in the evening before the two of them speak on the phone, finding it makes her more sympathetic to him. This is perverse psychological territory, with a woman who is already having an affair with a man simultaneously behaving as his online stalker and grooming herself to respond to him. She also discovers that Nick, the least intellectually confident of the group, was a child prodigy exploited by his parents, appearing on Channel 4 as a boy to talk about Platonic philosophy. He jumped through all the required hoops but replied, when asked why he loves the ancient world so much, that he didn't love it, he just studied it.

Technique in a first-person narrative has to be invisible, the degree of the author's identification with the narrator smoothly modulating rather than calculated once and for all. Frances is a witty narrator, but her relationship with wit isn't straightforward. What seems to attract her about wit is the illusion of control conferred by the precise language it favours. It offers no help with self-knowledge but certainly makes your ignorance of yourself cut a dash. Sometimes Rooney seems to be parodying Frances's wit, but that wit may already contain an element of self-parody. When she realises that the love between Nick and Melissa isn't extinct, she asks herself a new set of questions. 'Did he respect Melissa more than me? Did he like her more? If we were both going to die in a burning building and he could only save one of us, wouldn't he certainly save Melissa and not me? It seemed practically evil to have so much sex with someone who you would later allow to burn to death.' The exaggeration here is so rapid that it perhaps makes parody the predominating factor.

*

There's generosity in the way the plot works itself out without villains or false climaxes – the book has a very steady heartbeat, and a much surer sense of dynamics than *Normal People*. Everyone behaves well, even if Melissa's version, inevitably, has a few claws and teeth: 'I've become so used to seeing him as pathetic & even contemptible that I forgot anybody else could love him … He tells me your father is an alcoholic, so was mine. I wonder if we gravitate towards Nick because he gives us a sense of control that was lacking in childhood.' Frances has to adjust her view of Nick, not really the unconflicted soul she first imagined. He has experienced a depression severe enough to need hospitalisation: 'I could see I had entered a new social setting now, where severe mental illness no longer had unfashionable connotations.' Overall what is both memorable and remarkable about the book is how much emotional incoherence and damage can be accommodated in the portrait of its heroine without loss of sympathy, how much self-hatred is compatible with a residual sense of worth. Frances experiences even the afterglow of sex in terms of fatalism and danger: 'Instead of feeling tranquil, I felt oddly defenceless, like an animal playing dead. It was

as though Nick could reach through the soft cloud of my skin and take whatever was inside me, like my lungs or other internal organs, and I wouldn't try to stop him.'

The age of the bottom-drawer novel is long gone: the time, ending in the 1980s, when a first novel that received a handful of good reviews could sell two thousand copies in hardback to public libraries alone, and it was worthwhile for its author to resurrect an old manuscript that had been sitting in a bottom drawer and present it to the world as new. Nowadays it's relatively easy to get a first novel published, hard to take the next step with any confidence. Sally Rooney is well on her way, propelled by unusual quantities of acclaim and assurance. And yet, *Normal People* seems a less mature project than *Conversations with Friends*, even if it isn't a resurrected earlier project. Its slightly awkward time scheme, with artificial forward jumps perhaps transforming a more linear narrative, looks like a classic example of that common phenomenon, the rewrite that spawns a few new problems of its own. Either way, it's an eccentric decision to follow up a triumph with a mere success.

It is time to take a sharp inhale, people. Sally Rooney's Normal People is superb

Normal People review: Second novel from Irish author takes themes of passivity and hurt and makes them radical

Sally Rooney: an Irish writer of international stature. Photograph: Cyril Byrne

Anne Enright

Sat, Sep 1, 2018, 06:00

First published: Sat, Sep 1, 2018, 06:00

Lord be with the days when the job of the critic, especially the Irish critic, was to reassure everyone that a recently successful writer was no good, which is to say not as good as Proust. It is time to take

a sharp inhale, people. After the success of *Conversations With Friends*, Sally Rooney has produced a second novel, *Normal People* which will be just as successful as it deserves to be: it is superb.

Marianne and Connell are schoolfriends-with-benefits living in Carricklea, Co Sligo. Connell's mother is Marianne's mother's cleaner, but this social difference is masked by the fact that Connell is popular in school and Marianne, being odd, is a bit of a pariah. The story of the novel is the story of their relationship over the next several years, as they finish school and go to college, where Marianne is a social success and Connell merely tolerated by the Trinity types in Dublin.

It might be another *Eugene Onegin*, but actually, that part of the plot, where the scorned girl becomes the desired young woman, is done by page 93. Marianne and Connell start sleeping with each other again and now we do not know what kind of journey we are on. Still, there are only two possible destinations: they will, within the unbreakable frame of the narrative, end up together or apart and this is enough tension to keep us turning the page. Meanwhile, it is a tremendous read, full of insight and sweetness. The pace is deliberate but far from slow. There is the pleasure of seeing events unfold and these can be surprising though they are mostly "normal" as events go; the Debs dance, a fight in a petrol station, a game of pool.

One way or another, they are also beautiful people and the reader can, for a while, borrow the glow. The fact that Connell and Marianne are elite academics adds to the sense, in the first half of the novel, that we are reading a brilliant young person writing about other young people. Emotions are everything; they are forensically described. Connell and Marianne's feelings are so real they have a shape; they are sometimes experienced as a physical force. The book switches point of view but it stays very close, so we know how the characters feel but not, somehow, what they are. Rooney's mastery of tone is complete, we almost fail to notice as the darkness trickles in and the light starts to fade.

Problem of power

From the beginning, Marianne and Connell are aware of "the others". As they establish an intimate space, the images are of doors opening and shutting; their concerns are about privacy and exposure, about feeling safe or potentially shamed. The lines of power and humiliation that run through the book are not just about the gang at school or the internet's anonymous crowd, they are more realistically, in Dublin, about social class. The problem of power also plays out between the lovers in an urgent and intimate way. Although they feel, within the relationship, completely private, they cannot protect themselves from each other, nor from their own contradictions as wanting human beings.

They will, you hope, figure it out. Connell is a straight-up guy who will in time deal with his commitment issues. Marianne can guard her heart, to the point of seeming mysterious or cold. Even her mother believes she lacks "warmth" – by which, Marianne says wryly, "she means the ability to beg for love from people who hate her".

This is a modern heroine, with a dissecting intelligence to keep her safe from her own difficulty and from the projections of others. In this, she is like Rooney's first heroine, Frances, who pushes back very brilliantly, telling her lover: "You're interpreting your failure to hurt me as hostility on my part". It is important to be separate. Staying still, being matt black, this will keep you safe. Perhaps this is why the earlier work feels so "cool" in the adolescent sense of the word. Do nothing and you will not be hurt. In fact, doing nothing is something her characters are really good at: the charm and difficulty of *Conversations with Friends* lay in the lovers intriguing passivity; a sense of drift that might have been modernist, or just modern (is that how people have sex, these days?).

Human connection

Normal People takes those themes of passivity, hurt, and makes them radical and amazing. There is an amount of sex in the book and the sensibility is entirely contemporary, but there is no hint of modernism here. *Normal People* has the engine of a 19th century novel; there is an encompassing sense of authority in the voice that makes it more terrible when the characters lives start to slip away from them. The book grows up under your eyes: it is so much wiser and more moral than you thought it would be. Rooney is completely in control. Is Connell's reluctance a personality thing or a mental health issue – or is it just adulthood, a place where difficulties harden and things become clear? At the end, the challenge the lovers face is to own and escape the labels that life has put on them now.

It is tempting to heap pronouncement upon the many pronouncements that will be made about this book and about Rooney, who has already taken her place as an Irish writer of international stature. *Normal People* brings us all that bit further on. 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. But the truth is that this novel is about human connection and I found it difficult to disconnect. It is a long time since I cared so much about two characters on a page.

Anne Enright is the Man Booker winning author of The Gathering. Her latest novel is The Green Road

In https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/it-is-time-to-take-a-sharp-inhale-people-sally-rooney-s-normal-people-is-superb-1.3608184