Sally Rooney's Palpable Designs

by John Tangney (September 2019)

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Sally Rooney is the bright young thing of Irish literature, receiving plaudits from across the spectrum of mainstream media on both sides of the Atlantic for her novels about woke college students in Ireland. Her characters negotiate a social landscape without the moral compass that was once provided by

religion, relying instead on critical theory for guidance through their late teens and young adult years. Rooney's books ring true as a portrayal of these particular high-functioning millennial college students, but her artistic choices also seem intended to flatter the feminist imagination: with one partial exception there are no strong male characters, while all the female characters are highly intelligent with impeccably correct politics. They study at Trinity College, Dublin and have ambivalent sexual relationships that never result in commitment. Theirs is a world in which everything has been 'problematized.'

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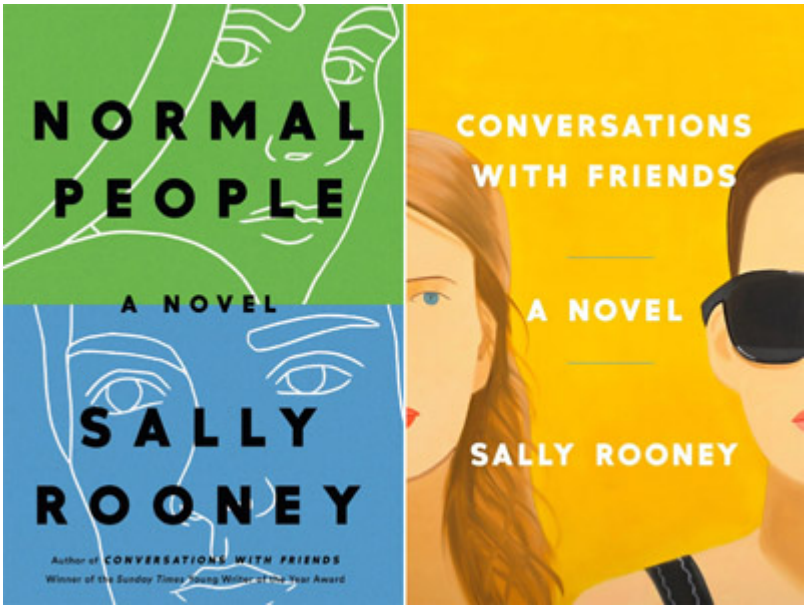
The unwritten context for all this is the collapse of Catholic Ireland in the 1990s amid revelations about sexual exploitation of children in religiously run orphanages, and about Magdalene Laundries—labour camps for unmarried mothers operated by nuns. The comprehensive implosion of that social order can be measured by the fact that we got divorce, gay marriage and abortion within twenty years. Our government framed the gay marriage referendum as the "Marriage Equality" referendum, a formulation that assumed critical-theory inspired orthodoxies about the constructedness of gender and therefore the equivalence of gay and straight relationships. It was simply a matter of making them equal under the law. The fact that men and women are complementary biological opposites whose union alone is capable of creating children was only considered to be important by regressive types who were shouted down in the media. The replacement of blood ties between extended family members with easily-broken legal ties

between political subjects as the principle of Irish social cohesion set the seal on the era of postmodern individualism.[1]



However, Catholic Ireland's corpse is not yet cold, and it makes its present felt obliquely among the panorama of normal people by whom Rooney's characters feel judged or let down, and who are therefore a necessary part of their wounded specialness. In her first book, *Conversations with Friends*, Frances and Bobbi's best male friend is a cipher called Philip who serves as a foil for her and Bobbi's brilliance. He loses an intellectual argument with Bobbi when Bobbi name-drops Deleuze and Guattari whereas Philip can only gesture towards anthropologists who think monogamy is an evolutionary inheritance rather than a social construct. We're told rather than shown that this was a devasting intellectual victory for Bobbi. Jamie, the whipping boy in *Normal People*, brags that he's not sitting the Trinity scholarship exam because he doesn't want to study for it, when everybody around him can see that it's because he knows he's not smart enough. His girlfriend, Marianne, wins the scholarship and the reader who identifies with her enjoys another moment of smug intellectual superiority. It helps us to feel okay about looking down on him to know that Jamie is involved in S&M activities with Marianne, at her instigation, as she acts out her relationship with her abusive father and brother and through them with the old patriarchal Ireland.

In this fictional world, to rise above the status of normal people means to be intelligent. The valorization of intelligence as the key to personal and collective worth is something Rooney's characters have in common with the alt-right who are ostensibly their political opposites. Intelligence leads to a kind of social stratification that sits uneasily with liberal doctrines about equality. Therefore, in this book as in so much of liberal discourse intelligence is conflated with the political correctness that passes for morality among sophisticated people who ultimately believe in nothing. This is one symptom of a kind of ideologically driven bad faith that robs progressives like Rooney's characters of any real agency. Another symptom is Rooney's own portrayal of a world made up of failing men and coping women, in which the only intelligent males are feminist allies. While it may be true that men are in crisis in postmodern Ireland as elsewhere, Rooney's microcosm deliberately exaggerates their weakness and thus betrays her palpable designs on us.[2]

The primary male character in *Conversations with Friends* is the "pathologically passive" Nick, an actor who was once a gifted child and is now married to Melissa, a writer who patronizes Bobbi and Frances. In *Normal People,* Connell Waldron is a slightly more three-dimensional version of Nick, and is the only person who can compete with Marianne intellectually. Rooney structures her books using an elementary intersectional calculus: Connell's being working-class balances Marianne's being a rich female victim of male violence. One continually feels like saying: "I see what you did there," also the case when it comes to Connell's chief credential as one of the good guys: when a drunk Marianne asks him to fuck her at a party he turns her down because he understands 'consent'. When a female former-teacher tries to have sex with him while he's drunk on a different occasion he

‘feels fucked up about it’, suggesting that men and women are vulnerable in exactly the same ways, with the implication that the different outcomes they experience in life are a consequence of oppressive systems of signification that need to be resisted.

In *Normal People,* while dating a Swedish artist/pornographer, Marianne agonizes about whether art can be the site of this resistance. She assumes that it should, yet it’s not clear who would be resisting what. She exists in network of characters whose inner lives are only encountered through their relationships. This is to say that the book is a dramatization of postmodern ideas about subjectivity as radically decentred. The inner life of the singular individual is of no interest to Rooney, and this means that the contemplative dimension of personhood that connects us vertically to the divine and/or to our rootedness in a place and a tradition is a dark continent that is nevertheless detectable in these characters by its absence from their conscious theorizing about their unhappiness. Not knowing who they are makes them incapable of real choices about anything beyond matters of immediate consumption.

This is why in *Conversations With Friends*, Nick’s relationships with Melissa and Frances never issue in a decision about who he wants to be with, just as their attachment to him is never free of a sense of incompleteness. In both books there is an implied continuity beyond the end of the story but of a vague bohemian kind, lacking the narrative structure that once gave meaning to our lives and demanded responsibility of us. None of these women are interested in having children, and Marianne reassures Connell after a pregnancy scare that despite the temptation to keep the baby, she never would. Bohemia has always been a licensed zone of

irresponsibility, but now bohemia has become the middle-class cultural elite. The alt-right is the new counterculture, one that lurks in the shadows of Sally Rooney's world: there is passing reference to a "neo-nazi" invited to debate at Trinity College by the unintelligent Jamie, of whom it is murmured with wry superciliousness that he believes in free speech.

Even among the normal people, there are no functioning marriages in Rooney's books. It seems as if everyone is special now and, of course, lifelong committed relationships are difficult for special people. Yet behind their unhappiness one can see an uneasy orientation towards traditional gender roles and monogamy, for example in Melissa's complaint about her husband's passivity while she is trying not to be jealous of his relationship with Frances. However, if critical theory is partly acknowledged to be a deficient moral framework, there is no real nostalgia for the older Ireland. It remains broken beyond repair, represented by the characters' parents with their unhappy marriages, and by Rob, a schoolfriend of Connell and Marianne's who commits suicide.

Rob's unhappiness is linked to his attitude to women. He displays naked phone pictures of his girlfriend at a house party, while part of the legacy of the abuse Marianne received from her father is that there are pornographic photos of her on the internet. Just as Connell's virtue in comparison with Rob is implicitly linked to his being raised by a single mother, the sexual promiscuity of the female protagonists of both books is juxtaposed with the fact that they have abusive or absent fathers. Behind these details we can detect the Orwellian "four legs good, two legs bad" logic of contemporary feminism, dictating that women are responsible for their own and men's virtues while men are responsible for their own and women's vices.

The misandrist bad faith implicit in this logic calls to mind Stephen Dedalus' remark in *Ulysses* that paternity may be a legal fiction, meaning that men who can't trust their womenfolk can never be sure of their own paternity. It is a consideration that is postmodern *avant la lettre* in that, like the ideology behind gay marriage, it corrodes our genetic connection to the past, and reduces society to a synchronic field of signifiers that seem to have nothing substantial behind them. Although the decentered subjectivity of postmoderns like Rooney's characters bears a superficial resemblance to the Pauline teaching that we are members of each other and that personal morality is a concern for the coIlective, in fact these ideas are opposite. One grounds reality in the flashing of signs and images across a multicultural network, while the other posits an organic body politic whose members share a common orientation towards the divine.

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If one unfashionably grants insight into the human condition to dead white European male writers, it might be argued based on the evidence in *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* or Strindberg's *The Father* that loss of faith in the virtue of women makes men tyrannical in trying to shore up their own political authority, and that the concomitant erosion of male authority leads to the kind of anomie we see in liberal societies today. However, this should probably not be seen as

a historical sequence leading from Catholic Ireland to liberal Ireland, but as a chicken and egg situation that may arise from the unaccountable vagaries of the human soul in all societies. The loss of faith in each other is as likely to be based on perception as on facts, but in Catholic society it was understood in terms of sin and salvation, concepts that were intrinsic to our sense of having a free will that could be compromised by false theologies. The feminist theory driving Rooney's books may be seen as a heresy against human nature, but perhaps her art transcends polemic nevertheless. Just as Shakespeare's antisemitic choice of a wicked Jew for his central character doesn't make *The Merchant of Venice* a bad play, Rooney's misandrist choices don't necessarily detract from her skill at drawing a set of individualized characters and telling a good story about them.

In Ireland tradition and progress have each entailed pathologies that were destructive of the quality of soul in the body politic. According to humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino, soul is nourished by beauty and friendship. In not striving too hard to answer the questions posed by her dramatization of progressive Ireland, Rooney does create beauty in her books, leading us through the delicate vicissitudes of friendship in ways that are genuinely moving, containing hope and sadness in their conclusions. The hope comes from the presence of love in this anomic social landscape, and the sadness from its fragility. What kind of agency she exerts in the achievement of this is a moot question that must remain an object of faith, not something that can be measured by social science. What cultural conservatives know that progressives seem to have forgotten is that literature transcends the politics of the writer, but to the extent that a piece of writing has palpable designs on us it's unlikely to outlive its moment. Even for those who are turned off by Rooney's political activism her stories remain

human portraits of the kind of people we generally disagree with, and may well outlive the political moment that has brought her to prominence.

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[1] Further evidence of this new dispensation can be seen in the *Irish Times* this week which contains a discussion about whether we should move away from a blood-based understanding of citizenship to one based on liberalism and internationalism.

[2] "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us" —John Keats, letter to JH Reynolds, 3rd February 1818.

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