

Loveless: Sally Rooney's latest television outing and novel

*The role of girls, responsibility
and love in the tactless
Rooney canon*

By Nadia Whiston

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THERE IS nothing wrong with a simple love story. Every one of us may guiltily covet a favourite, whether it lingers in the sphere of literature or film or song. Or perhaps for the lucky among us the perfect love story happens not to be found in text, or on screen, but is in fact, our very own.

Love, like money, like power, is a global interest. Love sells. It does not matter where you are from,

everyone can understand Adele, Elvis Presley, Dusty Springfield, Emily Bronte. And now – maybe – Sally Rooney.

15 May saw the latest addition to the Sally Rooney franchise. The BBC's serial adaptation of Rooney's debut novel 'Conversations with Friends' may come as a surprise to sincere Rooney loyalists.

Though I am not a member of that party, I could not help but be struck by the script's concerted divergence from the narrative of the novel. Central characters have also changed in nationality, race, even personality.

However, the most excruciating variant is in fact the unmistakable likenesses. Has anybody noticed how Irish-born Alison Oliver, our central protagonist Frances, is reminiscent of Daisy Edgar-Jones's rendition of Rooney's Marianne in the 2020 production of 'Normal People'?

I do not believe it could be argued that Oliver has modelled her performance entirely on that of



Edgar-Jones, which not only caused me to wonder whether she had read the novel she had been cast in, but also to consider that maybe it's not her fault. For when was the last time love looked that awkward, ah yes, I remember.

I read the complete works of Sally Rooney, fastidiously, one after the other into the dead of night over the course of one long weekend. For those who came upon me during this period, or for those who unwittingly rang me, I espoused many thoughts, both remorseful and remorseless. Few writers have left me more sour, more recalcitrant than this one.

When asked why, my first instinct was to claw at the names that came before Rooney, canonical writers, specifically those of our country. Perhaps, I admit, I have not read enough, my vision is limited; spoiled by a University education or maybe spoiled by the Irish themselves. We are a country of writers after all, we clog and infiltrate the tributaries of really any literary genre. Our writers are brave, frighteningly progressive, raw and wrathful - and more often than not share a deep inward-facing fascination with their own country without being self-involved.

I had to remind myself that it is possible to read an Irish writer and not place them within the canon. I had to remind myself that the world Rooney is concerned with has nothing to do with Edna O'Brien, Donal Ryan, Kevin Barry, John Banville. And nor should she be compared with it. Indeed, I have come to accept that Rooney represents something else entirely. But what is it?

Rooney is writing in a globalised world: for a globalised readership. Her stories could really be set anywhere. Trinity, to someone who hasn't attended it, but who has attended two other universities, seems very familiar. But these considerations did not much temper my grievances, because those elements are not the problem, or not the problem I am bothered by.

What I accept Rooney represents is our new idea of a young woman or indeed our new idea of writing about young women - and what that creature is encouraged and portrayed to be: a filterless, imperfect, brave, independent and tender thing. But, is that what we meet in Rooney's books?

What angered me, as a young woman myself, as a person both older and younger than Rooney's creations, was not only how self-centred they all are, but that they lack nuance, they lack depth and they lack agency. What bewildered me further was Rooney's alliance with elitism: everyone she creates is troubled by a vast and unconquerable intelligence, or so we are told, yet I never felt these exceptional traits to be on display for me.

I am not shown the inner workings of the mind of young Frances the poet in her 'Conversations with Friends', and it is interesting to reflect on how the current television representation of

Rooney's first novel would not function as it does on screen without the addition into the script of these poetic interludes (though that is not to say what we hear in them has poetic value).

It is important to note that, due to the absence of these in the novel itself, the character of Frances is that of a young woman we only ever meet in her relation with the married man she spends the book chasing, although she also does not chase after him does she? — because young Frances is a communist and she does not believe in love.

When speaking of my experience with an older friend of mine, I was assured that Rooney was undoubtedly a very clever young woman. When I asked this friend to elaborate, he said simply: "She has uncovered a formula, she has figured it out". I insisted that he clarify what formula this was.

He said: "She writes about what young women are like".

So perhaps now my thoughts on Rooney can begin to take their shape. For in reading her writing I find myself perturbed by a two-pronged quandary. One being that no, I do not think young women are like this; and two, I do not find 'love', that messy funny touching uncomfortable thing to be present among or inside of Rooney's characters.

Perhaps it is that Rooney's fetishising of coldness and emotional incoherence simply does not seduce me. I am aware that I may stand very much alone in my hinterland. I have on more than one occasion been labeled a 'hopeless romantic', and perhaps good heavens, I am, and long may I remain so. So on the basis that you are reading an article by someone inherently, though maybe comfortingly, old fashioned, let us proceed...

In her latest novel Rooney returned in some ways to familiar haunts, and though her characters are older, University still lingers as a defining presence however distantly. Trinity in 'Beautiful World Where Are You?' is where Alice and Eileen met. Our two central females occupy

polarities. While Eileen has remained Dublin-bound, over-qualified, under-paid and as yet out of touch with her intellectual potential, Alice (undoubtedly Rooney's alter ego) wrote her first book during the early hours of university life and has since become a best-selling worldwide superstar.

Again, we are never ushered into her creative space, instead we meet her on Ireland's west coast and also on Tinder. She is renting a country pile on her own, and secluded with her laptop authors entreating emails to Eileen, who at first eludes her.



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Ordinary People

Loneliness, and the loneliness of the late-twenty-something in the big bad world is a phenomenon in 'Beautiful World Where Are You'. Though success is the active agent of it for Alice, a failed relationship and the expense of Dublin are catalysts for Eileen. This novel is the most bulgy of Rooney's oeuvre. There is no denying that she is directly confronting contemporary existence, its losses and limitations, but the novel is mannered and made awkward by the ubiquitous use of emails to drive its narrative along.

This is not helped by the subject of the emails either. Rooney, quite desperate to display the wealth and variety of her geopolitical concerns, has Alice say things like this:

"I have been thinking a lot lately about right wing politics (haven't we all), and how that conservatism (the social force) came to be associated with rapacious market capitalism. The connection is not obvious, at least to me, since markets preserve nothing, but ingest all aspects of an existing social landscape and excrete them, shorn of meaning and memory, as transactions".

Rooney has spoken openly in interviews about her belief that human relationships are transactional, and I don't know if the above was supposed to act as some sort of metaphorical allusion to the concerns of her latest novel. Perhaps Ireland's wealthiest communist does have a point, and perhaps in the world of immediate gratification we are living in, I, the romantic, should accept this as standard

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philosophy. However, I insist on the fact that if you are in the business of writing romantic fiction, pursuing such beliefs may hamper the value, certainly the effectiveness of the story you have to tell.

In the case of 'Beautiful World Where Are You?', what I found to be most powerfully ironic was that contriving to inscribe her radical, what some may call nihilistic, beliefs into a work of fiction, rather than one of social reportage, only underlines the conventionality of the tale.

Here are our young women, both when we meet them eluded and discouraged by love. We accompany Eileen on her long walks home to her bedroom in a shared apartment where she stalks her ex on Facebook and masturbates until she falls asleep. Her soul comfort, it seems, is Simon. He is wealthy, intelligent, fluent in French, extremely handsome; they have known each other since adolescence, and he loves her.

Eileen finds in him a loving recipient in whom

she can deposit her loneliness and dissatisfaction (how convenient, how safe). Initially Alice and Felix from Tinder seem highly unlikely. Felix works in a factory warehouse driving a forklift, he is unimpressed by the country pile.

Their conversations are abrupt, irregular and volatile — mostly down to Felix. In an intimate sex scene between them in which Alice tells him that she loves him for this first time, Felix responds by stating that people do not often fall in love with her - before adding that she does not seem to have any friends either; then follows a paragraph like this:

"I was thinking about it over in Italy, he said. Watching you do your reading and your autographs and all that. I wouldn't go so far as to say you work hard, because your job's a laugh compared to mine. But you have a lot of people wanting things off you. And I just think for all the fuss they make over you, none of them actually care about you one bit. I don't know if anyone does'.

'You must really hate me', she said coolly.

'No, I don't', he replied. 'But I don't love you either'".

The relationship between these characters perplexed me. Though the voices of Alice and Eileen could be virtually interchangeable for most of the novel, a pervasive tendency in Rooney characters, Alice strikes me as a pleasant, inoffensive sort of person (while Eileen is at times overwhelmingly narcissistic). I am not quite sure what the purpose is of Alice being spoken to the way she is by Felix. Although he is by far the most memorable of Rooney's characters, specifically though not entirely because of his nastiness, I remain uncertain as to his function in the love set-to. And though I say he is the least monochrome of Rooney's creations, putting young women in situations which undermine them without giving the reader a reason as to why Rooney is doing it really baffles me.

As I said before, I thought Rooney was here to represent young women. Perhaps I was mistaken in assuming that therefore she would also empower them, lead them, inspire them. To be very fair Rooney has expressly disavowed any ambition to be the voice of her generation but that is the role she has been given, and it is her obligation to deal with it.

I say this about an author who was named one of 2021's most influential women by the *Financial Times*. What I struggled with in 'Beautiful World Where Are You?' is that once you scrape past the political and ecological waffle (Madeleine Schwartz in the New York Review of Books says the politics in Rooney's books are "mostly gestural") you get two young women entirely dependent on men.

Perhaps the ecological historical religious stuff is supposed to distract us from that, but what I see is that for both women there is a male

character who will make their decisions for them; and that in the novel's conclusion it is by and through these relationships both women will attain a sense of completion.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with that trajectory, aside of course from it being tinged off-white by inverted misogyny.

Of Alice the great writer we learn very little, other than, like every other child star ever, she had a mental breakdown and spent time in an institution.

Aside from that, what we learn of her is embodied in Felix, an unevenly sketched and malevolent creation, through whom it seems Alice has acquired a greater sense of inner peace...Am I missing something here?

Not for the first time with Rooney's writing I feel uncomfortable. Throughout my Rooney experience I was far more aware of the words anxiety, ego and power and coldness than I ever was of love. Perhaps we can assume we are going through a phase.

Among those shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year award was thirty-two year-old Megan Nolan's debut, 'Acts of Desperation'. Described as "a hugely powerful tale", her narrative of pathological self-hatred and obsession was a difficult and upsetting experience.

It made me worry about our new ways of writing about young women. I worry about an essential negativity, I worry that these chronicles of abuse and attacks upon the self are being given far too much power, and that how the media responds to them should be tempered accordingly.

In 'Conversations with Friends' twenty-one year-old Frances pursues a relationship with a thirty-five year-old married man, Dan. An affair ensues, initiated by Frances, with what could be discerned as Rooney's intention: an eschewing of gender dynamics and convention.

But really what we see is twenty-one-year-old Frances making nightly visits to the bedroom of married Dan over the course of their stay in a villa in France – on a holiday to which she was invited by Dan's wife, Melissa.

The affair ends because Dan starts to sleep with his wife again... only for it to be continued, maybe, it is hard or unrewarding to say, when Dan mistakenly rings his former mistress instead of his wife while doing their grocery shopping (yes, really).

The tone of this conversation I could only interpret as inherently misogynistic. What other way can we read the ending of this novel in which the man will succeed in being granted the opportunity of sexual dedication from both his older greatly successful wife (her interest in him reinstated by his extramarital endeavours) and his much younger, also highly talented – though totally intellectually unexplored – mistress.

What actually took place within those two hundred and forty odd pages? But oh well, at least Dan feels better.

What it says to me is that Rooney understands women to be disposable, so what I am talking about here for Rooney the writer is, in fact, *responsibility*. For it seems odd does it not, for a writer so young, so modern, writing books wedded utterly to the current,

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divorced utterly from the romantic, for one seen to be so influential, to merely reinscribe old tales of anxiety and rejection once again into society and then to be celebrated for them? Let us consider Eileen, a character who seemed very clearly rejected, depressed by the failure of her domesticity, and on the rebound – yet who was so easily made content by her marriage to a very wealthy man she has known all her life and the birth of her first child.

What could be more comfortingly bland and also so patriarchal?

Though I want it to be clear it is not the lack of imagination which has left me spinning. In 'Normal People' – certainly her strongest work – Marianne, another waifish insecure intellectual is embossed with not only a mainstream eating disorder but also, and just as seriously, a background as a victim of domestic violence.

Marianne has her nose broken by her brother and is unable to defend herself, nor does she verbally protest. His physical violence towards her, too, is left unexplained as is the bizarrely abusive behaviour of her mother.

Rooney renders her female characters lacking in distinction or agency.

Worse, it seems rather like Marianne's sexual sadomasochism is used merely as a motif, and one which never allows the young woman any chance at self-clarification. Rooney never gets to the heart of this instinct, one which generates great harm for Marianne, exposes her to humiliation, degradation and malice from former friends and ensuing abandonment: essentially abuse. Though Rooney too abandons and abuses her, Rooney too takes the damaged and victimised girl and turns her into an attractive image which sells.

Does it not seem odd for the author to choose to exhibit such a personal tendency though never to attempt to resolve it? I ask this with no feminist grudge, I ask this as a reader, I ask this as a young woman. In books which have gone so far am I wrong to place some degree of responsibility in Rooney's hands?

At the close of 'Normal People', Connell will move forward into a world of promise with a coveted scholarship and Marianne will be left behind, unchanged, unfixed. We are never told what she is doing in the world. Her world is not opened to us, but she hands Connell the key to his freedom, nonetheless, though her abandonment continues.

We deserve less randomness and more integrity, explanation and ultimately *justice*. Only an author who writes about issues as serious as this with so little tact, could write love stories with no love in them. **LB**