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Intermezzo

by Sally Rooney

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Discussion Questions

1. Chess runs throughout the book as a set piece and a metaphor. What role does it serve? Why might Sally Rooney have chosen to use it?

2. In Chapter 7, Ivan reflects on Peter's seemingly effortless ability to be "a person of good sense" in social situations. In other chapters, we're privy to Peter's own internal doubts and frustrations. Why does Ivan think this, and how is it indicative of the way each brother thinks of the other? In what ways are their impressions incorrect?

3. Margaret and Ivan have a simple intimacy from the moment they meet: "I guess you only make good moves," Margaret says. "I don't make horrible mistakes," Ivan answers, to which Margaret replies, "I do." In what ways do they and the other characters make "mistakes," going against their own rules or principles, or society's? Is there an overarching moral system for Rooney's characters, or do they each follow their own compass?

4. In one of Rooney's previous novels, CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS, Frances writes to her friend, Bobbi, "To love someone under capitalism you have to love everyone." Does INTERMEZZO take a similar stance? How are the characters' lives controlled or contained by their socioeconomic positions?

5. An intermezzo is a short independent piece that plays in between the acts of a play or opera. Why do you think Rooney used this word for the title, and how does this concept function in the novel?

6. Desire --- sexual, emotional, intellectual --- is often presented as an alternative to societal convention. Margaret recalls having once felt "contained before, contained and directed, by the trappings of ordinary life." How does the novel portray human interaction, romance and love as informed by, and in spite of, external factors?

7. "Quietly they look at one another. Love at times indistinguishable from hatred. What they represent to one another: unsatisfiable desires." Here, Peter and Sylvia --- and in other moments, Ivan and Peter --- contain both love and hatred for each other. In what ways is love at times indistinguishable from hate? How does Rooney show us this?

8. Consider how the chapters are narrated. For example, Peter's chapters have a marked use of fragments, capturing thought on the move. Other characters express themselves in different registers. What is the significance of Rooney's stylistic choices? What effect is achieved?

9. When they go for coffee together, Sylvia asks Ivan to talk her through a perplexing logic puzzle about a liar who claims that all his hats are green. Later, Peter likens himself to a "false true lover." What are the characters' relationships to truth and lies?

10. “Why anyway attachment, why always this attachment to particular people,” Peter wonders, thinking about Sylvia, Naomi and himself. "Attachment, the cause of all suffering." In another moment, Margaret thinks of life as netting: "There is no such life, slipping free: life is itself the netting, holding people in place, making sense of things." What are the characters attached to, and how do these attachments affect them and their relationships?

11. Toward the end of the novel, Peter ponders Wittgenstein's famous paradox --- that the presence of two options only gives us a picture, a frame --- and considers what the "third possibility" means. In what ways does the novel present an idea of a “third possibility"? How does the novel pose alternative ways of being and living with one another?

12. Where and how do you see grief and loss manifesting in the novel --- in Peter's and Ivan's lives and beyond? How do their relationships to these concepts evolve?

13. How did your reading experience of INTERMEZZO compare with that of Rooney's previous novels? In what ways does this work feel true to her sensibility, and in what ways does she accomplish something different?

Author Interview

Sally Rooney: ‘Falling in love when I was very young transformed my life’

By Lisa Allardice

Sally Rooney on romance, writing about sex, the Normal People phenomenon and her new novel, Intermezzo

“I feel like the older I get the more freedom I have to write about a greater range of life experiences,” Sally Rooney says when we meet to discuss her new novel Intermezzo, which centres on two love stories with significant age gaps. “Because I’ve lived slightly more, not a whole lot more, but a few more years.”

Those few more years make her 33, no longer the twentysomething voice of millennial angst. Rooney can’t wait to shake off the “Salinger for the Snapchat generation” tag that has followed her since the publication of her first novel Conversations With Friends in 2017 (she didn’t even know at the time what Snapchat was). The success of her second novel, Normal People, not to mention the TV adaptation in 2020, transformed the publicity-shy, self-proclaimed Marxist from County Mayo into the book world’s Taylor Swift. “I really feel like I’m not lying when I say I’m quite keen to leave that all behind,” she says. “I didn’t actually want to be ‘the young novelist’; I just wanted to be good.”

Wearing a brown dress, brown flats and a neat ponytail, the author is almost ostentatiously unadorned, in person as in her prose. We meet in the writers’ residence room at the Museum of Literature Ireland (nicknamed MoLI after Joyce’s Molly Bloom from Ulysses), in a former University College Dublin building overlooking St Stephen’s Green. Joyce had his graduate photograph taken in the gardens outside, where romantic novelist Maeve Binchy liked to read and the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins died of typhoid. Rooney has been reading Hopkins recently in a bid to memorize a poem a day.

In her early 20s, she was “the number one competitive debater in Europe” (the subject of her 2015 Dublin Review essay Even If You Beat Me which first caught her agent’s attention), and it’s not hard to see why: she gives long, carefully reasoned answers, often followed by an equally robust counter-argument. Although a master of self-deprecation and steely discretion, she is engagingly warm and talks passionately about the things that matter most to her (literature, politics and the Israel-Gaza war). In short, she is not the spiky recluse that her fiction or reputation might suggest.

Rooney is visiting Dublin, which features in all her novels, to see friends. After 10 years in the city, and a stint in New York, she and her husband, John Prasifka, have settled in the countryside, just a 15-minute drive from the small market town of Castlebar where Rooney grew up. She met Prasifka, now a maths teacher, in her final year at Trinity College, and they got married – “very, very quietly” – during lockdown. After struggling with her third novel, Beautiful World, Where Are You, she has been working happily on Intermezzo, set between Dublin and a fictional rural west Ireland town, since they moved in.

The title is a clever play on a term used in music and chess, both central to the novel (in music, it means an interlude; in chess, an unexpected move). “I love niche vocabularies,” Rooney says. During lockdown her husband got into online chess and, although she doesn’t play herself, she started watching YouTube tutorials with him. “I began to see it almost like an art form, the mathematical elegance of when people make really brilliant moves and you can see an idea kind of unfolding on the board.” As a writer, she could also relate to chess as an obsession. “I’m familiar with being fixated on the thing that I love in my life.” In Intermezzo, as with all her novels, her characters are moved around masterfully – closer, then further apart again – in an agonising game of power and unexpected moves.

The novel is the story of two brothers in the aftermath of their father’s death: Peter, a confident 32-year-old junior barrister in Dublin, and Ivan, a 22-year-old chess champion, all brains and braces. Peter is involved with a young student, while still in love with his former girlfriend, a lecturer who is dealing with the long-term effects of an accident, one of which being that she can no longer have sex. This love triangle is set against the touching story of Ivan and Margaret, 14 years his senior, who works at the rural arts centre where they meet.

All the usual Rooney elements are here: intense, in some way unequal relationships; absent fathers; and digressions on the Dublin rental market, feminism and late capitalism. As a much-loved chronicler of female friendship, Rooney’s greatest departure in this novel is to focus on two male siblings. “If you are observant enough and critical enough, I think you can come to an understanding of how gender works from wherever you stand within that social game that we all play,” she says. But as she points out, she has never witnessed a conversation between two men in which a woman wasn’t present. “So I was very aware that I was stepping outside my own social reality.” This comes with her usual caveat – no, this doesn’t mean that her previous novels are based on her own experiences or that the female characters are all her. “I just want to make clear that is not the case.”

Rooney’s great subject is love, in particular romantic and erotic love, and Intermezzo is no exception. As Anne Enright puts it, Rooney manages to be sexually explicit without being smutty, “with her distinctive choreography of the gaze, and of the breath, and a mighty precision about what-goes-where”.

As a writer of modern love, she feels it would be a “bit of a cop-out not to write about any of that, to say: ‘You’ll just have to imagine it in your head.’” In fact, she is surprised how little the subject of sex comes up in conversations about her work. “The erotic is a huge engine in the stories of all my books,” she says. “That doesn’t mean the characters are always about to get into bed together right now, but in lots of the relationships the driver is erotic tension or desire. So it’s interesting that I don’t get asked about it more often.”

Then there was the Normal People TV series, which was a huge hit in lockdown, the BBC’s most streamed series of 2020, but described by one critic as “more like high-end pornography than drama”. Paul Mescal’s character Connell caused such a stir that his silver chain, which was all he seemed to wear for much of the series, got its own Instagram account, and now has 132,000 followers. What did Rooney make of the series? “The only reason to do an adaptation of any work is if it can be something new and interesting in its own right,” she says. “And I think that’s what the whole team accomplished with Normal People. It became an autonomous thing in itself.”

She co-wrote the first six of the 12 episodes with Alice Birch, and worked as an executive producer for the rest. While she feels “blessed” by the whole experience, she doesn’t want to do more. “I never had any dreams of being a screenwriter, and I certainly don’t now,” she says. “I’m a novelist. I just want to write novels.”

She was completely unprepared for the scale of its success. “It felt to me like everyone in Britain and Ireland was talking about this television show, and it all kind of came from my head,” she says. While the media scrutiny of Rooney was nothing like that of lead actors Daisy Edgar-Jones and Mescal, “It still felt like too much,” she says. “I don’t want to be the centre of attention like that ever again.”

As her character Alice, recovering from a breakdown after the success of her first novel in Beautiful World, Where Are You, puts it, Rooney occupies the contradictory position of “widely despised celebrity novelist” – a role shared by other precocious talents such as Zadie Smith and Lena Dunham, who were also burdened by the “voice of a generation” label. Rooney feels that the media representation of her as an author was very much tied to her youth, “and the experience of being a young woman in the public eye is not always a completely pleasant or easy one. There’s so much to say and think and argue about when it comes to the role of young women in our culture,” she continues. “But I would love not to be the focal point on which that discussion sometimes rests. I would love that not to be me.”

A lot of these anxieties and stereotypes come together under the banner of “sad girl lit” – stories about introspective, essentially privileged young women (Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s Fleabag is the TV apotheosis), for which Rooney has become the unwitting poster girl. Followers on Rooney’s Goodreads page, of which there are over 50,000, have been looking forward to a “sad girl September” in anticipation of Intermezzo’s publication. But the author herself is unfamiliar with the term. “I don’t think my books are that sad, are they?” she asks, mystified. “I find my books quite optimistic about the human condition and about relationships.” Indeed, as she points out, feminist critics have complained that her work is too positive on this front.

She can’t win – and it is hard to write about Rooney and her work without acknowledging the noise surrounding her. Few writers provoke such emotional reactions. For some, to read Rooney is to make you a fangirl or a hater, a polarisation the author feels is fuelled in part by the hype: “It makes people who like my work feel that it becomes part of their cultural identity, they are people who enjoy this type of thing, and equally it’s alienating for people who don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

In Beautiful World, novelist Alice mocks the glitzy lifestyles of A-list writers “who open up the old MacBook to write a beautifully observed little novel about ‘real life’”. Does she ever worry that she’s left the “normal people” of her fiction behind? “I still live the same existence and know all the same people. I haven’t gone anywhere,” she replies. “So I don’t feel that my experience of success, although it absolutely has been a huge part of my life, has taken me away from normal life in a way that makes it difficult for me to write about people experiencing ordinary problems.”

As with sex, she feels a duty not to shy away from the grubby matter of money. “It would feel like I was reneging on my commitment to realism, almost in terms of the novel form, if I wasn’t prepared to grapple with what is so obviously part of the material reality of the cohort that I’m writing about.” And this means writing about the housing crisis, once more a subplot in Intermezzo.

Conversations With Friends was written at the kitchen table, or in bed, in a series of rented flats, paid for by a grant from the Arts Council of Ireland. She may have an office now, but she still writes whenever and wherever she feels the urge, happiest "under a blanket, hunched over my laptop in a very unergonomic position". Her ideal existence would be to be able to write and then let her work go into the world without her being involved at all. "I am blessed with a love of writing," she says. "I love working."

She credits her husband, John, with making her writing possible, and not just by bringing her cups of tea and emptying the bins. "Having had this experience of falling in love when I was very young, with somebody who completely transformed my life, and transforms it every day, has allowed me to write stories about people whose lives are transformed by love," she says. "Without that, I don't think my work would be recognisable. Just his presence in my life made it possible for me to write everything that I've written."

The rest of her family are also very supportive. Her father worked for a telecoms company, and her mother ran the local arts centre (like Margaret in Intermezzo); they separated when she was young. She has an older brother and younger sister, and they are all great readers of her work. "When I have finished a book, it is almost like we are gossiping about the characters and their lives." As a child they would have equally lively dinner-table conversations about books and politics. But her strongest memory is of wanting to grow up. "I thought, 'how glamorous and sophisticated to be an adult'. It kind of has turned out that way for me. It has lived up to my childhood dream." She has no interest in writing about childhood itself. Friends have said they would love to read something from a child's perspective. "And I'm like: 'from the perspective of a who?' It is like, I don't remember that."

In a much-quoted line from Beautiful World, Alice writes to her friend Eileen: "Aren't we unfortunate babies to be born when the world ended?" The two women on the brink of 30 worry about having children in the face of environmental breakdown. "It's something that absolutely keeps me up at night," Rooney says. "I'm not a parent, but there are babies and children in my life who I care about very much, and it's difficult to sit with the kind of world that we are handing on to them. I'm obviously not alone in feeling haunted by that. My commitment is to making a world where women can have children, whether or not I'd be one of them."

In 2021 she felt compelled to put her head above the parapet by refusing to sell the rights for a Hebrew translation of Beautiful World to an Israeli publishing company in support of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (BDS), following reports describing Israeli treatment of Palestinians as apartheid. "In Ireland the history of boycotting South Africa in response to South African apartheid is something that we feel very proud of, in terms of our national legacy," she says now. "I couldn't justify to myself not doing what all these civil society groups and trade unions were asking me to do." She feels the same about translation rights for Intermezzo.

She despairs at a global system that is "facilitating and enabling" the war in Gaza, while failing to do anything to avert "complete planetary ecosystems' collapse within our lifetime". Quoting the old Gramsci line about pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will, she feels a moral duty not to give up on a belief in a better world. And in part this rests on her commitment to a beautiful world, in which art makes life worth living.

“I’ve given my life to writing novels. I don’t know whether they are good, but even if they’re really good they’re not going to save the planet,” she argues. “There’s the idea that maybe artists have a role, which is to give people a reason to go on in a time when those reasons sometimes feel like they’re running low.” But, as always, she is ready with the case against: “That’s a nice thing to believe. I don’t know if it is a true thing to believe. Maybe I ought to be spending my time doing something more productive. And that is very, very possibly the case.” An argument with which her millions of fans would strongly disagree.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/sep/14/sally-rooney-intermezzo-interview-normal-people-conversations-friends-love-sex

Reviews

Sally Rooney, Heart on Her Sleeve, Writes a Weeper

Her new novel, “Intermezzo,” considers love in its various permutations.

by Dwight Garner

A Sally Rooney backlash, in certain quarters, has been building. Her books are too white, it is said, and her politics too soft. She can be, in pursuit of a love story, a bit corny — or so it is said.

Her success rankles. Midnight release parties are scheduled in many bookstores for her new novel, “Intermezzo,” as if it were “Harry Potter,” Book 8. These parties may be cheerful communal events for some. For others, they are deeply uncool.

Asked once about his ambition, the novelist Peter De Vries replied that he yearned for a mass audience large enough for his elite audience to despise. Rooney, who is Irish, has reached this tricky plateau. She’s been called the Salinger of the Snapchat generation. She does less publicity than most other writers, yet she seems curiously overexposed.

I’ve had a small, personal taste of the Rooney backlash. The advance word about “Intermezzo” has not been good, at least among publishing’s smart young crowd. I’ve heard it called overlong and undercooked.

When I’ve replied that I admire “Intermezzo” almost without reservation — I fell into it like a goose-down comforter after a 15-mile hike in the sleet — the reaction has largely been disbelief. Some were as apoplectic as parrots. If I had to boil down the responses to my declarations of love to three letters, they’d be “LOL.”

Clearly this book is going to divide people.

“Intermezzo” is about two brothers, Peter, a successful barrister in Dublin, and Ivan, who is shyer, geekier, 10 years younger, wears ceramic braces and plays competitive chess. They are mourning the death of their father, and there is lingering bitterness between them. Our perceptions of Peter and Ivan will shift quite radically over the course of the novel, the way they do about the foster brothers in Martin Amis’s early novel “Success.”

Anyone who has read Rooney’s previous work — notably the novels “Conversations With Friends” (2017), about two college friends who become entwined in the lives of a married couple, and “Normal People” (2018), about the class and status differences between a pair of young lovers — is aware that her primary subject is love in its various permutations, the minutiae of falling in and out of it. She writes as well about this topic as anyone alive. It’s as if she were Iris Murdoch or Edna O’Brien with a three-book deal at Harlequin Romance.

Peter, 32, is caught between two women. Sylvia, his longtime girlfriend, left him after she was gravely and permanently injured in a car crash; she didn't want Peter to have to care for her. He remains dismayed by her decision, and they remain close. He has a younger and more feral lover, Naomi, who is 23 and borderline homeless. At the start, he doesn't take this relationship seriously.

Rooney is attentive to physical beauty. "Milky white his skin, and his figure slender and beautiful as a Grecian marble," she writes about Ivan. Here is Naomi, in a few sketches: "Full lips parted, sweep of freckles on her cheekbone. Silver stud glinting in her ear"; "tiny silver dress"; "animal intelligence"; "pink tongue, flash of silver." Rooney underscores her "supreme desirability."

The overriding love story in this wise, resonant and witty novel is between Ivan, who is 22, and Margaret, a 36-year-old arts-program director he meets at a chess event. She fears the social repercussions of dating a much younger man. They skulk around, hoping to avoid being seen together.

She feels like Humberta Humberta. In writing about an older woman with a younger man, Rooney is working in the tradition of Colette, Zoe Heller and Annie Ernaux, among others.

Ivan and Margaret's mutual attraction — they feel they belong to "the same camp," a phrase that is repeated — is a revelation to both. She blossoms under his touch and he under hers.

"It ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love," Raymond Carver famously wrote. Rooney's writing about love hits as hard as it does because she is especially adept at evoking loneliness, for which love is a salve. There is so much restraint and melancholy profundity in her prose that when she allows the flood gates to open, the parched reader is willing to be swept out to sea.

"Intermezzo" wears its heart on its sleeve. It's a mature, sophisticated weeper. It makes a lot of feelings begin to slide around in you. I mentioned Murdoch: Although Rooney's supply of imagery and symbolism is more limited, they share a mad intellectual intensity. I recognize Rooney in lines like this one, from Murdoch's novel "A Severed Head" (1961): "I would come to her even if I had to wade through blood."

Like O'Brien in her early stories and novels, Rooney recognizes the life-changing importance of physical contact, of sex. Sleeping with Margaret, Ivan finds himself asking: Is this how it feels, to get what you want?

In bed with Peter, young Naomi shares her desire for rough sex, for abasement. "You can do whatever you want with me," she tells him.

The desire to be bossed around in bed has appeared in Rooney's earlier fiction. Peter complies with Naomi's request, but tender harm is not quite his thing. "Look, it's different for your generation," he says. "You're all going around getting strangled and spitting in each other's mouths or whatever. I'm 32, OK, we're normal."

This is a chess book without much chess in it. But when Rooney does turn her attention to the game, the writing is fluid and exact:

When a move suggests itself to him for no obvious reason, he need only apply the slightest pressure to his intuition, a few seconds or minutes of conscious calculation, in order to feel the strength of the intuition asserting itself forcefully in response: Because after the exchange, for instance — forcing his opponent to withdraw the rook and then taking with the pawn on g5, exposing the light-squared bishop, trading, after all that — then white's knight will be trapped.

Is "Intermezzo" overlong? I would not have wanted it shorter; Rooney has an exquisite perceptiveness and a zest for keeping us reading. Is it pandering? Perhaps, a bit. By the end, there were more tears in her characters' eyes than there were in my own.

Yet this book charmed and moved me, and, over the two or three days I spent with it, made my burdens feel lighter. Anthony Bourdain was always exhorting his audience to live, live! In one of his arias on this topic, he advised us to "Eat at a local restaurant tonight. Get the cream sauce."

"Intermezzo" is Sally Rooney with a bit more butter and cream. Yes, please, waiter. Call me a fool for love, but this oft-jaundiced reader found this meal to be discerning, fattening, old-school and delicious.

Dwight Garner has been a book critic for The Times since 2008, and before that was an editor at the Book Review for a decade.

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https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/books/review/sally-rooney-intermezzo.html