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Book Reviews and Discussions

normal people by sally rooney / review + discussion



## Summary:

- **my rating:** 5 stars
- **published:** 2018 by Hogarth Press
- **genres:** literary fiction, contemporary fiction, Irish fiction
- **content warnings:** depictions of abuse, assault, suicide, depression

## Synopsis:

Connell and Marianne grow up in the same small town in rural Ireland. The similarities end there; they are from very different worlds. When they both earn places at Trinity College in Dublin, a connection that has grown between them lasts long into the following years.

This is an exquisite love story about how a person can change another person's life – a simple

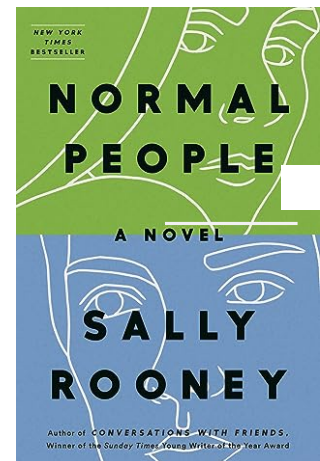
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Close and accept

legitimacy and privilege. Alternating menace with overwhelming tenderness, Sally Rooney's second novel breathes fiction with new life.



**SPOILER WARNING:** This is not a spoiler free review, it is more a discussion of the text and it's themes. It therefore may contain some light spoilers.

**“ He brought her goodness like a gift and now it belongs to her. Meanwhile his life opens out before him in all directions at once. They’ve done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another. ”**

Normal People is my first foray into Sally Rooney's work, despite hearing a lot about her. I can tell you now it will not be my last foray, because I absolutely loved this book. Rooney's writing is whip-smart, funny, and not afraid to show the simultaneous tenderness and heartbreak that comes with loving someone, exposing your vulnerabilities to them, over and over again, and having someone know you so intimately well they have the power to change you.

Normal People revolves around Connell and Marianne, who attend the same school in rural Ireland. Connell is popular and sporty, but he's also poor. Marianne is unpopular and disliked, but she's from a wealthy family. Hence, the tension between them. Connell's mother is Marianne's family cleaner. Eventually the two start dating, but keep it a secret. Connell does not want people to know about his mum being a cleaner, or to have people judge him for dating Marianne. Outside of school they are desperately in love, within school, Connell won't even acknowledge her.

**“ Marianne had the sense that her real life was happening somewhere very far away, happening without her, and she didn't know if she would ever find out where it was or become part of it ”**

This disparity in wealth, privilege and power plays out throughout the rest of the book. Through their relationship, power tips from one to the other while Marianne and Connell desperately try to meet on solid ground in the middle. The way power fluctuates between them is almost comical at times, Rooney shaping dramatic scenes and moments that would be unbelievable except they're really not. Rooney is clever, able to sharply curb her writing so that it never

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Rooney's writing is young and fresh, and her much revered millennial voice really stood out to me. I enjoyed the dialogue in this, the way the characters speak felt authentically young. They are politically aware, cynical, and ensconced in the bubble of academia. I recognised these characters, even as some of them made me cringe.

The most bold choice, stylistically, is the removal of all dialogue tags. I liked that too. You get the sense in this book nothing that is said was possibly said the way the character thinks it was – not that these characters are unreliable in the typical sense, but like most people, they aren't wholly reliable either. Dialogue reads like it's slipping loose from the tongue, like each character on the page only thought up what they said five minutes ago.

**“ It was culture as class performance, literature fetishised for its ability to take educated people on false emotional journeys, so that they might afterwards feel superior to the uneducated people whose emotional journeys they liked to read about ”**

Rooney interrogates modern relationships and how they are at the mercy of modern discourses. Casual dating, love under capitalism and the importance of politics and value alignment within relationships. Rooney also teases out disparities in class and wealth within Ireland, contrasting rural and city living, working class and wealthy families, and examining the levels of privilege and wealth that breed within universities, specifically Trinity College with its illustrious reputation and famous alumni.

Rooney is a marxist, who has spoken about how her politics affect her writing often. The influence was evident; class differences and power imbalance as a result of privilege and wealth is put to the forefront frequently within this book. It forms the central complication between Connell and Marianne, time after time. The flow of social capital, and how people can use their social capital to the benefit or detriment of others is also a prevalent theme of the book.

But Rooney also presents the benefit of sharing our resources. Marianne and Connell's relationship metaphorically demonstrates the value of social marxism. At different times, they both have things the other needs. Instead of helping, they withhold, and it drives them apart. It is when Marianne and Connell are finally able to meet on solid ground, when each one is having their needs met by the distribution of resources from one to the other they finally are complete, and not only that – they flourish. This is evidenced in Marianne's final thoughts **'They've done a lot of good for each other. Really, she thinks, really. People can really change one another'.**

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your life, by offering you exactly what you need. Rooney also asks, what if we extended this to society, what if wealth, class and more could be transcended or solved by the sharing of resources, for the satisfaction of needs, even if it is only amongst friends. To use the Marxist phrase; to each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.

**“ It’s not like this with other people, she says. Yeah, he says. I know. ”**

I feel like I have just scratched the surface of all the things I can talk about in this book. Which is just another strength. Rooney wrote a beautiful, humanising story about love and relationships and how two people can profoundly impact each other over a life time. But she also wrote a clever book that tackles love under capitalism, the frustration of the modern generation (whether valid or not), and the growing gap between rich and poor. Rooney is able to embed these issues so neatly within her story, teasing out parallels between our world, the the world of the central couple. The book works because both it functions so smoothly on these two levels.

I hugely enjoyed this book, and I cannot wait to read *Conversations with Friends*. Rooney truly is the new millennial voice I’ll be watching out for. If that makes me a cliché, caught up with the most recent trend, then so be it.

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