

# Sally Rooney: Intermezzo [C1]

Nel suo quarto romanzo, la giovane scrittrice irlandese esplora i temi del lutto, del passare del tempo e della famiglia. Torna anche a trattare l'argomento che l'ha resa un fenomeno letterario della sua generazione: le relazioni.

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The title of Irish author Sally Rooney's fourth novel *Intermezzo* refers both to an unexpected and threatening [chess move](#) and a musical composition played between other musical or dramatic pieces. Rooney's new book follows the lives of two [seemingly](#) very different brothers who are [grieving](#) the loss of their father while navigating complicated romantic connections. This latter theme has been consistently explored by the author and was the subject of her previous novels, two of which have been adapted for television. At the age of thirty-three, Rooney is considered a literary phenomenon and one of the best authors of her generation.

## FAMILY UNIT

In *Intermezzo*, the author examines the process of grief in relation to family roles, romantic relationships, [regret](#) and the passage of time, all of which [shape](#) the protagonists' lives. Peter, a successful Dublin lawyer in his early thirties, struggles with insomnia and manages conflicting feelings for his charismatic first love, Sylvia, and the much younger, financially-unstable Naomi. His younger brother, Ivan, [ten years his junior](#) and a former chess prodigy who has since become professionally [stagnant](#), [copes](#) with their father's loss as he opens up to intimacy with Margaret, an experienced and much older woman.

## COMMUNICATION

Rooney presented *Intermezzo* at London's Southbank Centre, where she offered [insight](#) into her writing process and how she approaches the thematic worlds of her novels. She began by highlighting that, much like in

romantic relationships, communication problems also occur within the family unit. **Sally Rooney (Irish accent):** I love communicative problems. Love them, can't get enough of them! And they always introduce just enough friction for me to feel drawn into a scene. When there is just some slippage between what somebody is trying to say or feels capable of saying and what the other person wants to hear or is capable of hearing. That space for me and I think for a lot of novelists is a really interesting one to inhabit. It's interesting that with lovers there's an expectation of miscommunication, but with siblings there's an expectation of deep knowledge because you have childhood together. But in a way, I think families often have fixed roles. Some family dynamics can be quite fixed. And I don't mean that in a people-become-entrapped way. It's not necessarily a negative thing, but for instance, a younger sibling will always be the younger sibling. So they inherit a kind of role just through birth order and then for me, it was really interesting to think about how that changes when the younger sibling, who has always been the baby and is indeed ten years younger than his only elder sibling, the brother, he's now an adult himself. And how can he conceive of himself in that way within their family unit? And how much space can his brother make for him to now be an adult in his own right? I found that really interesting because it felt like this was a family unit where people had become stuck in their roles, and they had labelled themselves and one another in relation to each other and they weren't seeing the parts of each other or even themselves that didn't fit within those roles. The boundaries were overrunning, but they didn't want to look at that. And that for me was really interesting and felt kind of specific to families in a way. Maybe an analogous process goes on between lovers or between best friends but I think with families, it's like set from such an early age that it becomes even harder to break out of.

## GRIEVING

Rooney discussed how the story of two grieving brothers came to her. Their intricate relational dynamics are at the heart of this book, which examines how the inevitable grieving process shifts the protagonists' positions, like pawns on a chessboard. **Sally Rooney:** I don't know why the book became

about brothers who are [grieving](#) the loss of a parent. I just know that they arrived in my head that way. And then I had to try and work out what that meant for them, what sort of changes that [triggered](#) in their relationship. You know, we're talking about families being a little bit [stuck](#) in certain roles but then when one of those family roles is suddenly absent because of a family [break-up](#), or in this case because of the death of a particular member of the family, what suddenly becomes possible in the absence of that person and the discomfort of realising that, that new family formations are possible, but then there's kind of [guilt attached](#) to that as well because this beloved person is no longer there, and the space that their absence left, maybe you don't want to fill that. Maybe the brothers don't want to move into that space. It feels like a wrong thing to do.

## PASSAGE OF TIME

Through the character of Peter, the older brother, Intermezzo also explores the grief associated with the inexorable passage of time, particularly when expectations remain [unmet](#) and the past cannot be changed. **Sally Rooney:** Part of the grief in the book is not just grief for their father, in the case of the elder brother it's grief certainly [triggered](#) by the loss of his father [but] he is also undergoing a kind of grief for a life that he didn't get to live. When he was in his 20s, a very significant life event happened that changed the trajectory of his relationship with his then partner and changed sort of the life that he had planned to live. And there is a sense that he hasn't... I [hesitate](#) to say he hasn't [dealt with](#) those feelings because who can ever deal with feelings? Like, I don't even know what that means! But those feelings are there, and the loss of his father [prompts](#) him to [spiral](#) into this extreme [regret](#), like he can't believe that his life... he only gets to live it once and it's gone so wrong. And people keep leaving, dying, and that's just going to keep going! And it's like, he's in his early 30s and it's like he hits this wall of, like, [disbelief](#) that this is his life now. And that's a kind of grief as well. It's like this mad, almost [spiralling regret](#). Like "I cannot believe that time keeps passing and the [stuff](#) that I planned is not going the way that I planned, and this is the one life that I have on this earth." For him it's like a [disbelief](#) and a [remorse](#), there's like a [rueful](#) quality to his grief.

## DIFFERENT LIVES

The author went on to explain how writing allows her to live different lives. She described how she experienced the passage of time during the three years it took to write this book. **Sally Rooney:** For me, this is a way of almost preventing or being in denial about the passing of time to some extent. Because the years that I spent writing this book passed and I can never have them back, but I do have the book. So it's like I've stored that time in a jar or something. Like it can never quite get away from me because it's in there! And there is a sense of pouring life into the novels and feeling like I get to live the lives of my characters. So I have this other sort of dream life that gives me a life I don't have in reality. And it's not like necessarily one that I would want to live or would choose for myself. I don't feel that I get to pick my ideas, they kind of occur to me and then I become obsessed with them and then I feel I have to write a book about them. But it does give me a kind of doorway out of the world where time passes, as it does for all of us, into a world where I get to control the passing of time.

## NORMALITY

The concept of 'normal', which features in the title of one of Rooney's previous works, *Normal People*, is something she continues to reflect on, particularly in relation to the idea of community. **Sally Rooney:** Obviously, I have used that word in the title of a previous book. And I kind of wish I didn't because I use that phrase so much in ordinary conversation, but now, of course, whenever I say that phrase... So it's like I've lost that from my lexicon, which is a shame because it's otherwise a phrase I use quite a lot! And there is a sense of like, why do I use it so often? And it's partly because I am really interested in what's considered normal. And that's something that comes up in this book too, in the sense of social relationships and intimate relationships that maybe don't fit comfortably into categories that we would consider socially normal. I am really interested in how the desire to be normal places demands on us that can often feel intolerable, and to many of the characters in my previous novels and in this one, those demands really do sometimes feel unbearably intense. But at the same time, there is a sense that normality is a way of belonging to a particular community in a

particular place and time. And that's something that my characters care about and something I care about too, being in a place with particular people, the same people, and seeing them all the time and being accustomed to one another, living in community with others. That's something that I don't dismiss out of hand, I value it really highly, but that it seems to come with a normative principle and so how do you balance that? That desire to belong, to be part of community that makes life meaningful, but also to resist that constant drive to normalising.

## DYNAMICS

Rooney commented that, for her, writing is an exploration of the dynamics between the characters she creates. Although both the characters and their worlds are entirely fictional, her aim, she said, is to make these worlds feel "full of life." **Sally Rooney:** I don't plan my books in advance, I never sketch out anything. And I've actually found that the things that I've started writing and failed to finish are often the ones where I had a plan. So I need to feel that I'm voyaging through something and discovering something, otherwise I would get bored. So I need to always feel like I'm finding things. One of the first things that I discovered in this book was that Ivan had an older brother, and that kind of opened the door into what became this whole novel. And so part of the discovery was just who it was that populated their lives. The moments of life that I spent with these characters made me feel that I was living that life with them, that that was like another special life that I got to live outside of time, outside of space, inside this world. And that's kind of what I want to try to make happen on the page for people who read the book and I don't know whether I will ever succeed, but I feel like that's my whole ambition... is when I have that moment of feeling full of life, full of this fictitious life that doesn't happen in our world, but that happens in a world very close at hand

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# Glossary

- **out of hand** = senza nemmeno pensare
- **aim** = obiettivo
- **slippage** = perdita di contatto
- **chessboard** = scacchiera
- **triggered** = provocare
- **attached** = legato
- **features** = comparire
- **rueful** = triste
- **stored** = conservare
- **ten years his junior** = di dieci anni più giovane
- **drawn** = coinvolta
- **boundaries** = confini
- **to break out** = uscire
- **stuff** = cose
- **prompts** = spingere
- **disbelief** = incredulità
- **remorse** = rimorso
- **chess move** = mossa di scacchi
- **seemingly** = apparentemente
- **stagnant** = stagnante
- **in his own right** = per conto proprio
- **unmet** = non soddisfatto
- **sketch out** = fare un abbozzo
- **failed** = non riuscire
- **unbearably** = insostenibilmente
- **drive** = impulso, spinta
- **insight** = visione
- **pawns** = pedoni
- **guilt** = colpa
- **hesitate** = esitare
- **being in denial** = essere in negazione
- **grieving** = essere in lutto
- **regret** = rimpianto

- **spiral** = essere fuori controllo
- **pouring** = versare
- **dismiss** = rimuovere, scartare
- **people-become-entrapped** = le persone rimangono intrappolate
- **stuck** = bloccato
- **shifts** = spostare
- **break-up** = rottura
- **dealt with** = affrontare
- **shape** = plasmare
- **capable** = capace
- **labelled** = etichettare
- **jar** = barattolo
- **demands** = esigenze
- **copes** = affrontare
- **siblings** = fratelli e sorelle
- **overrunning** = superare
- **some extent** = in parte, parzialmente
- **doorway** = accesso