

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Home/sickness and *Normal People*

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“I’ll go.”

“And I’ll stay; and we’ll be OK.” (*Normal People* 2020)

With this simple, yet devastating, exchange between two young people, the BBC brought to a close one of the standout productions of lockdown, *Normal People*, based very closely on the book of the same name by Sally Rooney. The timing somehow could not have been more perfect, as none of those watching could ‘go’ anywhere, but we were afforded the vicarious satisfactions of following Marianne and Connell on their various wanderings. Rooney takes us from the smalltown west of Ireland, on to Dublin, then on a tour of European highlights, the Italian interior, and a frigid Sweden, before laying a transatlantic path towards New York and beyond. Simultaneously, this *bildungsroman* is a journey into the shared, intimate space between two lovers, a space so personal that no matter how many others may try to enter, it will admit only these two (and the 21.8 million¹ iPlayer viewers trapped in their own space with them). It is a journey through domestic abuse, mental illness, self-harm, bereavement, and abasement but ultimately onwards towards a transient moment of contentment, fragile but all the more precious for its fleetingness.

Normal People is also an exploration of Ireland and the occasional strangenesses of Irish life. Set in the aftermath of the economic downturn of the 2010s, Rooney captures a moment of ghost estates and lost opportunities, broken dreams caught up amidst ‘bare concrete facades and overgrown front lawns’ (Rooney 2018: 33). She brings an insider’s eye to her work, coming as she does from Castlebar, a small town in Mayo and the likely model for her fictionalised Carricklea. She captures the tensions between the country and the city, or ‘That Dublin’ as my own mother in law refers to it, highlighting the toll moving there takes on Connell whilst Marianne appears to be a creature re-born on Trinity’s College Green. The

first time Connell encounters her in Dublin he muses that ‘People in Dublin often mention the west of Ireland in this strange tone of voice, as if it’s a foreign country, but one they consider themselves very knowledgeable about’ (69). The directors of the adaptation, Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie McDonald, working in close collaboration with Rooney, made the most of the ‘foreignness’ of the west, the visual media of film allowing them to engage in sweeping panoramic shots of Sligo beaches, going beyond what Rooney could include in her text to transport us there. The Irish tourist board² has been quick to capitalise on this, and any number of ‘Normal People’ tours have appeared in the wake of the show, ready for when eager visitors can come back to re-see them, a concrete example of the process Lovell & Bull describe as ‘the composition and commodification of places’ (Lovell and Bull 2017: 155).

Home/sickness

As my husband and I watch Marianne and Connell from our locked-down home, we are connected to those we love who might just wander into shot if we look really carefully, an imagined community of fill-in fathers and make-do mummies. And the same is true throughout the diaspora – *Normal People*, both the novel and the adaptation, has been an enormous hit wherever the Irish have made their home, in Canada, the United States, Australia, as homesick ‘culchies’ (149) have eagerly embraced the chance to virtually visit the Auld Sod whilst the reality has had to be put off. I should be on Achill Island as I type this, seeing our own normal people, but corona virus has put paid to our plans - for a brief moment Sally Rooney brought them just that little bit closer. And here again her plot has coincided serendipitously with reality, as she casts a bright light on the subject of homesickness. Whilst her lockdown readers and viewers have been forced to ‘Stay at Home’ due to a global illness, Rooney questions the relationship between home and sickness. Where is ‘home’? What is ‘home’? Is it a place or a feeling? What happens when ‘home’ becomes a place of toxicity? Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter examine a number of these questions in their recent consideration in this journal of the imaginative geographies of homes, stating that ‘Designating a space a home is a social act with a political dimension and emotional connotations’ (Birke and Butter 2019: 119). As I have indicated, there are multiple strands and connotations to this discussion within *Normal People*, as Rooney weaves the conversation between Connell and Marianne, his narrative focus being the pangs of missing home and the impact on his mental health, and hers being the lingering after-effects of an unhealthy homelife.

Ryan Hediger’s exploration of homesickness in the twenty first century ‘emphasizes the ‘sickness’ dimension of the word, recalling as it does mortality, embodiment, and ordinary human weakness and disability...both the desire to go home, a kind of nostalgia; and the awareness, which registers often as a kind of nausea and weakness, that we are far from home and perhaps always will be’ (Hediger 2019: 5). This passage captures precisely the dichotomous treatment of homesickness within *Normal People*. Connell desperately wants to go back to a ‘home’ which no longer exists, if in fact it ever did, to a time and a place which have slipped inexorably beyond his grasp, leaving him in a state of emotional vertigo as he

yearns for that which he can never reclaim. 'I just feel like I left Carricklea thinking I could have a different life, he says. But I hate it here, and now I can never go back there again. I mean, those friendships are gone' (217). Sheila Hones' discussion of Doreen Massey's work helps identify his longing for the Carricklea of 'there' and 'then', rather than of the 'here' and 'now' (Hones 2014: 59-60).

One of the tragedies of the story is that Connell cannot return 'home' once he has been to the city. He finds himself increasingly alienated from the people he grew up with, the people he called friends. And as he grows up throughout the course of the novel, we follow him as he questions those friendships, his values, and why he ever thought he had anything in common with the people he grew up with besides proximity: 'We were just in the same group so we were friends, you know' (216). Rooney presents us with a man lost, adrift from his family and unable to find a community within a city full of people, within an institution of knowledge and stigma, class and opportunity. We watch Connell fall apart before our eyes as he loses an acquaintance from school to suicide, his grief taking him into some very dark places as Rooney reminds her reader of the heavy toll of mental illness in the rural Irish population, particularly following the economic crash.

If Connell's character development revolves around trying to find a way to come to terms with leaving home forever, Marianne's is concerned with overcoming the damage of years of domestic abuse. We learn during the course of the novel that her father used to beat her and her mother, her brother is verbally and physically abusive, and her mother treats her with open contempt. As Alan Eppel notes in his review, 'Growing up in an abusive environment her personality development is constricted' (Eppel 2020) and Marianne is presented as cold and aloof, the walking embodiment of her mother's opinion that she has an 'unlovable personality' (65), except when she's with Connell.

Carricklea is where she grew up, but it is not the place of refuge it represents for him. Marianne is a loner at school, a social outcast, not the kind of girl the star of the football team should be seen with. Once she goes to university in Dublin life becomes a lot better for her, but her infrequent trips home always result in arguments. The stifling quality of her home environment spills out to the town as she finds herself unable to avoid scrutiny, 'She has no reason to be in the supermarket, except that she doesn't want to be in her family home, and there aren't many spaces in which a solitary person can be inconspicuous in Carricklea' (107). Rooney upends the notion of Home, Sweet Home for her heroine, highlighting the sour reality of societal expectation and the claustrophobic quality of small-town life. As Richard Bingham points out, 'Rooney's novels begin mapping such spaces by challenging the individual and the family as the basic units of society' (Bingham 2019). Family is complicated in *Normal People*, and just because two individuals share a living space does not necessarily mean that they are good for each other. In Dublin when Connell is facing being homeless, one of the turning points in the novel is his inability to ask Marianne if he could move in to share a home with her. And, as Gloria Fisk points out, 'Marianne misperceives his movement away from the cost of his rent as a movement away from her' (Fisk 2020). Rooney shows us that for all her intelligence, Marianne cannot understand the economic imperatives of

Connell's existence, and she automatically assumes that he is repeating the pattern of emotional abandonment she has suffered since childhood.

Marianne tries her hardest to escape from her life at home, but it follows her inextricably. Her flight to Dublin is only as far as her grandmother's old flat, and when she hosts her friends on holiday it is at the family villa in Italy. The poison spreads as she invites toxic friends into these spaces to take the place of her closest relations. The West exercises an irresistible hold over Marianne, simultaneously representing everything she wants to leave behind her, and the only person she can truly relate to. As Marianne travels further away from Carricklea, first to Dublin, then Italy and on to Sweden we find her in relationships that are increasingly troubling, and the more broken she becomes. 'She hates the person she has become, without feeling any power to change anything about herself' (238). It is only after one final, bruising visit to Carricklea that she and Connell can finally reach an understanding and create their own, new home in Dublin.

Love in the time of Corona

As Rooney expands on her theme of home being an emotional state rather than a physical entity, she makes use of technology to bring her protagonists together despite the miles between them. Whilst Connell is suffering his breakdown in Dublin and Marianne is bleakly depressed in Sweden they maintain communication through skype and email, with Rooney exploring the narrative potential of each format within her text, using the first person to virtually bring Connell and Marianne into each other's presence. Aleksandra Bida makes an insightful survey of the way home is frequently constructed along such lines in contemporary fiction, 'The complex narrative structure of the multimodal novel probes how making oneself at home works with more tenuous connections to places as well as technologies that further mediate such connections and the new ways in which one can escape within home spaces, such as writing or typing about and filming or photographing them yet not necessarily dwelling during these endeavours' (Bida 2018: 30). Interestingly, Marianne experiences just such a disconnect within a living space whilst her Swedish abuser photographs her. And again, we can relate as we watch and read her characters' lives, as Connell ponders that the tricky mismatch between sound and vision 'gives him a sense of Marianne as a moving image, a thing to be looked at' (215). The viewer response to *Normal People* on social media this Spring was a great example of people using a fictional happening to make their own moment of community, as they shared, with Connell, their own enjoyment of looking at Marianne. @vanessataaffe in Glasgow tweeted on May 1 'I'm obsessed with it. You're obsessed with it. We're all obsessed with Normal People. There's even a podcast to fuel and feed that obsession. Just what lockdown doctor ordered [#normalpeople](#)', whilst @pmokane in Dublin added on May 5 'How weird is it to feel wistful for Dublin city centre while watching a TV show. The locations are just down the road but due to lockdown they seem a million miles away. [#Normalpeople](#)'. Meanwhile, Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar Jones, the lead actors in the adaptation, joined a Twitter party with Hulu, the broadcasters in America, referencing the fact that everyone was staying at home in these unprecedented times, so why not watch some TV?

Hones describes the complex geographical networks of reader-response in the age of online fora in her discussion of Colum McCann's novel, *Let the Great World Spin*. Posts on online discussion forums in this way provide useful information about the emergence of technologically mediated social contexts for reading and exchanging opinions and ideas about literary texts' (Hones 2014: 154). I would argue that this extends to literary adaptations as well, as the pandemic brought watchers and readers together to share the emotional response to Rooney's text in a way which transcended traditional literary boundaries. Sales of the novel were boosted following the broadcast to the point that Amazon sold out of copies, as viewers, myself included, turned to the text to re-discover the characters they fell in love with on the screen. Technology can save us whilst we are caught in situations where we might otherwise feel very alone. It is a bridge between our homes and the world, offering invisible, umbilical linkages which keep us connected despite our habits of wandering ever further afield. As we learn to adapt to the new realities of post-Covid life, with the multiplication of Zoom and Team meetings, of home increasingly becoming the place where we work as well as where we sleep, Marianne's subtly different final words to Connell can offer us all some comfort 'You should go, she says. I'll always be here. You know that' (266).

Notes

¹ Viewing figures taken from the BBC website <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/normal-people-viewing-figures>.

² <https://www.letsgoireland.com/normal-people-ireland-filming-locations/>

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