

Social distance: Sally Rooney, Beautiful World, Where Are You (2021)

Talk about books, 25 Jan 2023 — Art Kavanagh

When I wrote before in Talk about books about Sally Rooney's fiction, I said that *Normal People*'s Connell and Marianne split up in 2012 because Connell couldn't afford to stay in Dublin over the summer and had to go back to County Sligo, while it didn't occur to Marianne that he had been hoping she would ask him to stay with her: she had instead thought he was trying to dump her. When I repeated this on Reddit, a commenter argued that it wasn't credible that they had split up for such a trifling reason: after all, Connell would just be 2 or 3 hours away: they could easily see each other regularly. To me, having been born and brought up in County Sligo and lived in Dublin throughout my 20s, it seemed entirely credible that they would separate in these circumstances. I began to wonder if distances that would seem insignificant elsewhere somehow become more of an obstacle in Ireland. Then I came across this piece by Sean O'Neill, who writes:

A friend of mine says that places feel further apart in Ireland. I think this is true. Mayo and Dublin are roughly as close together as Manchester and London; they are closer together than Boston and New York City. But moving between them usually involves a car, and always involves moving across a whole island, in all its cultural differences.

A similar sense of deceptive distance can be found in Rooney's next novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. Alice, suddenly rich, having sold two novels and the film rights to at least one of them, has retreated to a quiet coastal town where she lives alone a large, cold former rectory. She exchanges long emails with her friend and former college roommate, Eileen. Alice regularly asks Eileen to come and visit her, while Eileen complains that, when passing through Dublin to fly to a literary festival or the launch of a new translation of one of her books, Alice never makes time to see her old friend in person.

When Eileen and her possible soulmate, Simon, finally come to stay with Alice, it takes them three hours by train and taxi. They get the train to Ballina, which is a 20-minute drive from Alice's new home. Once they're there, it becomes clear that Eileen is unable to accept or comprehend that Alice has moved to "the countryside" indefinitely: that this is more than just a brief period of convalescence following the breakdown

suffered by Alice on unexpectedly finding herself famous.

If the physical distances in Rooney's fiction, and in Ireland generally, turn out to be less easily traversable than they superficially appear, this is equally true of the distances between the social classes. When Alice says that Dublin is "literally and topographically flat – so that everything has to take place on a single plane" (p. 15), she isn't speaking *just* literally or topographically.

Dublin is socially flat too – and the small town to which Alice has moved is almost certainly even more so. For a start, it's the sort of place where a wealthy and famous novelist with her own Wikipedia page could meet a warehouse worker on Tinder, and go on a date with him to the local hotel, without exciting much *overt* comment.

Of course the class divisions are real. Ireland most certainly has its capitalists and workers, landlords and tenants, financiers and paupers, the homeless and, even in the twenty-first century, some landed gentry. Even the innocuous term "farmer" hides a gulf, between subsistence small proprietors on one side and "ranchers" on the other. The divisions are real but they're often – not always – played down, maybe even disguised. Some of the groups I've mentioned will rub shoulders in the same pubs and supermarkets, at the races and occasionally even on the golf course. Some of these distances can look deceptively small.

Each of Rooney's novels and several of her short stories has at its centre a friendship and/or relationship across the class divide. Sukie, the narrator of "Mr Salary", would probably be homeless if family friend Nathan hadn't had a job in tech and large apartment. *Conversations with Friends*'s Frances is "broke" while her friend Bobbi is comfortably off as the daughter of a senior and well paid civil servant. Connell is dependent on his part-time job, while Marianne's problems aren't financial. Then we come to *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, in which we see a reversal of fortune.

Alice is now rich but until she sold her first novel that hadn't been the case.

Looking back now on the period when I wrote the books, I feel like it was a good time in my life, because I had work I needed to do and I did it. I was perennially broke, and lonely, and anxious about money, but I also had this other thing, this part of my life which was secret and protected, and my thoughts returned to it all the time ... (p. 234)

When she had first met Eileen at university, the latter's parents didn't see her as one of the "nice middle-class girls" (p. 311) they had hoped their daughter would befriend.

Alice had a very loud speaking voice, dressed in ill-fitting second-hand clothes and seemed to

find everything hilarious. Her father was a car mechanic with a drinking problem and she'd had a disorganised childhood. (p. 29)

After university, Eileen went to work for a literary magazine as an editorial assistant and remained there several years later, at the time when the novel is set. Soon she was allowed to commission pieces and, after a year, to submit her own writing, something she was wary of doing at first, though eventually the magazine carried her essay on the novels of Natalia Ginzberg (p. 190). Following the Ginzberg essay, a London literary agent contacted her to ask if she was writing a book, a query to which Eileen didn't reply.

Eileen's job is badly paid, as such jobs tend to be.

Okay, I make about 20k a year and pay two-thirds of that in rent for the opportunity to live in a tiny apartment with people who dislike me ... (p. 73)

When she tells Alice's boyfriend that she makes "about" – which I take to mean "not quite" – €20,000 a year Felix is aghast at the idea that she could live in Dublin on so little (p. 280), while her elder sister Lola is in the habit of telling her that she's going to have to start living in "the real world" (p. 33). In short, Eileen has taken, and intends to continue in, the kind of job that has usually been the preserve of people with trust

funds, private incomes and/or parental support, though she doesn't have that kind of financial backing.

Her father manages a farm in County Galway and her mother is a geography teacher (p. 26). That's to say, her father is now an employee, though at a managerial level. It's implied, though, that this hasn't always been the case. Around the time that Eileen finished her Master's degree "her parents had run into financial trouble with the farm" (p. 32). This suggests that her father had owned his own farm, which he had been obliged to sell or surrender, and is probably still in substantial debt arising from the loss of it.

At a drinks party for the birthday of her friend, Darach, Eileen gets into an argument with a man named Gary about who is or is not "working class". Gary is confident he can rely on her job as an unanswerable argument:

I know you work at a literary magazine, he said.
(p. 103)

His implication is that nobody who was genuinely working class would – or could afford to – take such a dilettante position. As Darach points out, they're arguing from different premises. Broadly speaking, Eileen is taking an economic view of class, while Gary is treating it as a cultural matter. For her, to be working class is to be someone who can gain access to the means of production only by selling her labour power, while for Gary it's much more a question of where one

lives, what kind of education one has, what leisure activities one pursues and a range of other “lifestyle” questions.

People like Gary, who define class in cultural terms, tend to annoy their opponents by describing the economic approach as “reductionist”. It’s an argument that’s been going on for some time: I got involved in it twice, first in the late 1970s or early 80s, and later in the mid 90s. It’s nice (if a bit frustrating) to see that there’s still some mileage in it.

So, the class relationship between Eileen and Alice reflects the change in the basis of wealth in Ireland over the past 30 years or so. The disparity between Eileen’s earnings and Alice’s is, in a word, gross. While Alice’s path to great wealth has hardly been typical – in fact, if much the same thing hadn’t happened to her creator, I’d have said it was wildly implausible – it does represent a real shift in the Irish economy. Before 1990, wealth in Ireland was predominantly founded on land ownership and building. Since then, earnings from technology have greatly surpassed those from other parts of the economy.

The ridiculously named “Celtic Tiger” was driven – at high speed – by the tech industry, and brought crashing to a halt by the hubristic attempt of the traditional land-and-building businesses to catch up. The resulting slump and the accompanying years of “austerity” widened the wealth gap even further. This

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shift in Irish society is exemplified by Nathan, "Mr Salary" himself.

It seems likely that the social changes will make the class divisions both more obvious and more complex, with people like Alice and Nathan occupying more ambiguous positions than have hitherto been available to them. Nathan, for all his wealth, is still an employee – he's "Mr Salary", not "Mr Stock-Options" – while it's not much of an exaggeration to say that Alice is in a class of her own.

When Alice and Eileen have their climactic row about why they've kept away from each other for so many months (while exchanging friendly emails), Alice makes it clear that she doesn't think that Eileen appreciates what her breakdown put her through. Eileen's reasons are more varied and more complex. Alice had told Simon not to let her know that Alice was back from New York (and having a breakdown). Alice seemed oblivious to her friend's poverty and the cost of travel. She had let Eileen believe that she was going down the country for a short time to recover, whereas now it seemed she might never be coming back.

I wonder if there isn't something else as well. Perhaps Eileen has kept her distance in part because she's no longer sure where Alice *fits*, either into her friend group or into her "reductionist" theory of class.

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