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## FROM TURNING PAGES TO TV CHANNELS: THE EXPLOITIVE NATURE OF LOVE IN SALLY ROONEY'S *NORMAL PEOPLE*

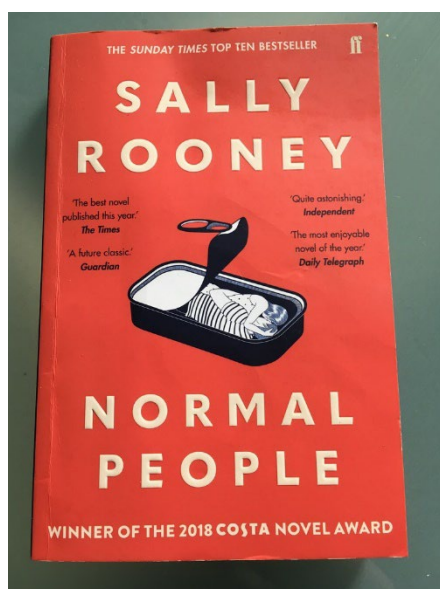
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What is normal when it comes to modern love? Can love in fact be called normal in any sense?

Sally Rooney's 2018 bestseller *Normal People* explores the anguish and unrelenting emotion that comes with the complexity of navigating modern love. This coming-of-age novel beautifully encompasses the innocence of young relationships tainted by contemporary expectation and miscommunication. Her story follows Connell Waldron and Marianne Sheridan, two Irish teens, supposedly on two very different paths who collide with unexpected eloquence. However, the 2020 series adaptation of the novel ignores the darker features of unhealthy love that Rooney presents. Despite the TV series perfectly capturing the reality of growing up in a world that has become disconnected from the naturalness of conventional love, it overlooks the concerning narrative of sexual exploitation that encompasses the relationships in Rooney's novel.

Beginning a somewhat unconventional but common love affair in secret, the couple face peer-pressure and social expectation that, in their eyes, prohibits the acceptance of a 'normal' relationship in which they could openly be together. It takes the entire novel for both characters to admit their true feelings for one another. But



regardless of Connell finally admitting 'that was kind of a perfect time in my life, to be honest. I don't think I was ever really happy before then', we, as readers, cannot and should not ignore his mistreatment of Marianne throughout the book. Yes, they are young, yes, they do not make the right decisions, yes, they learn and grow as intelligent and aspiring adults. However, the TV adaptation, in my eyes, fails to portray the problem with Connell's misuse of his best friend's affection to his own advantage.

Marianne and Connell acknowledge the overwhelming comfort and security they share in one another's arms. But we learn that the chemistry between the two school students is tainted by the unhealthy reality of sexual exploitation and ownership. Marianne knows that 'Connell always gets what he wants, and then feels sorry for himself when what he wants doesn't make him happy'. Unknowingly, Connell seeks out Marianne as an escape and source of comfort during the uncontrollable moments in his life. She acts as an anchor to ground and support him. Knowing herself that

'she would have lain on the ground and let him walk all over her body if he wanted, he knew that' which conveys to readers the damaging reality of exploitive love. The passion Marianne has for Connell acts as the destructive force that manipulates her and her devotion to him in the novel. Her strong-will and undesirable personality masks a frightened and submissive side as Connell holds 'effortless tyranny over someone who seems, to other people, so invulnerable'. Therefore, Marianne's shame in the novel stems from her willingness to be rendered helpless in the face of love, but when it comes to Connell she does not act on this knowledge. She chose to leave her abusive relationship with Lukas, questioning 'Is the world such an evil place, the love should be indistinguishable from the basest and most abusive forms of violence in which Marianne can conceptualise the inhumanity that fuels love, but we do not see the paralleled recollection in the emotional torment she endures from Connell. Rooney successfully captures the demise of innocence and natural companionship at the hands of sexual exploitation, ultimately highlighting a twisted modern necessity to seek comfort in damaging and unhealthy relationships.

But why does this warped concept of love engulf two otherwise normal Irish teenagers?

To put it in its simplest form, love floods every aspect of life, from school playgrounds, to representation of love in *Normal People*. This realisation conceals a larger modern-day dilemma; fear of expression.

Development of the contemporary world means that love is expected to be found by swiping left and right

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on dating apps or hiding behind the glow of a phone screen in the hope that genuine emotion can be found in a monotone text message. The anxiety created from this disassociation of expression leaves Connell and Marianne speechless in their attempts to voice natural emotion. Traditional displays of affection have become extinct, destroyed by peer pressure and social constructs of gender expectation. Despite finally addressing the connection they share; their social climate prohibits them from acting on these feelings. Therefore, both are left to navigate the frustrations and pain of modern day alone and at the consequence of their own mental health and sanity, trapped in a perpetual loop of damaging anxiety and hurtful disassociation.

