



“Oh my god, shut up”

Sally Rooney, short story writer

Update 15 May 2020: In addition to the three stories discussed below, another short story by Sally Rooney is now available online, free to read. It's "[At the Clinic](#)", which was published in *The White Review* in 2016. It features the two main characters from Rooney's second novel, *Normal People*.

Sally Rooney's two novels to date, *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*, have been a phenomenal publishing success, so it's worth reminding oneself that she first attracted attention as a short story writer. Shortly before the publication of *Conversations with Friends*, I saw that her story "Mr Salary" had been shortlisted for the prestigious Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award, so I read it. As I didn't buy a copy of *Conversations* until it came out in mass market paperback, there was a period of slightly more than a year during which I knew Rooney's writing only through "Mr Salary" and perhaps another short story. "Mr Salary" left me in no doubt that she was a significant new Irish fiction writer. And, while I like and admire the two novels, and hope to write about them eventually, I think it's important not to overlook her strengths as a short story writer.

Many publishers, and not a few authors, see the writing of short stories as not much more than an apprenticeship for the more demanding and potentially rewarding task of producing a novel. [I've suggested before](#) that this is partly a function of the size and shape of the printed books that publishers have traditionally been expected to produce and that, as publishing

changes, we can expect the short story and other shorter forms to assume an importance that economic realities have often denied them in the past. With that in mind, I'd like to take a look at three of Rooney's short stories, including "Mr Salary". The three stories in question are all available online. (At least one of these, "Color and Light", is behind a paywall, but *The New Yorker* allows nonsubscribers to access a small number of stories for free each month.)

"Color and Light", *The New Yorker* March 2019

Declan has a business degree and works as an office manager. He is buying a house near the seaside town where he grew up, with the aid of a twenty-year mortgage. Unlike his slightly younger brother, Aidan, he has a car. Also unlike Aidan, he has never worked in a hotel, bar or restaurant. Declan's ownership of a car makes him useful to Pauline, a screenwriter who is living temporarily in a large rented house in the town.

We can easily imagine what a male author of the mid-twentieth century would have made of Declan's story. Pauline would be an enigmatic siren after whom Declan lusted, while partly concealing his feelings from himself. A little later in the twentieth century, we might expect a feminist retelling, in which Pauline would be deobjectified, her autonomous individuality insisted upon.

Rooney's inspired variation is to tell this tale, not from Declan's point of view, or from Pauline's, but from Aidan's. In the established model, Aidan is a cypher, a character who exists only for his brother to be jealous of, to complicate his inchoate relationship with the screenwriter. She flirts with the younger brother; the elder one, the protagonist, isn't sure what's going on or how serious it is. In Rooney's story, Aidan too is lacking essential information and doesn't seem to have

any way to acquire it. He thinks about asking Declan "How do you know this girl? I mean, are you riding her, or what?", but feels he can't ask because "Declan's sensibilities would be offended". Sensibilities, presumably, that haven't been coarsened by working in the hospitality industry.

Pauline tells Aidan that Declan doesn't know whether Aidan is gay or straight. We can be sure that Declan didn't volunteer this observation but was responding to an enquiry from Pauline, one calculated to intimate that she was interested in the younger man. It's not clear that Aidan picked up on the intimation, because its immediate effect is to elicit the reply from Aidan that "I don't talk about things with him." That is to say Aidan sees the comment as having to do with how he relates to Declan, not to Pauline.

There are large gaps in what Aidan and Pauline know about each other, mainly because Aidan and Declan don't talk. Declan would be the obvious source of information for each of them but he doesn't have the answers to Pauline's questions about Aidan because Aidan doesn't tell him, nor does he enlighten Aidan about Pauline because Aidan doesn't ask. However, in spite of the information gap, their assumptions about each other's occupations make it possible for Pauline and Aidan to reach plausible conclusions. So, Pauline is able to ask Aidan (in Declan's presence, naturally) if he's ever slept with a hotel guest, and more or less hit her mark.

If Aidan would be a cypher in the version of the story told from Declan's point of view, he is not much more distinctly visible in this one. To Pauline's question, whether he is in a bad situation now, he answers:

Now I would say, I am in no situation at all. I feel like my life basically isn't happening. I think if I dropped dead the only people who would care are the people who would have to cover my shifts. And they

wouldn't even be sad, they'd just be annoyed.

Aidan is suffering from grief at the death of his mother. He would like to be able to think about her "because she was the person on earth who loved him most", but those thoughts are still too painful and he avoids them. Not that the sense that his life "basically isn't happening" is purely an effect of grief. The story's title comes from the firework display that Aidan and Pauline watch together during the town's annual arts festival. The festival has been running for 12 years and Aidan remembers thinking during the first one, when he was still in school, that "his life was just about to start happening, then". Aidan enjoys the fireworks as a spectacle but also attaches a less immediate significance to them.

Aidan realizes, obscurely, that a lot depends now on Pauline's having enjoyed the fireworks – that if she didn't enjoy them, if she thought they were boring, not only will he no longer like her but he will no longer have enjoyed them either, in retrospect, and something good will be dead. He says nothing.

He goes home in a sulk when he thinks that Pauline is implying that he wants something from her. In fact, he does seem to think that she can supply something he lacks: perhaps significance, depth, a life of more value than that of a hotel worker. It's possible that he feels he can acquire these by being around her without it costing her anything. Ultimately, he is able to do her a favour which seems, however, to be motivated less by a wish to be helpful than by his jealousy at seeing an older man with his arm around her waist while he tries to book a hotel room for that night.

The story is told in the third person (and in the historic

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present tense) but clearly from Aidan's point of view. Point of view is of central importance in the story, because so much depends on what the characters don't know about each other, but try to work out by observation.

"Robbie Brady's astonishing late goal takes its place in our personal histories", *The New Statesman* August 2017

This story is likewise told in the third person and in the historic present tense but the point of view shifts subtly between the two characters. It starts with Conor, who is in Lille for Ireland's match against Italy in the 2016 UEFA European Football Championship, and phones Helen in Cambridge. Ireland has unexpectedly won the match, getting through to the later stages of the Championship. Conor is slightly drunk, so that he doesn't worry about the roaming charges he'll incur by phoning the UK from France, via an Irish phone service provider. He works in a call centre and is clearly not very well off. When he visited Helen in Cambridge six weeks earlier:

All day he'd been mentally converting sterling to euro in an attempt to keep track of how much money he was wasting on bus tickets and cups of coffee, and this minor but persistent cognitive effort had drained him and made him feel miserly and self-conscious.

Helen, the graduate student, may be even more affected by poverty than Conor: she has watched the match on her computer, "alone, eating a bowl of instant ramen noodles with disposable chopsticks". Unlike Conor, who has been celebrating in a bar after the match, Helen has followed the

creation of post-match memes online. She says it's interesting to watch the production of culture in real time. Conor responds with "I want to say, you know, the disintegration of the idea of authorship", sounding a bit like a 1980s undergraduate who's just discovered Barthes. Helen knows what he means, though: something along the lines that memes and social media may belatedly be lending significance to Barthes's observations, or something that can plausibly be claimed to resemble them.

This leads them into some talk about where power is located in the production of culture and the need "to analyse operations of power, culturally". The exchange resembles a dance, where a series of well established steps are formally executed and nothing is said that hasn't been articulated many times before. Helen, it transpires, enjoys having these conversations with Conor. She finds that she doesn't like English people very much. This is partly because of the arguments surrounding the Brexit referendum (which exposed a xenophobic facet of English nationalism which had previously been kept under control). But it's also in part because most of the English people she meets are based in Cambridge. They're:

people who take a brittle pride in demonstrating how clever they are. She somewhat enjoys engaging them in conversation, little jousting exchanges, until the other party becomes defensive and irritable. But the enjoyment is ultimately feline, as if she's idly batting her interlocutor back and forth between her paws. There's something about their kind of intelligence which isn't lively or curious. Conor ... is her ideal conversational partner, the person around whom she feels most clear-minded and least remote. They keep up with one another effortlessly in conversation, and maybe for this reason, or maybe out of a sincere and

long-standing mutual affection, their discussions don't become competitive.

That's not to say that communication between the pair is transparent and frictionless. When Helen asks Conor if he is watching her as she changes for bed, partly concealed by her wardrobe door, he answers evasively. He is similarly, if less consequentially, evasive when she asks him to confirm something he's already said: that "swept away on a tide of emotion" (her phrase), he "shed a tear" (his) while watching the match. Conor equivocates:

A tear came to my eye, I don't know if it was shed or not.

This is pointless and ridiculous. Unless the tear is still there, it obviously was shed! Ultimately, their exchanges, enjoyable as the protagonists find them, are shown to be a form of circumlocution. Conor finally tells Helen that the reason he is phoning her is "to tell you I love you, and all that". This declaration is followed by several seconds' silence. Then Helen laughs.

I love you, too, she says. I was trying to think of something intelligent to say there about how we feel and express love through these communal cultural experiences like football, but then I thought, oh my god, shut up. I love you, too, I miss you.

It seems that the talk about power, authorship and cultural production is nothing more than a shield against vulnerability. Even after the mutual declarations, the fear of being left defenceless remains. Each is "pleased at having managed to

extract this new confession from the other". "Confession" is a striking choice of word here. Each party has given the other something that can be used against him/her. Not only that, but each thinks that s/he is the "winner" in a kind of competition ... or battle. The implication is that love can survive only in those rare circumstances where *each* party is able to believe that s/he has come out on top. This is a bleak view, particularly in a narrative that seems on its face to be a love story.

Having opened with Conor's point of view, the narrative closes with Helen's. After the call ends, she pulls her computer back onto her knees and wakes it using the trackpad. Earlier, we've been told that she had moved it "off her lap and on to the empty part of the bed, as a gesture of commitment to the conversation".

"Mr Salary", The Irish Times March 2017

Unlike the two stories already discussed, this one is a first person narrative in the past tense. I admit to being a bit wary of the present historic, which can too easily be used to generate an unearned sense of immediacy, so I initially felt more comfortable with this story (the first one I read) than with the two discussed above. The narrator, Sukie, is another Irish graduate student abroad, this time in Boston. She has made an unplanned return to Dublin for Christmas, because her father (Frank) is about to die of leukaemia. Sukie's unexpected flight home is paid for by Nathan, who meets her at the airport.

As a 19-year-old student, Sukie had run out of money and moved into Nathan's luxurious apartment. He's about 15 years older than Sukie, and is a very well paid employee of a company that was acquired by Google. She was meant to stay only till the end of the academic year, but actually spent 3 years living there, until she left for graduate school in Boston. Nathan

and Sukie flirt, smoke weed while watching *Twin Peaks*, and leave each other in very little doubt as to their love for each other, but have never become a couple in the six years since they began sharing his apartment.

Nathan's reluctance arises partly from the disparity between their financial circumstances. He doesn't seem to mind that his friends assume that he and Sukie are engaged in "some kind of sordid arrangement", in which he is "paying me for something", but he behaves as if he were afraid of actually sliding into such an arrangement. And, of course, there's the age difference:

One night he told me he could remember my christening. He said they served a cake with a little baby made out of icing on the top.

A cute baby, he told me.

Cuter than me? I said.

Yeah well, you weren't that cute.

The story gets its title, "Mr Salary", from her father's dismissive name for Nathan. Sukie comments:

They hated each other and I mediated their mutual hatred in a way that made me feel successfully feminine.

Sukie will soon have lost her remaining parent, as Aidan has in "Color and Light". Like Aidan, she thinks that nobody (except Nathan in her case) would miss her if she died. Her relationship with Frank has been a complicated one. He's an opiate addict, and it was his irresponsibility that left her broke and needing to move in with Nathan. For all this, there's very little to suggest

that Sukie will be glad to be rid of her father, or that his death will be easy for her to bear:

He was unpredictable, but I didn't cower in terror of him, and his attempts at manipulation, though heavy, were never effective. I wasn't vulnerable to them. Emotionally, I saw myself as a smooth, hard little ball. He couldn't get purchase on me. I just rolled away.

Sukie's protection against emotional vulnerability also adopts another form: she copes with her impending bereavement by taking in and digesting information:

I graduated way past the booklets they printed for sufferers and onto the hard medical texts, online discussion groups for oncologists, PDFs of recent peer-reviewed studies. I wasn't under the illusion that this made me a good daughter, or even that I was doing it out of concern for Frank. It was in my nature to absorb large volumes of information during times of distress, like I could master the distress through intellectual dominance. This is how I learned how unlikely it was that Frank would survive. He never would have told me himself.

Sukie implies that she sees her academic success as little more than a by-product of the strategy she uses to "master ... distress", as if it were true that the deeper our understanding of the world, the greater our ability to control what happens in it. What might be described as her emotional blinkers are particularly in evidence in a painfully funny exchange between her and Frank in the hospital. Frank remarks that she seems to have her life under control but wonders if she'll still be as cool

when she's left on her own. When Sukie asks why she should be left on her own, he answers "He'll go off an get married." Sukie sees Frank's remarks as evidence that he has taken her for someone else. For all her acuity and intelligence, she fails to see how well her father's observation fits her own situation.

When Frank says "He'll find some young one", Sukie's belief that Frank doesn't know whom he's speaking to is confirmed. After all, she is fifteen years younger than Nathan. She doesn't see how plausible it is that Nathan might marry a *different* "young one", as a way of evading and denying his feelings for Sukie. In the end, Nathan's resistance to the prospect of sleeping with Sukie ("It's not a good idea") is no match for Sukie's persistence. The story concludes while they are still uncertain of the outcome:

In bed that night I asked him: When will we know if this was a bad idea or not? Should we already know? Because now it feels good.

No, now is too early, he said. I think when you get back to Boston we'll have more perspective.

I'm not going back to Boston, I didn't say.

Will they still gain the perspective if she doesn't go? The story doesn't answer that question. Again, a love story has ended on an ambivalent note. Sukie concludes "These cells may look fairly normal, but they are not", echoing an earlier statement about the cancerous cells that are just about to kill her father. It's striking that Sukie finally gets together with Nathan just as her father's death is imminent, as if she were looking to find a replacement for Frank.

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Does that mean that there's something unhealthy in her fixation on a man who was already almost an adult when he was present at her christening? Maybe we, as readers, should be wary of having too much confidence in our own personal answers to that question.

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