

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

I love you; it's ruining my life

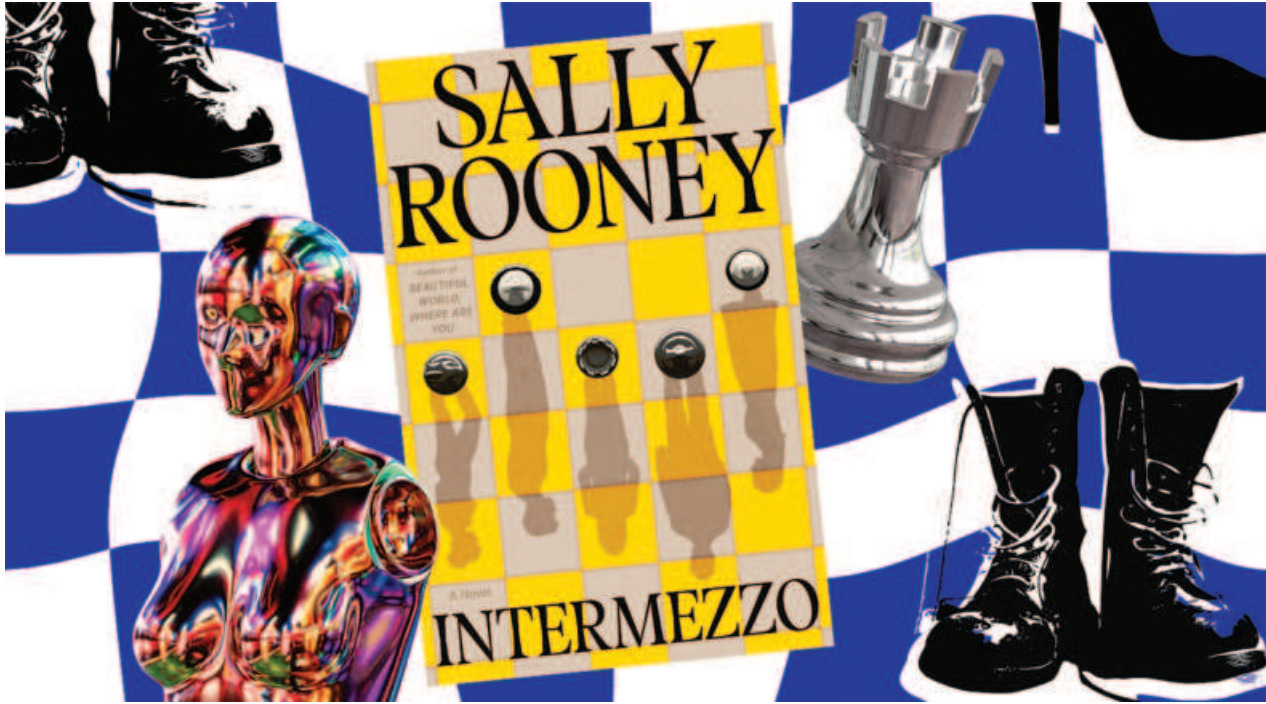
A reluctant fangirl reviews Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024)

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

Someone in a chat group somewhere called Sally Rooney the 'Taylor Swift' of the literary world, and now I cannot unsee it. Young, beautiful white women telling stories from a white, relatively privileged perspective, crafting worlds populated almost exclusively by beautiful people, and yet managing to transcend borders of race, age and gender to achieve widespread appeal in a way that's almost magical. Just as I have mixed feelings about Ms Swift, everything Ms Rooney has written has had me ugly crying. Yet, I'm never not going to reach for the next thing she brings out.

Intermezzo is Sally Rooney's fourth novel; it revolves around two estranged brothers of Polish descent who have just lost their father, an event that strains their already frayed relationship. Grappling with grief, they medicate themselves with unconventional romances. Peter, the elder, is in his 30s and a successful lawyer. He finds himself torn between Sylvia—the untouchable love of his life—and Naomi—his much younger plaything, for whom he's beginning to catch feelings. He runs from his feelings by shuttling between the two women and drowning the in-betweens in work, alcohol and drugs. Ivan, the younger, is in his 20s and a socially awkward chess prodigy—written almost like he's on the autism spectrum, although this isn't explicit anywhere in the novel. He meets and falls for Margaret, a much older woman who is "technically" still married to the town drunkard.

Like the pattern of a chessboard, the narrative structure alternates the perspectives of each major character with each chapter—mostly Peter and



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Ivan—although, surprisingly enough, Margaret gets a few chapters of her own. While occasionally speaking to one another, the stories of these characters very rarely intersect. But 'intermezzo' itself is an in-between move which forces its players to respond. It's symbolic of the way death repositions a life and grief unsettles love, and that's pretty much what the novel explores. While the romantic tangles, the messy friendships, and the minefields of parent-child relationships that characterise Rooney's other works are present, this particular novel is a little bit of a departure from her usual style. Here, she puts the brothers

front and centre, pitting Peter's hypocritical condescension against Ivan's resentment and utter disdain. Throbbing beneath the surface of this tension is a well of love, and it would take a stone-cold sociopath not to weep at the book's emotional climax.

Those familiar with Rooney's earlier works will note the increased confidence in this one, the ease with which she merges her complex themes and issues—from women's health, to mental health, to climate anxiety, to Covid scares—with some of the most mundane scenarios. The prose changes with the perspective: Peter thinks in short bursts and phrases, almost like a list, while Ivan has a cool, calm, logical

exposition. Margaret's chapters have long, emotional and introspective sentences. The author is a master of scenes, drawing each one out in lush detail, with great economy of words, filling space normally reserved for propulsive action, instead with a variety of ideas, conversations and themes, or as Margaret imagines halfway through the novel: "more life".

The way Rooney seamlessly folds in age-old questions and ideas within the reality of our current, often hopeless world makes her the significant writer that she is. And if I may jump back on the Taylor Swift parallel, all of the characters in her novels so far feature

young adults figuring out the desires, dreams, and people that compose their respective lives (much like Rooney's main readership, or the Swifties' core demographic). Peter, Ivan, and Margaret may be positioned in specific and unique scenarios, yet their feelings will resonate with many readers the way Swift's songs, as hyperbolic as her imagery may often be, still hit you in the feels when you least expect them to. References to topics explored in her preceding books also show how Rooney is in conversation with herself and her past writing, and how she grows and evolves as her characters do, much like Ms Swift revisiting her old hits in her 'Taylor's Version' drops. It's not a stretch to imagine that the ongoing success of both artists hinges on continuing to capture with compassion the ways in which we all respond, grieve, and grow with each new day.

Intermezzo has received favourable reviews in general, with many calling it the "perfect novel", but I actually have a peeve—it's that some of the secondary characters feel not fully realised. Naomi in particular, is built on the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope, and while the complications of Sylvia's health issues, and their impact on her relationship with Peter, are treated with non-sensational attention, the lack of specificity at times feels like a jarring blind spot. Similarly, the brothers' mother, when she makes an appearance, isn't fleshed out enough.

Minor quibbles aside, Sally Rooney has been going from strength to strength with each successive book, and this, her latest, is a real triumph.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of *Sehri Tales*.

ALT LIT

How to make incendiary literature



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

KATERINA DON

Zines are a new name for an old thing. They are the revolutionary pamphlets of the 1930s, and the underground student manifestos of the '50-'60s. They are a distant relative of the tattered choti mags. There are many other examples from around the world of self-published, self-distributed, and often dangerous reading material.

In the context of our scale-obsessed, globalised market value system, zines are a very niche subculture. And today they are relevant in a very new way as a form of escape from surveillance, censorship, capitalist authoritarianism, and targeted algorithmic erasure—phenomena that threaten creativity and freedom of thought.

Zines are a way to create and share but stay invisible to the pervasive information harvest. Even if you said no to web cookies, every word, reaction, and eye movement made with and on a digital device is used to make you a clearer target. Can you tell that there is a tone of paranoia in my voice? Yes, because this article should have been a zine.

So, here is a simple instructional guide

to creating your own zine in times of peace, war, or armageddon. Note: You will need a photocopier to multiply and distribute, so try to make your zine before the power goes out. There are alternatives to the machine, which I will mention at the end, but they are slightly more labour intensive.

WHY ZINES?

- Fits in to your pocket
- No binding needed
- Easy to reproduce
- Easy to slip into people's pockets, unnoticed
- Stands up to be a pop-up exhibit

HOW TO MAKE ZINE(S):

*Note: When folding, crease well.

1. Fold the page in half horizontally
2. Fold the page in half vertically
3. Fold the page in half vertically again
4. Open the page and fold it vertically
5. Cut (or gently, rip) the centre crease the length of one square, this is your central slit
6. Open and fold horizontally again and push open the slit and press the two ends together*
7. Done! You have made a zine

*Alternative ways of folding exist and you can experiment to find what works best for your issue.

Pagination—which rhymes beautifully with imagination—is the page order of a publication. Most material has a front page, a back page, and inner pages. Let's call this the status-quo pagination. Challenging the status quo pagination means exploring other ways of thinking about and working with page structure and sequence.

In the case of your 8-page zine with the central slit—you can get pretty wild with it. You can choose to respect the 'front-inner-back' order or have a run on story with no end. You can open the zine up into its original single sheet state, flip it over to have two sides of the story. You can treat the inner side as a completely different thing. Or stand the zine up by opening up the centre cut to give a sneak peak into the flip side.

In format and philosophy, the zine allows for an unchecked creativity. Mary Poppins famously declared: "First of all, I would like to make one thing clear: I never explain anything." Similarly, the zine is absolute; it does not have to seek the approval of an editor or a publisher. It is in and of itself,

just like you.

But there is an honour code—to fact check; to spread information that is helpful and hard-to reach; and to refrain from stealing or appropriating the work of others. There is no zine police or censor board to tell you where the line is and threaten with punishment if it is crossed, but there is a self-regulatory culture and benchmark of what is and isn't acceptable.

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER AS YOU MAKE YOUR ZINE(S):

1. There are two schools of thought: One, pro-digitisation/pro-ephemera, and the other (which I belong to), believing that information has a lifespan and should not be doomed to live forever. Zines should expire, like butterflies, bonfire logs, milk, medication, humans. And being terminal adds a gravitas to the zine and the moment in which it is made. Once the moment is gone, the information may be outdated, not age well, be decontextualised and made redundant. If you want something to live on, this may not be your format. But zines can live on, however—in other zines.
2. Zines are your own personal

communication channel, but you can choose to be unseen. You, the maker, choose to be yourself, anonymous; use a pen name or Insta handle.

3. The topic should matter to you a whole lot. And it should challenge something enough that you worry that it would never see the light of day as an institutional publication.
4. It does not have to be pretty. But it does help if the handwriting is easy to read.
5. This is a slow-burn. There are no word limits, no moderators, no instant gratification apart from the joy of making, no reactions to worry about.
6. You need to give it oxygen and share it. Copy it and you drop it in washrooms, libraries, slip them into books and leave them on coffee tables.
7. Your original and your copies will be different; the copies will be black and white.

Now that you have made your zine, you have been a writer, a layout artist, an editor. Now it's time to be a printer and distributor.

To multiply the zine, use your office/library photocopier while no one is watching. Or take your zine to the print shop, any neighbourhood shop where you don't mind spending some time. Make sure to distract your photocopier-mama from looking too closely at your material.

PRINTSHOP TIPS:

1. Choose the right paper. Standard weight is the most economical and works well with high-speed copiers. If you are using coloured paper, choose light tones so that the ink pops more.
2. Check that the contrast and brightness is set to your liking on the machine.
3. Check the margins (you may need to zoom in or out on the machine).
4. Give the ink time to set before folding.
5. Give yourself time for folding, use gloves to keep from staining your fingers.
6. Quantity depends on your plans, but starting with 50 is good.
7. Make sure to save your original for making more copies in future.
8. If the power is out or you have no access to a photocopier, there are several analog ways of multiplying your zine: Call your friends and copy by hand; use plasticine block prints; screen print.

Now that you have your zine multiplied and folded it is time to distribute. You will need to find locations that resonate with the theme and topic of your zine. If it's an educational zine about tax filing you may want to be dropping it in the tax office or at the bank. If it is a girl zine about sex-ed for newly married couples, the marriage registrar is a good seeding ground.

Hope to stumble upon and be ignited by your zines soon!

Katerina Don is the curator of *HerStory Foundation*, and together with Shoma Sharmin and Zaima Hamid Zoa hosts *Sister Library Dhaka*.