

Intermezzo, intervention

Spoiler alert: In her latest, Sally Rooney yet again plays the therapist we didn't realise we needed.

By Stuti Agarwal



A still from the American satirical TV series *Succession*

Can-cry-at-a-drop-of-a-hat club, hello there! I hope it's been a somewhat happy one today; one with those soft reel cries. You know, when you're emotional but can't identify the spectrum of it—and you see a sweet 30 seconds of strangers' parents that help you realise your bunch isn't that crazy after all, a reminder of your partner's beige flags, maybe something that makes you miss a friend without feeling miserable about not having that big fun friends group, just a tiny tot of a monkey running to his mother for a squish after someone took his toy away, or a cat hitting a mouse who's faking its death—and it all makes you tear up, but with a slight smile. It's been an anomaly of a few weeks of such nights for me while I have ended the day

with a few pages of Sally Rooney's latest, *Intermezzo*; backaches; and M&S' Cheddar and Gouda Crispies.

It isn't often that a fantasy-head like me gets the chance to find myself whole in the books I read. I mean, it is hard to see myself in the antichrist progeny that Linus Baker learns to cherish in TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea*; even Nora Seed as she sifts through her many choices and lives in the multiverse in *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig; and what about the hulking Mrs Komachi of Michiko Aoyama's *What You Are Looking for is in the Library* nonchalantly dishing out life direction to readers in the way of book recommendations.

But, it was different with Rooney. It is always different with Rooney, whose characters never fail to be

“reach-out-and-touch-me real” as Kirkus describes them, and I should have expected it when I first began the book despite Rooney pushing her boundaries this time with an exploration of family relationships in ways that have her signature blend of ugliness and softness all at once.

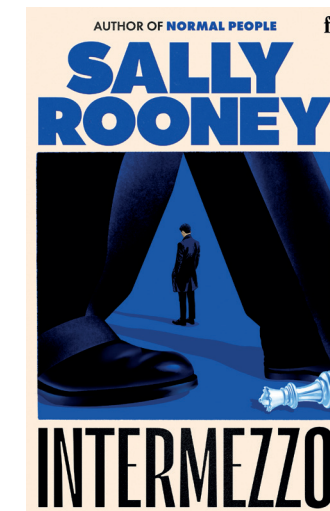
The first line in the back blurb read, “Aside from the fact that they are brothers, Peter and Ivan Koubek seem to have little in common.” *That pretty much sums bhai and I*, my mind thought when I read it, and I continued, with great intent to see a mirror of my finely threaded, knotted, and ebbing relation with my own brother.

Was it a no-holds-barred, told-as-is, in true Rooney fashion, a telling of “someone finally gets how complicated my sibling relationship

really can be and I'm not a lunatic to feel this all alone”? Well, yes.

As it begins, in the aftermath of their father's death, thirty-something Peter and a decade younger Ivan deal with the period of bereavement in ways disparate and far removed from one another. Peter, a successful lawyer, seems tired of having to pick up for his younger sibling all the time, *I wish*, judging him for the oddball he is in ways that are almost brutal. It at once reminded me of an important bit of life I had missed discussing when I was in therapy—*remember when your brother, in front of many, told you you were “short, dark, ugly”, and oh, stupid*—something that unfortunately seems to have not completely left my own understanding of self image.

Ivan, on the other hand, is a chess prodigy right out of college, struggling to make ends meet as a freelance data analyst while dealing with his tumultuous fall in world chess rankings—*oh God, the never-ending “I still haven't made it as JK Rowling and will the next book make it” reminders*—feeling alone having lost his one confidante, dismissed yet again by his brother, oh the flashbacks, and to top it all unable to take his beloved dog in because of tenant policies. Oh, and of course (long sigh) he's a recluse, and awkward, and a nerd. *No, not a pity party, not even*



Sally Rooney's third novel *Intermezzo* is a story about family, grief and love

close, which you'll know when you read through the eccentricities of Ivan, which I have enough of too.

As the two get on with their lives, they juggle their own romantic relationships in the forefront. Here I must refrain from getting into details in an effort to not strain my own sibling relationship anymore in case this is read (the very miniscule window of in case) but let's just say I am trapezing on a steady line of parallels. Peter struggles between finding his feelings for his latest fling with a much younger Naomi and his first love Sylvia, and Ivan finding love in an older Margaret. For Peter, Naomi, who he met on a somewhat unconventional dating website, is a breath of fresh air; but



Sian Clifford and Phoebe Waller-Bridge in a still from the series *Fleabag*

Sylvia, who met with an accident that rendered her incapable of having sex and led her to breakup with Peter, is the love of his life, the one who stimulates him intellectually, and the one he imagines his life with. When Ivan meets a much older Margaret at a chess tournament—a fact that is hypocritically judged bitterly, even violently, by Peter (*Brain is screaming! Brain is screaming!*)—age holds no witness to the partnership that blooms, that is at once nurturing and natural.

What follows, though, is not the sisters-in-arms read I was growing to expect. Quite on the contrary, it made me rethink and want to rework my own sibling relationship.

Spoiler alert: It isn't a hunky-dory, all is well, end; again, as I should have come to expect of Rooney. Instead, as we see the boys grow into their romantic loves and navigate the complexity of their feelings, all while acting out against each other in classic ways of spilling emotions and unresolved feelings, the two find spaces of their own and grow into better versions of brothers and human beings to one another...somewhat...in exactly the kind of mundanity we have come to expect from the author.

And isn't that what life is? Isn't it what Rooney unfailingly provides a glimpse into—the everydayness of being in relationships?

As I was saying, the nights of reading *Intermezzo* was a roller coaster of somewhat happy cries as it brought to the forefront for me in a brutally honest way the singularity in my understanding of my sibling relationship. In holding a mirror to a lot of myself in Ivan, I was able to be kinder to myself. In seeing Peter make sense of his own world in the context of Ivan, I was able to forgive my brother for a lot I had held on to for years. And, I suppose, I found my own cathartic end, not in the grandeur of a stadium like Peter and Ivan, *as Ivan went on to become a chess champion might I add*, but in a short “goodnight, I love you” text I sent to my brother as I put down the book. ■