



Girl Meets World

Whipping up a fiercely loyal – and deafeningly vocal – fan base, *My Mad Fat Diary* has struck a chord with the heart of the nation. We chat to its breakout star, Sharon Rooney

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I'm standing between a crudely stuffed giraffe and a case full of Ming Dynasty vases. It's mid-afternoon in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow – a dusty, echoing cavern of a place filled with eccentric historical artefacts and hundreds of screaming children (it's a public holiday). I'm here to meet Sharon Rooney, Glaswegian actress-in-demand and star of the quite brilliant E4 drama *My Mad Fat Diary*.

Set against a backdrop of Nineties Britpop, the show is an honest and funny account of teenage coming-of-age. Based on the book, *My Mad, Fat Teenage Diary*, by broadcaster and writer Rae Earl, it shines an unapologetic light on issues normally reserved for Shane Meadows-style TV – suicide attempts, eating disorders, abortion, self-harm (the first episode opens with Rae being released from a psychiatric ward) – and deftly juggles them with college crushes and virginity angst. The last series drew in 1.2 million viewers per week, earned Rooney a Scottish Bafta nomination and saw her named among 2013's Bafta breakout stars.

When she arrives, winding her way past a bear standing tall on its hind legs, I'm struck by how little Rooney looks like Rae. It might be something to do with the fact that she is 25, and not the 16-year-old teenager she portrays in the show (complete with a uniform of band T-shirts and baggy jeans) but there's also a beauty and confidence to her; a world away from her character's crushing insecurity.

"Sometimes they get them out of their wee cases," she tells me – staring curiously at an elaborately coloured bird of paradise (long-deceased). I'm surprised by her distinctly Scottish accent – a far cry from her on-screen Lincolnshire lilt.

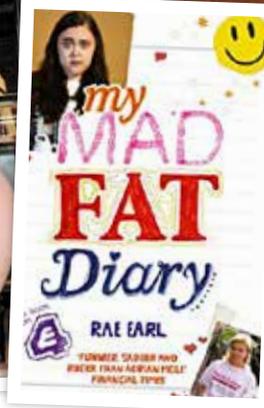
We're led to a quiet room and I'm pleased to discover Rooney is a ridiculously entertaining interviewee – cheerful, relaxed and animated. But she balks at certain questions: "That's just the sort of thing that's going to get you into trouble," she laughs,



ROONEY AS TEENAGER
RAE EARL IN
MY MAD FAT DIARY



ROONEY AT BAFTA'S
BREAKTHROUGH BRITS
EVENT IN 2013



steering the conversation elsewhere. I wonder if she's been briefed by a protective PR team, or whether she's just acutely aware of the impact her comments might have on others. Probably, it's both. But she needn't worry. She is nice. And warm. And engaging. And funny. I'm eager to know more.

Rae is your first major TV role, what were you doing before?

My best friend Anna Devitt is a stand-up comedian. Before I got *Mad Fat*, I was doing Theatre And Education (TAE) tours [travelling the country performing educational skits to school children] when she said, "Why don't you come and do stand-up with me?" I turned up for the first gig completely unprepared. I thought I'd just stand there and sing a comedy song. I did *I'm Not Pregnant*, *I'm Just Fat*, but gave it a 'Scottish twist'. Luckily, I think people felt a bit sorry for me. When I came off stage people patted me on the back and said, "Well done. Very brave."

I knew then it wasn't good. But after that we actually toured together, doing female comedy shows at The Fringe and at Henley. It was great.

How did *My Mad Fat Diary* come about?

Totally by accident. I was on tour and I was feeling a bit sorry for myself. Auditions weren't going well and I'd convinced myself I was going to quit acting completely. Then my agent rang and said, "Can you be in London tomorrow?" I wasn't having any of it. But he sent me the script anyway. I read the first page and went, "I'll be there."

What was the audition like?

I just thought, 'I'll make them laugh.' I didn't want to show them anything vulnerable. But at my last audition I found out a friend had passed away just before I went in. The last time I had spoken to her she said, "Do not come home without this job." When I heard she'd died, I thought, 'I can either fight for this, or I can go home. But if I do

go home, she still won't be there, so why not honour what she said.' That's when I realised that I needed to stop being silly and stop thinking that I could get through life just by making people laugh. That it's fine to not be fine. It's OK to say, "Look, something really bad's just happened. But I'm here and I still want to do this." I think that really changed me as a person.

What were you like as a teenager?

I kind of hung around with everybody. I wasn't a threat to the gorgeous girls, and the boys didn't see me in that way either. I tried to be one of the cool ones and get into certain music – and had an attempt at a goth phase – but it never really worked. I always looked a bit try-hard. I didn't get up to anything naughty. I look back now and think, 'I wish I'd been a bit worse.'

Did you have quite a theatrical upbringing?

My dad has thousands of CDs. He actually used to DJ at my school discos – HORRIFIC, that was why I was not popular at school. Both my parents love the theatre and on my 16th birthday they surprised me with a trip to the West End where we went to see *Fame* and *Saturday Night Fever*. I was just in awe.

Are you part of a big family?

I was an only child; an attention-seeker; always doing accents and impressions. We'd have family parties and I'd do a 'show' and distribute leaflets beforehand. I was so annoying. Every single night my grandparents were subjected to a Michael Jackson tribute act, but they never complained.

Do you identify with Rae in any way?

I think everyone gets up sometimes, looks in the mirror and goes, 'What do I do with *this*?' But you just need to put on your armour and go. 'This is how I'm going to face the world.' I think deep down Rae doesn't want to be the thin, popular girl. I think we all think it would be brilliant, but actually, we'd still have the bag of bulls*** we have to carry, whatever we look like.

As an actress, what's it like taking on a show with 'fat' in the title? Is there any element of pride involved?

Everyone is shocked by the word 'fat.' But in this case it isn't necessarily aimed at me. Fat means 'big'. Rae's problems are fat – they're massive. Rae's ideas and emotions are fat. In other shows a larger woman would be cast as a comedy sidekick or a bully. They'd always have something defining them that wasn't themselves. Whereas Rae defines Rae. What would have pissed me off is if it was called *My Mad Fat Diary* and I was tiny; because it wouldn't have been real. As long as I'm happy and healthy, I don't care. People probably think I sit at home and eat pizza all day. I know that I don't.

Are you very aware of being a role model for people who watch the show?

This time last year I definitely felt too much responsibility. You start to think you are important enough to be responsible for anyone who has mental health issues, or an eating disorder, or any problem. It was a lot of pressure. I'd constantly be thinking, 'Can I tweet that picture? Can I say that?' I just had to realise that I cannot solve the world's problems. I wish I could. But all I can do is point people in the right direction of charities and organisations that already exist.

Did you do research into mental health? Did it shock you?

Yes. I was shocked to learn that



SHARON DISCOVERS HER INNER GREEK GODDESS

"I LOVED GERI HALLIWELL. THERE'S VIDEO EVIDENCE OF ME IN A GINGER WIG AND UNION JACK DRESS, JUST GIVING IT"

one in four people suffer from mental health problems. So we're clearly not talking about it enough. People don't need to suffer in silence. No-one's going to put a banner round you and shout, "This is one!" We all go to STI clinics; we seem to be happy to talk about *that*, and that's meant to be a taboo. Every time I turn on the telly there's someone else getting swabbed.

Did you have any crushes growing up, like Rae?

Rae is so horny. I love it. But I didn't really have posters of boys on my walls. I never really

got over the Spice Girls. I actually had framed pictures of them. My whole room was covered in memorabilia: the bedspread, the curtains, the door. Geri was my favourite. I liked her sass. My gran made me a Geri outfit. There's video evidence of me in a ginger wig and full on union jack dress, just giving it. I think making a Spice Girls video is a rite of passage for any woman my age.

Have any surprising people contacted you and said they love the show?

Amazingly, [*Sunshine On Leith* actor] Peter Mullan actually told

me he loves it. That was probably one of the best moments of my life. I just wanted to go, "Stop! Let me film this." I was so honoured to be nominated for a Scottish Bafta alongside him.

What do you do when you get some time off from filming?

I'm pretty boring. I don't drink. If I have one glass of wine I look like this in the morning [she gestures to a copy of *Stylist*, which is open on a picture of a screaming baby]. I'll normally be found in my pyjamas watching *Dance Moms* or *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. It's brilliant, but it makes me feel like I'm a failure at doing my own make-up and hair. I panicked getting ready this morning because I realised I don't know how to 'contour' my face.

You had a cameo in *Sherlock* earlier this year. How was that?

My mum is a complete Cumberbitch [laughs]. Out and out proud. She will tell anyone who's interested. When I got *Mad Fat* she was like, "That's amazing – well done!" When I got *Sherlock*, she sobbed. Benedict is actually a friend-of-a-friend so I sort of knew him before. But even to be a tiny part of such an amazing show was incredible. I'll tell my grandkids about that before I tell them about *My Mad Fat Diary*. Because I don't know how I'm going to prepare them for watching that.



My Mad Fat Diary is on E4 on Mondays at 10pm

SHARON ROONEY – CURRICULUM VITAE

We chart Rooney's journey to the silver screen

DANCE SCHOOL

In her late teens Rooney auditioned for a musical theatre course at The Knightswood Dance School of Scotland, only to be turned away by the head of department who was convinced she should be an actress.

UNI DAYS

She went on to study performing arts at various colleges in Glasgow before spending a year at Hull University converting it all into an acting degree.

SCREEN DEBUT

In 2010, she appeared as 14-year-old single mother Chantelle in Harry Hill's video to promote his album *Funny Times*.

COMIC TURN

On graduating in 2011, Rooney worked for a Theatre And Education company (TAE), promoting flood awareness in schools.

BIG BREAK

This came in 2013, with *My Mad Fat*



Diary, written by Oscar nominated Tom Bidwell.

FILM

Rooney starred in 2013 TV movie *Two Doors Down* alongside Arabella Weir.

CULT CAMEO

2014 began with a cameo in *Sherlock* as obsessive fan Laura. One confused viewer criticised her "awful" Scottish accent.