

# Suspended Humanity

*Orbital* by Samantha Harvey, Vintage, 2024.

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Among the Booker-Prize-winning texts of recent years, which have tended to feature strongly personal, often self-told narratives of individual destinies, the 2024 winner<sup>2</sup> is a somewhat surprising exception. Samantha Harvey's<sup>3</sup> *Orbital*, a short but very complex and comprehensive novel, is a universal ode that reflects not only on the fate of the singular, but also of the community and, ultimately, of humanity as a whole.

The plot follows six astronauts and cosmonauts of different nationalities – American, Japanese, British, Italian and Russian – over the course of one day spent on the board of an international space station that orbits around the earth. To be more precise: over the course of 24 hours, because as we are confronted with the well-known and frequently voiced fact: time – especially under these circumstances – is truly relative. One day on earth means 16 orbits: 16 sunrises and 16 sunsets for the crew members, who are suspended in space in “weightless drifting ... sardine living and ... earthward gaping” (2). And although they are in a constant and continuous motion as a result of various, simultaneously acting physical forces, they do not actually have the ability to move. They can literally fly due to weightlessness, yet they do not have the opportunity to choose where they go beyond the tight boundaries set by the space station. And even when they leave its confinement on the rare occasions of spacewalks, they are forced to stay connected to it, as their life depends on physical attachment to this small representation of earth in space, secured by the tether, just like an unborn child is connected to its mother in the womb.

Suspended in space and lifted from the conventional context of earthly time, “humans with a godly view ... that’s the blessing and also the curse” (73), they begin their own inward journeys into their own inner spaces, conjuring up their own personal and yet quite universal images of life on the planet they cannot keep

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing this review, the winner of the 2025 Booker Prize had not yet been announced.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey is no stranger to the Booker Prize, her first novel, *Wilderness* was also longlisted in 2009.

their eyes and minds off of. They are constantly confronted with the questions regarding their own humanity, the beginning and the end of life, the possible presence of God and after all the meaning of one's existence as a human as they are torn between the constant and simultaneous presence of the mundane and the extraordinary, the closely documented and data-driven confinement and the greatest spatial freedom possibly experienced by a human, and their limited physical presence and the infinity of mind.

The complexity of the characters is built orbit by orbit. By the end of the book, they all become refined and drawn enough so that they do not come across as schematic or two-dimensional, yet Harvey manages to keep them also general enough to be absolutely relatable, hence universal. And although their backstories are sketched individually, by the end of the novel the reader is left with the feeling that the six of them have merged into an inseparable whole, as their physical proximity also results in spiritual community. Harvey masterfully conveys a sense of interpersonal porosity that is based on their shared experience of “repetitive and unprecedented” and “inexpressibly trivial and momentous” (121).

Harvey's language is nothing short of lyrical, she uses images that are strong enough to stay with the reader for a long time after finishing the book. The rhythmic pulsation of the text is meditative in nature, the lack of marked dialogues and the repetitive structure, signposted only by the number of the ascending and descending orbits, create a stream-of-consciousness-like unity and continuity. Language and thoughts interlink with dreams and feelings, as they are shared and experienced collectively – by the crew members and the readers alike. This universality is also emphasized in those cases when the author deliberately uses the different native languages of the astronauts, only to point out in the end that they all want to convey the exact same message.

*Orbital* evokes questions that are not and cannot be answered on the pages of the book. Along with the crew we witness the formation and the inevitable destructive power of a typhoon from a helpless, passive perspective removed from earth. Yet, there is no explicit moral lesson on the “inconvenient truth” about the climate catastrophe caused by humanity. It does not formulate the recipe for world peace either, even though we get a beautiful description of the constantly changing face of earth caused by the war-induced border changes. And finally, it does not get involved in political statements, a fact that some consider to be one of the main drawbacks of the novel. It gently and humorously plays around with the idea of Russian “otherness” that manifests itself in a separate bathroom, and the separation

of the word *cosmonaut* from the generally used *astronaut*, but it does not move further – taking the chance offered by the neutrality of the setting. The answers are outside the book and left to the reader to ponder upon. We are given the opportunity to step out of our apparent immobility, take a step back and reflect. And by taking advantage of the opportunity provided by a different perspective, to realize what we can and should do in this infinitely small amount of time that, compared to the universe as a whole, has been given to humanity.