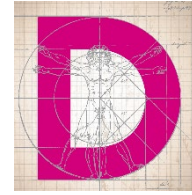


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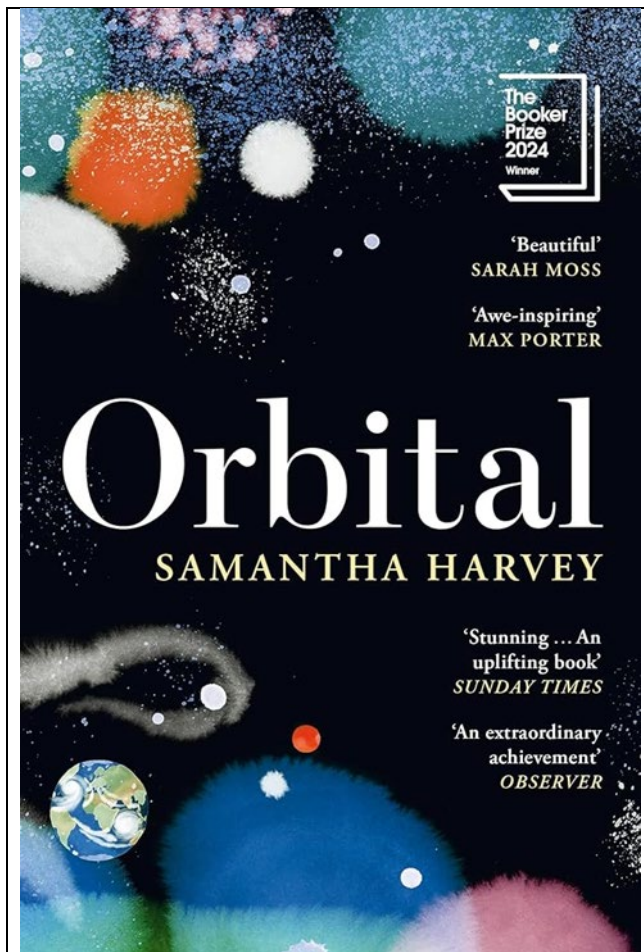
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BOOK REVIEW: *ORBITAL*
RESEÑA DE LIBRO: *ORBITAL*

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Author: Samantha Harvey

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Orbital by Samantha Harvey, published in November 2023, describes the journey of four astronauts and two cosmonauts in a mission in space during 16 orbits. Throughout her career, Harvey has published five novels so far: *The Wilderness*, *All Is Song*, *Dear Thief*, *The Western Wind* and *Orbital* as well as a memoir, titled *The Shapeless Unease* (Harvey, 2024). *Orbital* has been awarded with the 2024 Booker Prize, which had not been held by a woman since 2019, when Bernardine Evaristo and Margaret Atwood won the award. *The Guardian* reveals that the novel was “unanimously” chosen as a winner by this year’s committee; furthermore, it was the best sold book amongst the ones shortlisted for the award, with 29,000 copies retailed in the UK in 2024 (Cain, 2024). The judges for the 2024 Booker Prize— Edmund de Waal, Sarah Collins, Yiyun Li, Justine Jordan, and Nitin Sawhney—, stated that they “were determined to find a book that moved us, a book that had capaciousness and resonance that we are compelled to share” (qtd. in Cain, 2024). In 136 pages, *Orbital* accomplishes all that, the reader is transported to the spacecraft, where there is a silent, reflective environment, and every moment seems highly significant, yet ethereal, like stardust.

The novel is divided into 22 chapters, each alluding to an orbit or the placement of said orbit (e.g. “Orbit 1, ascending”). The narrative occurs over the course of 16 orbits, each of them lasting about 90 minutes, which means that the audience accompanies the crew for one whole day during their 9-month mission. Harvey’s writing style stands out for its capacity to provide the reader with an immersive experience. The author provides extended, detailed descriptions of what the astronauts are experiencing, intertwined with philosophical and existential reflections. The story promotes personal and critical thinking, which is one of Harvey’s goals with this luminous novel. *Orbital*, despite being brief, captures the essence of humanity merged with the fragility and vastness of the universe, providing a narrative that mirrors the singularity of existence itself. Reading the novel feels like floating without gravity, each word seems to have been carefully chosen, creating an exquisite read. The reader has to carefully absorb each of the layers in order to fully comprehend the meanings of the text, as if they were on a space mission with the task to uncover the key to the secrets of the vastness of the cosmos.

The novel features 6 characters: four astronauts and two cosmonauts from different nationalities. There are two women and four men: Chie and Nell, from Japan and Britain respectively; Shaun, from the United States; Pietro, an Italian astronaut; and two Russian cosmonauts, Anton and Roman. Each of their personalities are introduced as the story progresses, each of the members represents a crucial part of the spaceship. Anton is depicted as the spacecraft’s heart, Pietro its mind, Roman (the commander) its hands, Shaun its soul, Chie the conscience, and Nell the rocket’s breath (Harvey, 2023, p.19). As the reader accompanies the daily tasks of the members of the ship during their mission in the International Space Station, their routines in the ship are described as well as their thoughts, inquiries, feelings, and aspirations. The novel delves into matters such as the importance of life, the futility of time, and the smallness of the universe.

Orbital manages to keep the reader wondering about existential questions even after finishing the novel. In the spacecraft, the need for human interaction and connection is seen from the opening pages of the novel, when the astronauts set a party for the landing of other astronauts in the moon and they celebrate it as if it was a birthday party, “it was

nobody's birthday but it was a celebration and it was all they had" (Harvey, 2023, p.1). This demonstrates the necessity for the crew to gather and celebrate, creating moments of shared joy, showcasing the urge of humans to feel connected and accompanied. The concept of *floating family* is introduced to describe their relationship: "they're everything to each other for this short of time because they're all there is" (Harvey, 2023, p.18). They are indeed a family, a group of people bound by fate rather than by choice, compelled to share life spaces and dynamics for a period of time.

What is unique about this novel is that it invites reflection, several topics can be seen through the perspectives of the different characters such as the meaning of life, religion, gender inequalities, climate change, death, and belonging. Chie loses her mother while she is in the mission and the novel neatly depicts her grief. She is mourning her loss, as she has to continue with her detailed schedule in the spacecraft. Although the novel aims to be realistic in the sense that it aims to portray life in space as it really is, fiction can be found as well. I wonder whether in a real mission the astronaut would be informed of something as devastating as the death of a close relative. It would inevitably affect the mental health of not just Chie, but the overall crew, unavoidably thinking that the fate of Chie's mother could have happened to someone else's beloved ones. A traumatic news like the death of a mother would threaten the mission and the organisations in charge would probably not take such a risk. Chie also considers abandoning the mission at one point, concluding that she could not because it would mean that two other of her mates would have to give up their dreams and go to Earth with her (Harvey, 2023, pp. 98-99). Chie prioritizes the mission over her own well-being, driven by her sense of responsibility for the fate of her crewmates and, in a way, for humanity as a whole, since they are the chosen ones to represent it.

It is interesting to uncover each of the characters' personalities and background stories as the narrative unfolds. Their different cultures clash in the spacecraft, having each of them very diverse visions of the world as they have had different life experiences throughout their respective existences. Nell cannot quite comprehend how Shaun, as an astronaut with so much knowledge about science and the universe, can also be a Christian. This reflects the disagreements that arise when living together on the spaceship, showing that as humans, we're not always able to fully understand each other (Harvey, 2023, pp. 44-45). Chie reveals that her motivation to become an astronaut comes from when she was a child, she asked her mother if there had ever been a woman in space. At her mother's negative response, especially as an Asian woman she decided that she wanted to become the first woman in space (Harvey, 2023, p. 49). In the case of Roman, he states that he wanted to become an astronaut before being born, when he knew infinity in his mother's womb (Harvey, 2023, p. 120). The astronauts' distinct inspirations reveal their personalities by sharing their perspectives of the world, and the characters show themselves as unique individuals, each with their own weaknesses, dreams, hopes, and challenges.

Their cultures merge in the story, as they become a *floating family*. They use English as a lingua franca to be able to communicate with each other. The characters finding a third language to communicate underscores the cultural negotiation required in an interconnected environment, representing the use of a common language as a bridge

between cultures to collaborate and create a shared environment. Nell and Shaun already have English as their mother tongue; besides this, the other members of the crew have to step out of their comfort zones and use a second language to communicate. At one point in the novel, they discuss the things they miss, particularly the sweets from their childhood. Each person shares memories of the candies that they enjoyed and the happiness they brought (Harvey, 2023, pp. 97-98). Through this shared nostalgia, it can be seen how, despite their diverse backgrounds, everyone finds pleasure in the same things. This illustrates that, although we are different, we share a common humanity.

In all, the novel offers a deeply immersive experience for the reader. It enables the audience to travel to the spaceship and feel a void of unknowingness. Through the characters' points of view, the reader is left with a feeling of uneasiness, wanting to reflect upon their existence, identity, place in the world, and the meaning of life. By orbiting the Earth with the crew, Harvey is able to convey a wide range of emotions to the reader, wanting to know more about space and Earth, since they are not so distant after all. The novel is unique because it is able to subtly merge literature with philosophy, science, and emotional depth, making *Orbital* an "out of this world" experience and remarkable addition to contemporary literature, recognizing Samantha Harvey as a stellar storyteller and thinker.

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