

Orbital: Samantha Harvey’s award-winning novel about problems of climate and social change

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Orbital, by Samantha Harvey, London, Jonathan Cape, 2023, 144 pp.

British novelist Samantha Harvey’s *Orbital* is the winner of this year’s Booker Prize and the first Booker winner to top the UK bestseller list in the week of its awarding. Described by Harvey as a “space pastoral,” and elsewhere as “a love letter to the earth,” it has struck a popular chord in a world poised between the immense potential of scientific advances and the threat of military and ecological catastrophe.

Setting the novel in the International Space Station (ISS) with a fictional crew of six, Harvey (born 1975) combines her very considerable powers of observation and empathy to place her readers in this strange, “unearthly,” as she ironically phrases it, position—in which “space shreds time” and “claustrophobia becomes agoraphobia in an instant, or you have both at once.” Rocket launches and the ISS are facts of life for most alive today. Harvey has a knack for phrases that shatter the background sense of familiarity with these “routine astronauts in earth’s backyard” and allow the triumph and wonder of this achievement to come through.

The same point can be made about her treatment of the planet itself, cast in new lights again and again—literally as well as metaphorically, with “the whip crack of morning” arriving every ninety minutes across the sixteen full orbits made of the Earth by the ISS in a 24-hour period. These passages feel like the heart of the book, in which “the earth is the answer to every question.”

As such, the characters themselves are slight, with little opportunity to relate their pasts or create their futures in the single day over which the story takes place. The timeframe means that their final chapters are spent sleeping, leaving the last pages to the planet below and universe beyond. Nor is there a plot in anything but the loosest sense.

Yet *Orbital* is a deeply human, humane book. There is a lovely passage turning the tables on a religious worldview which observes, from the ISS, “The earth, from here, is like heaven. It flows with colour. A burst of hopeful colour... an improbable, hard-to-believe-in place.” Another describes the feelings of solidarity, openness and curiosity evoked looking out on this sight as a “heart scraped hollow with craving, which is not emptiness in the least, more the knowledge of how fillable he is. The sights from orbit do this; they make a billowing kite of you, given shape and loftiness by all that you aren’t.”

The human subject in *Orbital* is humanity in the round, as part of the earth and its improbable, fragile existence; a decision Harvey takes to get a handle on the sheer scale of the ecological issue. But it is also

humanity at a distance—one at which its features begin to blur. Crew member Pietro’s notion that “if you could get far enough away from the earth you’d finally be able to understand it” is aimed at encompassing the shared fate of a species jointly “wobbling on a pinhead of being.” This encompassing effort takes the form, however, of a flight from the divisions that wrack contemporary society and underpin the novel’s central concerns.

Dotted also with references to national tensions and conflicts, “war abounds,” the focus is on climate change and ecological breakdown. This reaches a crescendo at the mid-way point of the book, a long single passage of “snow that has never before melted ... the prolonged pinking of evaporated lakes ... brown seepage of cattle ranch where once was rainforest.” The closest thing the novel has to an antagonist is a super typhoon in Southeast Asia whose progress and catastrophic landfall the crew monitors from above.

In trying to make sense of this at the level of “humanity,” however, *Orbital* ends up indicting us all, presenting a “planet held hostage by humans, a gun to its vitals.”

There are flashes of social inequality, the main device being a Filipino fishing family befriended by Pietro on holiday, living in the path of the typhoon. In his memory of that event, the young children seem to look at him with the knowledge that “the tables would never turn.” As the storm approaches, their father asks himself, “Flee to where? It isn’t like that,” setting up a sharp contrast later in the book, when a “billionaire’s rocket” is described as “fleeing the scene of a crime. Away from the plucking flinging brute typhoon.”

But these divisions have no history or motive force in the narrative. Where do the billionaires come from, and what relation does this wrenching inequality have to the ecological crisis? The questions are sunk into a highly general, species-psychological explanation: “The planet is shaped by the sheer amazing force of human want,” or “maybe humankind is in the late smash-it-all-up teenage stage of self-harm and nihilism.”

This is not one-way traffic because *Orbital* is far from a tragic text, nor does it express the kinds of Luddite romanticism found in sections of environmentalist discourse. In many passages it is hopeful and forward-looking, as much an ode to human science as embodied in the ISS as it is to the earth it orbits: the space station “of all places in mankind’s short but striving remit, is not somewhere to deny the beauty of progress.”

The novel, however, struggles to find a vehicle for this optimism. Most persistently, it invokes a common, inextricably connected and interdependent humanity, “not this nation or that” but

“all together, always together come what may,” a “fumbled harmony taking shape,” and an earth that “holds no possibility of opposition.” Harvey of course knows the latter is untrue as a matter of fact; she is counterposing an ought to an is. The problem is that this sense of potential harmony and collectivity is left unmoored, becoming deeply otherworldly by the closing pages.

Orbital is in some way self-conscious of the shortcoming, “The thoughts you have in orbit are so grandiose and old,” but excuses it immediately: “there are no new thoughts. They’re just old thoughts born into new moments.” As if all we have is the truth that “without the earth we are all finished” and this will somehow see us through. The closest we come to a concrete realisation of this truth is, again, in scientific endeavour and the crew of the ISS itself, in which

humanity ... is no longer a species of confounding difference and distance but a near and graspable thing ... they are equalised here by the delicate might of their spaceship.

It is acknowledged though, that the impact of technology is not free from its social context: “the atom bomb,” most bluntly, and also space missions in search of the “new black gold,” a “new domain ripe for the taking.” Even its positive impact is harnessed to the idea of a collective maturing, a “grow[ing] out of the royalty of childhood,” that sounds more hopeful than convinced. The idea of “a bashing away of mankind’s ego by the instruments of scientific inquiry” falls flat in a world where rocket companies are the new pet project of the richest men on earth.

Grappling with this, *Orbital* can lose hold of its optimism and sense of progress. In answer to a question from a newspaper about how we are writing the future of humanity, Shaun thinks, “We’re not writing anything, it’s writing us.” Tellingly, Pietro’s own suggestion, “With the gilded pens of billionaires I guess,” is left hanging. Instead, “We’re wind-blown leaves. We think we’re the wind, but we’re just the leaf.”

The fatalistic consequences of that view are made immediately plain in the next thought that “all this great human endeavour of space exploration really is” is “an animal migration, a bid for survival.” The last description we have in the book of human beings is the image of “forty of fifty bodies sheltered behind the altar of a chapel” as the typhoon hits, “praying and praying, praying for hours ... they suppose they must be witnessing a miracle” to have survived. Whether of biology or god, human beings end up helpless objects.

Where does this come from, in a book that is otherwise at odds with these tropes? One of the strengths of *Orbital* is its capacity to answer, or begin to, its own limitations. Harvey is not entirely satisfied with Shaun’s answer, having him doubt himself: “The future of humanity. Does he know anything about that? He thinks the taxi driver,” one of the professions asked by the newspaper, “would have a better idea than he does.” And this sense of being not fully up to the problem is explored more explicitly in other passages.

Watching the typhoon, the crew are “Fortune tellers who can see and tell the future but do nothing to change or stop it.” Elsewhere, “They’re humans with a godly view and that’s the blessing and also the curse.” Here is the real crux of the book. One can read this as a Cassandra-like rendering of the fate of the informed few in the face of stubborn popular ignorance, but to do so runs against *Orbital*’s humane impulse. Read with the grain of the text, it amounts to a more

genuine, ultimately unanswered, appeal for some means of realizing the social imperatives and benefits of humanity’s scientific insights.

The distance between the ISS and the earth is meant to stand for the gap between humanity’s ability to understand the climate crisis and to act to address it. But it ends up more poignantly signifying the feeling of disconnection and impotence experienced by a broad layer of conscientious scientists—perhaps especially climate scientists—whose research and increasingly urgent warnings have no influence on the running of society. It is suggestive that the short book returns twice to the image of unrequited calls back down to earth.

Harvey’s crew members are thoughtful, penetrating minds, capable of grasping the dialectic of human practice in the sphere of natural science—“They’re the specimens and the objects of research who’ve forged the way for their own surpassing”—and its transformation of the potential into the possible: the ISS which is “going to end,” at least in this form, and will do so “through the relentless spirit of endeavour that made it possible in the first place.” But they struggle to apply the same understanding to social life.

How to do so? Especially when politics appears in *Orbital* as a “babbling pantomime ... an insult to the august stage on which it all happens,” which has nonetheless so terribly “shaped every single thing on the surface of the earth.” The problem, of course, is not *politics*, but *Orbital*’s narrow conception of it. Social struggles, humanity as a historical force acting upon itself, do not feature, except perhaps in an elusive, enigmatic reference to the last “lapsed century”: more than simply “passed,” surely; perhaps “failed” or, more productively, somehow still present but no longer observed—to be renewed, unfinished? The past, after all, is “stealthy in making the future.”

It’s on these points that Harvey and her characters seem to overlap most fully, since they are not only the problems of a generation of scientists who have grown up amid a prolonged suppression of the class struggle and socialist politics, but of artists, too; and all those with a critical attitude towards capitalism but without, as yet, a political perspective. Harvey’s talent as a writer has brought these issues, which lurk in the background of so much of today’s scientific and cultural discourse, more into focus.

Receiving the Booker, she dedicated the prize to those who speak “for and not against the earth, for and not against the dignity of other humans, other life ... all the people who speak for and call for and work for peace.” Her book speaks for the same progressive spirit in search of a home, held in suspension until a renewed revolutionary wave can bring it down to earth.



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