

ROOM TO READ BOOK GROUP

Orbital by Samantha Harvey

This Booker prize winning novel has attracted very polarised critical views, being described both as an 'amazing read... a skilful sweet lament to planet earth' and otherwise 'a short dull novel... with unlikeable and undeveloped characters.'

It made for an interesting discussion as opinion in our group was similarly divided.

It is the story of six astronauts who live on a space station for months at a time, and their journey around the earth over the course of 24 hours. It details mundane routines as they experience the reality of life in conditions of weightlessness, with 16 orbits of the earth (and associated 16 periods of daylight interspersed with darkness in those 24 hours), conduct scientific experiments and collect meteorological data.

We learn something of the characters of the astronauts, their motivation and relationships with their friends and family back on earth. We see their confusion as detached observers (literally) of their entire world. The book is a meditation on the fragility of our existence, both as individuals and in our place in the cosmos. As the book progresses, there is more focus on what humankind is capable of, and whether in the process of achieving this we are destroying our planet (as evidenced by climate change and the accumulation of space junk orbiting around the earth.) One member described it as a brilliant and unique description of what it's like to be trapped in a really weird environment. But it also offers for some a profound insight into the irrelevance of humanity within our universe.

However, for others this was a very challenging read. It meets few of the traditional requirements of a novel, by way of character development or plot, and even those who loved it agreed it was more akin to a poem or a philosophical meditation than a novel. It is repetitive to an irksome degree unless you are fascinated by the mundane details of life on board a spaceship. It contains a large amount of factual detail which depending on your viewpoint is very well researched or simply tedious.

We enjoyed a lively exchange of views about this book, and all agreed that as a book for a group discussion it was a good choice. We were somewhat less likely to recommend it to a friend though. Scores for discussion rounded up to 4 out of 5 but for recommendation to a friend averaged 2.5 out of 5

Review by Ann Whitfield