



## **Orbital**

by Samantha Harvey

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**Orbital** is the winner of the  
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*“There was a lesson at school about the painting Las Meninas, when Shaun was fifteen. It was about how the painting disoriented its viewer and left them not knowing what it was they were looking at. It's a painting inside a painting, his teacher had said - look closely. Look here Velasquez, the artist, is in the painting, at his easel painting and a painting and what he's painting is the king and the queen, but they are outside of the painting, where we are, looking in, and the only way we know they are there is because we can see the reflection in the mirror directly in front of us.”*

This metaphor, which describes a scene from the school days of one of the six fictitious ISS astronauts composed of “a summary of experiences”, could also be applied to the observation of the Earth gliding past the cupola of the ISS: An astronaut looks deeply impressed and fascinated at the image of the blue, fragile planet floating in the infinite, incomprehensible vastness of the universe.

Samantha Harvey's writing in her book “Orbital” vividly captures the awe-inspiring perspective of viewing Earth from space, prompting reflections on humanity's place in the universe, offering readers a meditative journey that contrasts the vastness of space with intimate human introspection.

*“The earth, from here, is like heaven. It flows with colour. A burst of hopeful colour. When we're on that planet we look up and think heaven is elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful lonely light shows could well be it.”*

“Orbital” is a concise yet profound yet “floating” novel that delves deeply, precisely and poetically into the collective astronaut/cosmonaut’s experience aboard the International Space Station (ISS). The narrative unfolds over 24 hours, following the activities, their interactions, contemplations about life, family, love, and their quest for scientific knowledge of the six fictitious crew members, two Russian cosmonauts, one American, one Japanese, one British and one Italian astronaut, as they fly 16 ‘ascending’ and ‘descending’ passes over the Earth in a 90 min rhythm while the mother Earth turns below showing her unique colorful arrangement of rivers, mountains, plains and seas under varying illumination from dusk to dawn during an October day, and no borders, no dictators, no –isms, no wars, only pure nature.

In what Samantha Harvey calls “space realism” she describes in her unprecedented prose the crew savoring watching the Earth as often as they can, experiencing a multitude mind expanding, sometimes metaphysical notions only possible from the distance of the ISS orbit.

The confined situation onboard, the closeness, the sounds, the smells and the psychological atmosphere is very realistic as well as the feelings of the crew during their mission as confirmed by many “real” astronauts and cosmonauts flown on the ISS so far. As published many times before, almost all astronauts/cosmonauts changed their view on Earth as demonstrated by Alan Bean’s (Apollo 12 moonwalker) “Love letter to Earth” published after his Apollo mission to the Moon.

Love Letter to Earth

Since that time I have not complained about the weather one single time.

I’m glad there is weather.

I’ve not complained about traffic.

I’m glad there are people around.

One of the things that I did when I got home:

I went down to shopping centers, get an ice cream cone or something,

And just watch the people go by and think:

Boy, we’re lucky to be here!

Why do people complain about the Earth?

We are living in the Garden of Eden.

- Alan Bean

This is all the more surprising because it seems that Samantha Harvey has not spoken to astronauts directly about their experiences. In an interview, she said she had only watched hours and hours of footage from the ISS, however, the book quotes also acknowledgements expressing gratitude to NASA and the European Space Agency (ESA) for their support and detailed information, which significantly contributed to the book's authenticity.

The small novel is a brilliant masterpiece of poetic “space realism” which adds a new facet to human spaceflight and a tremendous concern for the well-being of the, oh so vulnerable Earth.

One sentence of the book lingers in my mind:

*"Wherever mankind goes it leaves some kind of destruction behind it."*

Everybody should think about that....