



From Judging Room to Living Room

A Discussion Guide for Readers



The Employees

Olga Ravn

Translated from Danish by Martin Aitken

Lolli Editions

thebookerprizes.com

What the judges decided

'This beautiful and moving novel, set in a workplace — a spaceship some time in the future — is by turns loving and cold, funny and deliberately prosaic; capable of building a sense of existential horror one minute then quotidian comfort and private grief the next. In deceptively simple prose, threaded on a fully achieved and ambitiously experimental structure, it asks big questions about sentience and the nature of humanity. And about what happiness might be.'

What the judges discussed: ideas to explore

- The author has said that she wanted the novel to be set in a space that was completely cut off from Earth, completely confined, with no exits. In writing about humans who are removed from their world, how well does she succeed in making you think about what our relationship is with the Earth, with soil, weather, atmosphere -- and what it means to lose that relationship?
- One judge described *The Employees* as a novel about love. Would you agree?
- In what sense is this book about what it means to be human?
- *The Employees* is set far in the future and is, on the surface, at least, about the world of work. What does it tell us about our obsession with work today?
- *The Employees* is written in the form of statements taken down by a committee. In what ways did you find these statements effective in driving the story?
- A word that came up in the course of discussion was 'polyphonic'. How do you think Ravn's use of multiple voices helps her tell her story?

About the book

Structured as a series of witness statements compiled by a workplace commission, *The Employees* follows the crew of the Six-Thousand Ship which consists of those who were born, and those who were made, those who will die, and those who will not. When the ship takes on a number of strange objects from the planet New Discovery, the crew is perplexed to find itself becoming deeply attached to them, and human and humanoid employees alike start aching for the same things: warmth and intimacy, loved ones who have passed away, shopping, child-rearing and our shared, far-away Earth, which now only persists in memory.

Gradually, the crew members come to see their work in a new light, and each employee is compelled to ask themselves whether they can carry on as before – and what it means to be truly living. Wracked by all kinds of longing, *The Employees* probes what it means to be human, emotionally and ontologically, while simultaneously delivering an overdue critique of a life governed by work and the logic of productivity.

About the author and translator

Olga Ravn was born in September 1986 in Copenhagen, Denmark. One of Denmark's most celebrated contemporary authors, she is also a literary critic and has written for *Politiken* and several other Danish publications. Alongside Johanne Lykke Holm, she runs the feminist performance group and writing school Hekseskolen. She lives in Copenhagen. Her novels in Danish include *Jeg æder mig selv som lyng* and *Celestine*.

Martin Aitken was born in August 1961 in Carlisle, UK. He has translated numerous novels from Danish and Norwegian, including works by Karl Ove Knausgaard, Peter Høeg, Ida Jessen, and Kim Leine. He was a finalist at the U.S. National Book Awards 2018 and received the PEN America Translation Prize 2019 for his translation of Hanne Ørstavik's *Love*. He lives in Sorø, Denmark.

@TheBookerPrizes

#FinestFiction
#2021InternationalBooker





The author says...

'I wanted a space that was completely confined, with no exit, and I also wanted to see what would happen if human beings were taken out of their ecology, away from Earth. By making Earth distant I could examine man's relationship to it in a new way. I wanted to examine how we relate to the soil, the weather, the atmosphere, and I wanted to write about this obsession with resources. And when I say resources, I mean both land and bodies.'



The translator says...

'I love the strange, disquieting poetry of the piece, and the restrained nature of each of the statements, which in some cases are almost like small, beguiling objects you can pick up and examine, perhaps even press to your cheek. Like the objects carried by the ship.'

@TheBookerPrizes

#FinestFiction
#2021InternationalBooker

