

BOOK REVIEW: 'Orbital', Samantha Harvey (Vintage: London, 2024)



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It is said our attention span is shrinking. Twenty years ago, it measured two-and-a-half minutes, but in 2024 psychologist Dr Gloria Mark's research reduced this to forty-seven seconds.^[1] Professor Marion Thain asks whether we are now prioritising different skills (speedy information-processing) rather than 'development of human empathy, or understanding of identities different to our own, through engagement with imaginative fictional worlds.'^[2]

If you believe short novels to be a cure, note there are short novels and there are expansive novels tucked between fewer pages. 'Orbital' is the latter, a Mary Poppins carpet-bag of a book. Ostensibly it describes a day in the life of six astronauts orbiting Earth. But this is not a book to be hurried; Harvey's carefully crafted thoughts pack deep-time into sentences.

'There are times when the rapidity of this passage across the earth is enough to exhaust and bewilder,' (p. 125) writes Harvey of the orbiting spacecraft, also neatly describing the reader's experience. The slight and the immeasurable stand shoulder to shoulder. In *orbit 13* (p. 111) we pass through fourteen billion years in a single paragraph; in *orbit 5 ascending* (p.45-49) four pages cover lunchtime. Astronauts are taught to check their watches frequently, as 'space shreds time to pieces.' (p.5)

For both astronauts and aliens in space, 'earth is the answer to every question.' (p.2). Harvey's 'Orbital' reminds us of our responsibility to ask the right questions.

Oh, and keep an eye on the time.

[1] <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/science-attention-span>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/26/young-people-attention-spans-online-world>