

MY WORK

PRAISE FOR *MY WORK*

‘This novel from Olga Ravn, this new golden notebook, needs to be read by absolutely anyone who has known the quiet madness and claustrophobic happiness of the interior, especially mothers who also long for a life of literature. But this novel absolutely needs to be read by everyone else as well. Oh Olga Ravn, always inventing new forms, you are a genius, how do you do it?’

– Kate Zambreno

‘Olga Ravn has not only added a highly personal and literary page-turner to her body of work: she has made a brave and important contribution to literary history and social debate, which since the 1970s has been in dire need of writing that incorporates lived experience.’

– *Børsen*

‘Olga Ravn writes dazzlingly about the task of motherhood and the task of writing. Her poems feel as though they were written in the maternity ward. Reading Ravn’s book, you run through the whole gamut of human emotion, as though you too were a new mother: tears, laughter, anger, fear, pain, frustration. This is powerful writing that’s hard to put down... perhaps “this text is meant to keep me alive”.’

– *Politiken*

‘Ravn traces the threads of motherhood back into a more-than-human past... Luminous.’

– *Jyllands Posten*

PRAISE FOR *THE EMPLOYEES*

‘Everything I’m looking for in a novel. I was obsessed from the first page to the last. A strange, beautiful, deeply intelligent and provocative investigation into humanity. *The Employees* is an alarmingly brilliant work of art.’

– Max Porter

‘*The Employees* considers the work that underlies others’ ability to dream, and the ways in which working with numinous objects may inspire a vision of a self-ownership and self-value in that labour, and beyond it... A reminder of the all-too-often inorganic imaginaries of space fiction.’

– So Mayer

‘A pocket-sized space odyssey of uncanny proportion. Ravn creates language as poetic data, seducing us with her soft-natured riot upon our sense of sentience... A sort of delicate *Westworld* – compact, crystalline, unnerving.’

– Yelena Moskvich

‘Few stories today are as sublimely strange and their own thing as Olga Ravn’s *The Employees*. This disorienting, mind-bending expanse recalls as much the poetry of Aase Berg as the workplace fiction of Thomas Ligotti. Something marvelously sui generis for the jaded.’

– Jeff Vandermeer

‘Beautiful, sinister, gripping. A tantalising puzzle you can never quite solve. All the reviews say that the novel is, ultimately, about what it means to be human. What makes it exceptional, however, is the way it explores the richness and strangeness of being non-human.’

– Mark Haddon

'*The Employees* is a clever exploration of what it means to be a person – and an excellent satire of corporate lingo.'

– Mahita Gajanan, *Time* 100 must-read books of 2022

'What *The Employees* captures best is humanity's ambivalence about life itself, its sticky messes and unappealing functions, the goo that connects us to everything that crawls and mindlessly self-propagates, not to mention that obliterating payoff at the end of it all.'

– Laura Miller, *New York Review of Books*

'Ravn asks us to envision a future in which the machines, rather than the humans that create and maintain them, lead the workers' revolution.'

– Lauren Nelson, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

'One humanoid co-worker refers to the parts of the Six-Thousand Ship where the humans are quartered as "*a museum, a prison, a brothel ... a nursery*". There may still be division in Ravn's twenty-second century, but humans and humanoids alike answer to a distant, faceless corporation. If that's a fate worth avoiding, there is still plenty of work for us all to do.'

– Richard Lea, *TLS*

'*The Employees* is not only a disconcertingly quotidian space opera; it's also an audacious satire of corporate language and the late-capitalist workplace, and a winningly abstracted investigation into what it means to be human.'

– Justine Jordan, *The Guardian*

'*The Employees* is a strangely affecting work of speculative fiction which brings Vuillard's war of the poor to the heavens. Irrespective of who wins the International Booker Prize, they can be glad of the company they have kept on this

ambitious and innovative shortlist.’

– Michael Cronin, *The Irish Times*

‘Stunning and poetic... All I want to do is quote the many highlighted bits that I keep returning to on a regular basis, lines of poetry that I keep repeating to myself.’

– Barbara Halla, *Asymptote*

‘Olga Ravn’s critique of life governed by work and the logic of productivity is long overdue. Through poetic insight and emotional eloquence, brilliantly delivered in Martin Aitken’s translation from Danish, she has created a frightening, astonishing literary experience.’

– Steph Glover, *It’s Freezing in LA!*

‘Revealing its secrets through brief, poetic reports made by the employees to unknown assessors, Olga Ravn’s elliptical and evocative novel builds deep effects – threat, desire, grief – from restrained means. It gets under your skin.’

– Burley Fisher Staff Pick

‘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.’

– 2021 International Booker Prize judges



MY WORK

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Olga
Ravn

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FIRST BEGINNING

Who wrote this book?

I did, of course.

Although I'd like to convince you otherwise.

Let's agree right now that someone else has written it. Another woman, entirely unlike me. Let's call her Anna. Let's say Anna has given me all the pages that follow this preface. And let's say that with these pages, Anna has given me the task of arranging them. Let's say that some nights, after reading these many, many pages Anna has left me, I'm gripped by greed and hysteria. I don't want anyone but me to read Anna's texts. I don't want anyone but me to know her.

For many months I tried to come to grips with Anna's papers, and during this work I was again and again overcome by something I cannot describe as anything but an animal impulse, a deep instinct that made me jump up from my desk, propelled by a single thought: Anna's papers should be read only by pregnant people and parents with small children.

And each time, I had to sit back down at the desk, breathless and baffled by my own foolishness. But I admit I was seized by this microscopic rapture often.

Perhaps I thought that such a select readership would protect Anna by keeping her experience a secret. These pages she left in my custody – reading them has felt like carrying confidential information.

My biggest challenge has been to understand Anna's relationship with time. She doesn't seem to adhere to any chronology,

and I cannot pretend to grasp the timelines of her writing. The pages were piled haphazardly when she gave them to me. In the notebooks, one event might follow another which took place years before, as if she suddenly gained access to a different layer of time in the text and carved out space for it.

Meanwhile, like all new mothers, she seems obsessed with the passage of time relative to the child's development. She often notes the age of the child, sometimes down to the number of days, at the top of a text, even if what follows is not about the child.

Her seemingly inscrutable approach to time was recently underlined by a strange coincidence.

I found a journal from Anna's pregnancy. I can't quite explain why, but some vague impulse prompted me to insert the notebook later on in the sequence rather than placing it as the opening act, which would have been logical.

Perhaps it was a way of mimicking my own experience. This notebook was the last part I found when, preparing for the eldest child's fourth birthday, we moved the black dresser away from the wall and a blue notebook fell down. It had been pinched between the wall and the dresser on top of which Anna's papers lay piled before and while I read them. (Later, I sealed up the papers in three boxes and stored them at the office. Only when the last notebook turned up did I, in a sudden fit of common sense, find the strength to begin organising the pages with the hope that others might read them.)

The pregnancy journal must have fallen behind the dresser one of the times I retrieved pages from the stack, and I therefore cannot say whether Anna left this notebook on top or, as I suspect, in the middle of all these points in time.

Placing the pregnancy at the midpoint of the composition was my own first breach of chronology, and the rest followed easily. Or more easily, at any rate.

SECOND BEGINNING

This book began when the child was six days old and I found myself in a darkness.

I have tried to arrange the various parts based on what I surmise to be the order in which I wrote them.

I have no recollection of having written any of it.

Over the past few years, I have found more and more pages of writing.

If it weren't for my handwriting, I might have assumed it was all written by a stranger.

These handwritten pages, as well as a large number of documents on my computer, emails sent to me from my own email address, and notes on my phone, together constitute such a vast amount of material (which, again, I have no recollection of writing) that I, after typing it all up and seeing the staggering total number of pages, was filled with a feeling I can only call horror.

The section titled 'The Pregnancy Journal', a blue notebook with tattered corners, was the last to appear – two weeks ago when Aksel and I moved a chest of drawers to make room for a game of pass the parcel at the child's birthday party.

Collecting and arranging these papers and documents has ultimately been an attempt to recreate the three years of my life that have disappeared from my memory, and which, just as the reader, I can only access here.

Something tells me that the reason I have now finally been able to complete my work with these pages is that I am pregnant again.

I feel I have returned, like a time traveller, to the state of pregnancy; as though I could travel up and down through the layers of time.

In one week, I will reach the last day of the first trimester.

I fear it's merely an illusion, but it appears to me that the impending birth of my second child has given me the strength to both step away from and step into the psychological crisis that accompanied the arrival of the first.

Of all the parts in this book, however, it is those in which someone (myself?) writes about a woman with my own name that disturb me the most. As though there were in those years another power at work, mercilessly scrutinising me and keeping record of my every move. Someone who considered me a she, hysterical. And when I read it, I sometimes get the feeling that a hand is gripping my neck and forcing my head down. That someone else stepped out of my closet at night to write these texts.