

THE EMPLOYEES

SHORTLISTED FOR THE
INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE

TRANSLATED BY
MARTIN AITKEN



OLGA RAVN



'An alarmingly brilliant
work of art' MAX PORTER

PENGUIN BOOKS

The Employees

‘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

‘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

‘Few stories today are as sublimely strange and their own thing as Olga Ravn’s *The Employees*. Something marvelously sui generis for the jaded’

Jeff Vandermeer

‘It starts out reading like Philip K. Dick retooled by a McKinsey’s team using a malfunctioning Samuel Beckett app. But as the pages quickly turn it soon reads only like itself, something, well, Ravnescue – comically dark, original and poetic’

Richard Flanagan, *The Times Literary Supplement*

‘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

‘It is astonishing how much Ravn achieves in her small canvas of 130-odd pages. This clever, endlessly thought-provoking novel catches something of our recursive search for the nature of consciousness; a question that answers itself, a voice in the darkness, an object moving through space’

Justine Jordan, *Guardian*

‘An unforgettable novel about the psychic costs of labour under capitalism . . . Dreamlike and sensual, *The Employees* shouldn’t be missed’

Esquire

‘What might result if Ursula K. Le Guin and Nell Zink had a baby’

Tank

‘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*

‘*The Employees* is a strangely affecting work of speculative fiction which brings Villard’s war of the poor to

the heavens. Irrespective of who wins the Booker International prize, they can be glad of the company they have kept on this ambitious and innovative shortlist'

Michael Cronin, *Irish Times*

'This is more than a clever reframing of sci-fi tropes, although it's that, too; the employees' voices themselves, some of them desperate, some of them meditative, form a touching, alienated chorus, narrating a tragedy that for many will ring eerily true'

Vulture

'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

'Charged with a melancholy lyricism that gives this series of cosmic memos the feel and radiance of prose poetry'

Lit Hub

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olga Ravn is one of Denmark's most celebrated contemporary authors. She is the author of four novels, including *The Employees*, which was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize and the Ursula K. Le Guin Prize, and longlisted for the National Book Award and the Dublin Literary Award, and *My Work*, which won the Politiken Literature Prize and led directly to changes in Denmark's maternity rights. Her debut novel, *Celestine*, appeared to critical acclaim in 2015. She has also written two celebrated poetry collections. *The Wax Child* is her most recent novel translated into English.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Martin Aitken is the acclaimed translator of numerous novels from Danish and Norwegian, including works by Karl Ove Knausgaard, Peter Høeg, Jussi Adler-Olsen and Pia Juul, and his translations of short stories and poetry have appeared in many literary journals and magazines. In 2012, he was awarded the American-Scandinavian Foundation's Nadia Christensen Translation Prize. In 2019, he was awarded the PEN Translation Prize for his translation of *Love* by Hanne Ørstavik.

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THE EMPLOYEES
A Workplace Novel of the
Twenty-Second Century

OLGA RAVN

Translated from Danish
by Martin Aitken



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Page 1: the phrase 'You'd probably say it was a small world, but not if you have to clean it'
is a slight rewording of Barbara Kruger's artwork *Untitled (It's a small world,
but not if you have to clean it)*, 1990. We thank Sprüth Magers and the
artist for their permission to paraphrase it here

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and sculptures, without which this book would not exist.*

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The following statements were collected over a period of 18 months, during which time the committee interviewed the employees with a view to gaining insight into how they related to the objects and the rooms in which they were placed. It was our wish by means of these unprejudiced recordings to gain knowledge of local workflows and to investigate possible impacts of the objects, as well as the ways those impacts, or perhaps relationships, might give rise to permanent deviations in the individual employee, and moreover to assess to what degree they might be said to precipitate reduction or enhancement of performance, task-related understanding and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, thereby illuminating their specific consequences for production.

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STATEMENT 004

It's not hard to clean them. The big one, I think, sends out a kind of a hum, or is it just something I imagine? Maybe that's not what you mean? I'm not sure, but isn't it female? The cords are long, spun from blue and silver fibres. They keep her up with a strap made out of calf-coloured leather with prominent white stitching. What colour is a calf, actually? I've never seen one. From her abdomen runs this long, pink, cord-like thing. What do you call it? Like the fibrous shoot of a plant. It takes longer to clean than the others. I normally use a little brush. One day she'd laid an egg. If I'm allowed to say something here, I don't think you should have her hung up all the time. The egg had cracked when it dropped. The egg mass was on the floor underneath her and the thready end of the shoot was stuck in the egg mass. I ended up removing it. I've not told anyone before now. Maybe that was a mistake. The next day there was a hum. Louder than that, like an electric rumble. And the day after that she was quiet. She hasn't made a sound since then. Is there some kind of sadness there? I always use both hands. I couldn't say if the others have heard anything or not. Mostly I go there when everyone's asleep. It's no problem keeping the place clean. I've made it into my own little world. I talk to her while she rests. It might not look like much. There's only two rooms. You'd probably say it was a small world, but not if you have to clean it.

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