

Discussion Questions

The Employees by Olga Ravn

1. Instead of traditional chapters or a linear plot, *The Employees* is structured as a series of anonymous, non-chronological personal statements from the ship's crew, which have been compiled by a committee investigating the effects of the mysterious objects on board. Did you find the structure of the novel easy to follow, challenging or confusing? How did the book's unusual format affect your overall reading experience? Have you read other books with a similarly unusual structure?
2. *The Employees* blends elements of speculative fiction, science fiction, and existential literature. In what ways do you think the novel challenges traditional expectations of sci-fi or speculative fiction?
3. The narrative is deliberately ambiguous and provides limited information about the Six-Thousand Ship and its crew, including the objects they have discovered. Much of the novel requires readers to come up with their own meanings and interpretations. Do you feel that Ravn has provided enough information for you to be able to draw firm conclusions?
4. The crew members – both human and humanoid – become deeply attached to the objects they have discovered, describing a sense of euphoria when interacting with them. Why do you think this is, and what specifically might the objects represent for the humans and humanoids?
5. The human crew members begin to yearn for simple earthly pleasures, such as love, shopping, road trips and cookies, which Ravn describes as 'nostalgia attacks'. Interestingly, the humanoid crew members begin to want similar things, despite never having experienced them. Why do you think Ravn gives the humanoid crew members many of the same desires as the humans?
6. Throughout the book, Ravn uses visceral and sensual descriptions, such as pulsing lips, in response to an object described as an egg, or a crew member dreaming of pores growing larger, with seeds inside. What do you think is the purpose behind these vivid, unsettling images, especially when set against the cold, sterile backdrop of the ship itself? Why might Ravn have chosen to include such powerful sensory details?

7. *The Employees* was written after Ravn was approached by artist Lea Guldditte Hestelund in 2018 to write notes for her art exhibition's programme. The objects in the book are inspired by Hestelund's organic, abstract sculptures. Considering the way the objects inspire a powerful emotional response among the crew members, to what extent is this a book about the power of art or beauty to change the way we experience the world?
8. Science fiction is full of descriptions of the conflicts and challenges that arise when humans and sentient humanoids are forced to interact. More often than not, artificial intelligence is presented as something dangerous for humanity. Would you say that is the case in *The Employees*?
9. Writing in the *LA Review of Books*, Lauren Nelson said of *The Employees*: 'By taking a closer look at the fundamental relationship between artificial intelligence and the corporatization of our world, we might understand that the true threat comes in the form of CEOs and boards of directors, rather than technologically advanced machinery.' To what extent would you agree that this is one of the book's core messages?
10. The book's subtitle makes it clear that this is a 'workplace novel'. At one point in the novel the humanoid crew members rise up in a mutiny of sorts, in protest against the idea that they were created solely for work. At the same time, the human workers seem more passive and naive about their status as workers and the expectations placed upon them. If we are to understand that the book is telling us that there's more to life than work, why do you think Ravn left it up to the humanoid crew to reach this conclusion, rather than the humans?

Source: *The Booker Prizes Reading Guide*