

Then We Came to the End

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by

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There are a few classic novels set in the world of business, among them W.D. Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *The Financier* (1912) and other business novels by Theodore Dreiser, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) by Sloan Wilson, and *J R* (1975) by William Gaddis. Lesser known, filled with pie charts and graphs but weakened by an uninspired ending, is Stanley Bing's *Lloyd: What Happened* (1998). Joshua Ferris has provided an update on this mini-genre that captures the mores of those who would prefer to be slackers, and who regret having to work to maintain their lifestyle. There's little examination of whether that lifestyle is worth maintaining, which is part of the abundant humour.

The setting is a Chicago marketing firm suffering repercussions from the dotcom slump. The time span—jumbled as the narrative moves forward and back—covers several months in early 20001, apart from the ending that brings the work nearly into the present. The novel's narrative voice and mood are established in the first lines:

We were fractious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise. At least those of us who smoked had something to look forward to at ten-fifteen. Most of us liked most everyone, a few of us hated specific individuals, one or two people loved everyone and everything. Those who loved everyone were unanimously reviled. We loved free bagels in the morning. They happened all too infrequently. Our benefits were astonishing in comprehensiveness and quality of care. Sometimes we questioned whether they were worth it. We thought moving to India might be better, or going back to nursing school. Doing something with the handicapped or working with our hands. No one ever acted on these impulses, despite their daily, sometimes hourly contractions.

Compare that to these opening paragraphs from another business novel published a little over three decades ago:

I get the willies when I see closed doors. Even at work, where I am doing so well now, the sight of a closed door is sometimes enough to make me dread that something horrible is happening behind it, something that is going to affect me adversely; if I am tired and dejected from a night of lies or booze or sex or just plain nerves and insomnia, I can almost smell the disaster mounting invisibly and flooding out toward me through the frosted glass panes. My hands may perspire, and my voice may come out strange. I wonder why.

Something must have happened to me sometime.

Apart from the different uses of the first person, both passages speak of anxiety and dissatisfaction, the unease and the sense of another life that is either to be lived, or has occurred without the narrator able to grasp it. Bagels bring momentary relief; shut doors cause a low-grade panic.

The second quotation is from Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), whose narrator, Bob Slocum, keeps looking behind him even as his life proceeds toward a startling domestic incident. Ferris's narrator, in contrast, foreshadows from fairly early on that the events of September 2001 will make what is related seem harmless, summed up in the line, "We expected so little from security in those days." Those who chat in offices, meet in lunchrooms and out of the way nooks, are consumed with talk about layoffs, deaths, failing marriages, unwanted pregnancies, and the motivation for owning a totem pole. The downturn in the fortunes of the company means that characters are laid off in the first few chapters, but the nested Russian doll structure of the book ensures that they reappear in recapitulations of earlier events.

There are two main engines that push the plot forward: rumours about the health of someone in management, and the actions of Tom Mota, freshly fired, and almost as freshly abandoned by his wife. Reading Emerson doesn't help him keep his life together. Mota sends out aggressive e-mails, insults his co-workers, and on his last day cuts up his clothes, grabs a mug, and begs for money outside the building's elevators. He's the kind of worker some characters believe would return with a gun.

These two motors operate smoothly, and for the most part plausibly. Ferris never lets out more than is necessary, and since his narrator is ambivalent and shifty, we can't rely on him to prognosticate what will happen. We get spin, not facts. Does the senior company manager have an illness or not? As for Mota, being thrown out after years of service to the company, and being discarded by his wife, could conceivably cause him to go on a killing rampage.

Then We Came to the End features many men and women who only occasionally do or say something that shows they're not heartless. When a colleague's daughter disappears, their initial impulse to come up with posters deteriorates into an unseemly campaign.

We made layouts in QuarkXPress; all our image manipulation we did in Photoshop. Genevieve dropped the image of the girl into Photoshop and started playing up the girl's hair and freckles. We took a look and everyone agreed she was still getting washed out...

We all wanted to help. Genevieve worked on it another hour, tweaking this and that, until someone recommended that she fix the little girl's smile to be less crooked. Jessica would look prettier that way.

"All right," she concluded, "we're officially through here."

The girl on the poster is not a true likeness of Jessica. It won't help in the search for her, but that matters little next to the goal of turning out a handsome product:

Our desks were waiting, we had work to do. And work was everything. We liked to think it was family, it was God, it was following football on Sundays, it was shopping with the girls or a strong drink on Saturday night, that it was love, that it was sex, that it was keeping our eye on retirement. But at two in the afternoon with bills to pay and layoffs hovering over us, it was all about the work.

For the narrator—that “we” is more the collective voice of the corporation than we may realize at first—the bang comes from creating Cold Sore Guy or a particular image that becomes consequential in the consumer world. An ad takes precedence over real life. The novel is filled with assertions (we won’t make jokes), followed by corrections (though some of us did), followed by actions that are more unpalatable or by half-hearted contrition. Emotions, when experienced, are quickly suppressed.

What isn’t ignored is personal or professional failure. If ideas don’t materialize, or aren’t accepted, insecurity sets in immediately and devastatingly. “One unfinished ad could throw us into these paroxysms of self-doubt and intimations of averageness...” There’s an obvious echo of Wordsworth’s “mortality”; successful ad campaigns raise the status of those involved above that of their coworkers, and make life worthwhile. Looking out the office windows, the staff is “buoyed” by the sight of clouds and other buildings. “It made us ‘happy.’” Those ironic quotes indicate that company employees aren’t certain they know what happiness is. They are merely assuming that this is what they’re feeling.

Then We Came to the End conveys uneasiness and life’s fragility throughout, and balances humour and domestic misery nicely. Ferris explores the once-powerful USA Inc. by revisiting the corporate office situation in a period of economic downturn, which is followed by the more sweeping consequences of 9/11 and the hugely draining war on terrorism. “We had the great good fortune and shortcomings of character that marked every generation that had never seen war,” the narrator tells us, which is quite different from the desperation felt by Heller’s post-Vietnam Bob Slocum, a desperation that stems from what he remembers, or suspects, about his past. Slocum could be the father of most of the people Ferris has created, and he has passed on many of his traits, which tells us something about how the business environment, and the US, have fared over a generation.

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