

# What's Eating Dilbert?

*The peculiar intimacies of the cubicle*

**Bruce Tulgan**

*Then We Came to the End*

By Joshua Ferris

Little, Brown, 2007

*Then We Came to the End* opens with a brief prelude in late 2000, just when “[w]e believed that downturns had been rendered obsolete by the ingenious technology of the new economy.” And so we are back in those final days of peace, prosperity, and magical business models, when Generation Xers were still racing office chairs down the halls. The first sentence of the book reads, “We were fractious and overpaid.” The last sentence of this prelude reads, “We, too, thought it would never end.” In between, it’s all very painful, and somewhat funny, to see.

Joshua Ferris’s book begins in earnest as the boom fizzles. We watch the employees experience the swift unraveling of corporate good times. Ferris writes, “The austerity measures began in the lobby with the flowers and the bowls of candy.... Next thing we knew, no one was receiving a bonus.... Finally layoffs began.” And then it’s one layoff after another, punctuating the story throughout over nearly 400 pages. Anyone who had (or lost) a corporate job in early 2001 can relate. Most of the book plays out in and around the sinking ship, amidst the steadily diminishing group of people who remain in an increasingly empty and surreal workplace.

Much as this is a workplace tale, work itself appears only in the form of a bizarre assignment. As the “real work” disappears, nearly all the remaining characters (including one former employee who shows up anyway, *Office Space*-style) are kept busy with a pro bono campaign for an unknown client. The assignment—to develop a message about breast cancer that will make breast-cancer sufferers laugh—seems to be the author’s metaphor for meaningless work. The daunting task haunts and mocks the remaining employees (plus one), even as it gives them purpose (barely) and the slight hope of clinging to their jobs a little while longer.

A lot of quirky personal behavior is on display, as well as pranks, tempers, romance, pilfering, office politics, friendship,

slights, insults, gossip and rumor-mongering. As workplace comedy, the book succeeds, mildly. The humor often borders on immature. The characters are caricatures, mostly unlikable.

That's why I struggled to figure out what makes *Then We Came to the End* so compelling.

No matter how private (or not) a coworker may be, if you work with a person long enough, you end up sharing—however obliquely—some of the most profound and intimate events of his life. Even if he doesn't say a word, you know somehow. There is a birth in the family, or an illness, death, marriage, divorce, incredible joy, crisis, or tragedy. Somehow everybody knows.

This is the deep truth Ferris captures, in an uncanny way. At its very best, this is a book about the blurry window we have into our coworkers' "real" lives. We see Janine cope with the loss of her daughter. We watch Lynn, the intimidating boss, struggle with breast cancer (we think) and the requisite surgery. We see a laid-off employee—a "martini addict, gonzo emailer, sometimes wielder of an aluminum bat, great garden enthusiast, paintball terrorist, and our own in house Emerson scholar"—go berserk in a fit of workplace violence.

The workplace makes such an interesting setting for a story precisely because it is a quasi-public space in which we spend so much time with other humans. Our coworkers: perfect strangers and intimates at the same time.

**But this is not just a story set in a workplace; it is a workplace story.** And one thing that bothers me about the novel is something that bothers me about most books in this genre. If you were a reader who had never had a job, you'd be left with impression that all corporate labor is alienated. You could conclude that most employees have utter disdain for the company they work for, their boss, their work, and most of their coworkers. And that most employees don't learn very much of any value, don't build worthwhile relationships, don't do meaningful work, and have absolutely no negotiating power

in relation to their employer. Ferris signals his point of view in an epigram taken from Emerson: "Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit; —not to be reckoned one character; —not to yield that peculiar fruit that each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong."

I'm not one to lightly question Emerson, whose words have given me such pleasure and inspiration throughout my life. But these words, used in this context, just don't ring true.

Since 1993, I've spent thousands of hours behind the scenes in hundreds of different companies, including several advertising firms and plenty of other professional services firms. I've learned that many, many good, interesting, genuine, unique characters find a great deal of purpose and meaning in contributing to the mission of a corporate entity. They cherish their roles and their work. They learn and grow, build wonderful relationships with other good people, and tackle one creative challenge after another. In doing so, they earn what they need to take care of themselves and their families. There are frustrations, of course. But being part of something larger seems to strengthen their souls, rather than eviscerating them. Are they really as self-deceived as Ferris seems to think? Am I?