

Book Review by Drew Cherner

Title: "We Came to the End

Author: Joshua Ferris

Publisher: Little, Brown & Company

Length: 385 pages

Price: \$23.99

Reading time: 6 hours

Reading rating: 7 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Earlier this year, 70,000 employees were laid off from some of America's most well respected companies over the course of a single week. Each one of those people left fellow employees sad, stunned, and breathing a sigh of relief, while wondering if and when it could happen to them.

Joshua Ferris' very funny and bittersweet novel, "Then We Came to the End," is the story millions of us who have spent as much time with our office colleagues as with our own families wish we had written. It could be the print version of the hit television show, *The Office*, with an added sobering "pack up your stuff and turn out the lights" final episode.

As anyone who has been part of an organization for a long time knows, a company's foundation is its people. Each person has his or her own unique personality, idiosyncrasies, problems, and fears. People who have worked together over several years bond and bicker. Some rise to power, some don't. Some leave for better jobs. Some are terminated. Over the course of years, they share problems, gossip, love affairs, and hopes and dreams. Some become parents, make personal changes, grow in different ways, or get crushed by the day to day.

Mr. Ferris' novel is written in the first person plural, "we," a style perfect to advance the story of people working together with their common fears, demons and desperation. "We were fractious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise."

In the novel, the reader meets the agency's cast of characters, which those of us who have spent much of our professional life in an office, easily recognize. There is Lynn, the agency president, desperately trying to boost staff morale as clients are walking out the door. Joe, Lynn's first lieutenant, hired to enforce office policy is resented by all. Karen is the office gossip and source of all corporate leaks. Chris, a desperate, middle-aged copywriter, sneaks into the office to work even after he's been fired. There is a doomed office romance between the single, pregnant and devoutly Catholic art director in love with a married colleague who's hoping she'll have an abortion and just go away. Tom, an account executive,

wears three company polo shirts, one on top of the other, each day, in a display of company loyalty.

While clients continue to leave, a succession of staff are laid off, or as one of the office's chief cynics says, "walk Spanish down the hall." Their surviving colleagues watch and wait while plotting to abscond with a better bookcase or desk chair once assigned to the dear departed.

As the situation grows worse, the agency takes on a mysterious pro bono assignment from an unnamed client, in order to give the remaining people a "project" to work on as attempts are made to right the ship.

The novel is often told through water cooler chatter, groupthink, or behind closed door gatherings of agency employees who are overly paranoid, overly panicked, overly depressed, and overly medicated.

"Then We Came to the End" is a loving witness to all the individuals slugging it out in the cubicles and conference rooms of America's white collar office culture. I highly recommend the novel to any and all corporate soldiers regardless of tenure or rank. You'll see yourself and your colleagues with all the strengths, flaws and vulnerabilities that make each of us so very human.

Drew Cherner is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at www.wcu.edu/cob.