

books

Men at work

Whether it's high-paid chin scratching or low-paid meat packing, our working lives prove fertile ground for two promising debut novelists

WORDS BY HENRY SUITTON
ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM SIMPSON

No1
Ad on
Joshua Ferris studies the art of work avoidance

➔ **WITH HIS MUCH-HYPED FIRST NOVEL, *Then We Came to the End*, Joshua Ferris has created a**

worthwhile literary addition to the now well-trodden subject of office culture. The 30-something writer has used his experiences as a copywriter for a Chicago advertising agency to stuff his book with gloriously funny observations about people working and being laid off from (guess what) a Chicago advertising agency.

The quirk of Ferris's book is his choice of style. By sticking to the first-person plural, "we," the characters

speak from a collective perspective. It's a highly effective device, not properly seen since Jeffrey Eugenides' sublime debut novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). However, Ferris's attempt is flippant and funny – though perhaps there are too many unconnected characters to create a genuine narrative drive or engender real empathy.

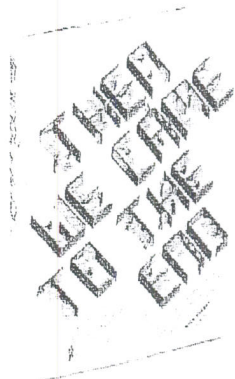
That said, Ferris's account of the corporate world – which explores a stratum of office culture higher than that of Ricky Gervais – is often insightful. He captures post-millennial anxiety, where people no longer feel secure shooting the breeze by the printer, racing chairs along the corridor or sending colleagues obscene emails. As the lights dim over Chicago's Magnificent Mile, the level of paranoia rises and the dreadful prospect of having to do a proper day's work emerges. That, or being sent home early.

For Ferris's characters – prankster Tom Mota, pregnant Amber Ludwig, lithium-dependent Janine Gorjanc, rascaliteur Bonny Shassburger, cancer victim Lynn Mason, chipper Chris Yop, depressed Carl Garberdian, slimy Joe Pope and cracklers Jim Jarkers – anything is better than the reality of home. Work, the office, and their colleagues are everything. If, as the title suggests, the book is also a rumination on mortality and the banality of existence, then it's treated with the lightest of touches. Still, at the very end, no one can quite let go.

Then We Came to the End Joshua Ferris

(Viking)
Out on 26 April

The verdict: Office life has never seemed so dull yet life-affirming in this humorous, and lyrical debut, depicting a group of lazy advertising executives fearing termination.



No2
Pluck off
Mark McNay on the fowl side of employment

Having once worked at an East Anglian chicken factory, Mark McNay, author of *Fresh*, knows more than you'd ever want to know about handling birds. For anyone considering a career switch, he outlines the attractions.



1/ Catch a gastric illness, and end up losing more pounds in a day than most diets can promise in a month.

2/ All workers in the poultry industry are entitled to an influenza jab on the NHS.

3/ The never-ending parade of chicken thighs gives plenty of satisfaction to those who fancy the mature lady.

4/ Rather than waste money on expensive meals, the poultry worker picks from the complimentary box of chicken off-cuts they receive every Friday.

5/ You can murder your offspring with a mutated strain of salmonella scraped from the back end of a turkey, then claim compensation and live a child-free life in Tenerife.
6/ Most poultry workers are female. Just.

Fresh Mark McNay

(Canongate)
Out on 19 April

The verdict: Dead chickens and poultry farms form an engaging tale of brotherhood, love, hate, bad diets, and bird flu.