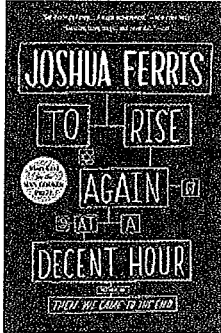


To Rise Again at a Decent Hour (Ferris)

Summary	Author Bio	Book Reviews	Discussion Questions	Full Version	Print
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[ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0316033995&linkCode=as2&tag=litl-20&linkId=UEBBCAGQFLIOC5VO](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0316033995/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0316033995&linkCode=as2&tag=litl-20&linkId=UEBBCAGQFLIOC5VO))

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour

Joshua Ferris, 2014

Little, Brown & Co.

352 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780316033992

Summary

A big, brilliant, profoundly observed novel about the mysteries of modern life by National Book Award Finalist Joshua Ferris, one of the most exciting voices of his generation...

Paul O'Rourke is a man made of contradictions: he loves the world, but doesn't know how to live in it. He's a Luddite addicted to his iPhone, a dentist with a nicotine habit, a rabid Red Sox fan devastated by their victories, and an atheist not quite willing to let go of God.

Then someone begins to impersonate Paul online, and he watches in horror as a website, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account are created in his name. What begins as an outrageous violation of his privacy soon becomes something more soul-frightening: the possibility that the online "Paul" might be a better version of the real thing. As Paul's quest to learn why his identity has been stolen deepens, he is forced to confront his troubled past and his uncertain future in a life disturbingly split between the real and the virtual.

At once laugh-out-loud funny about the absurdities of the modern world, and indelibly profound about the eternal questions of the meaning of life, love and truth, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* is a deeply moving and constantly surprising tour de force. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1974
- Raised—Florida and Illinois, USA
- Education—B.A., University of Iowa; M.F.A., University of California, Irvine
- Awards— PEN/Hemingway Award
- Currently—lives in New York, New York

Joshua Ferris is an American author best known for his debut 2007 novel *Then We Came to the End*. Ferris graduated from the University of Iowa in English and Philosophy in 1996. He then moved to Chicago and worked in advertising for several years before obtaining an MFA in writing from UC Irvine.

His debut novel *Then We Came to the End* is a comedy about the American workplace. It takes place in a fictitious Chicago ad agency experiencing a downturn at the end of the '90s Internet boom. The novel was greeted by positive reviews from the *New York Times Book Review*, *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, and *Slate*. It received the 2007 PEN/Hemingway Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award.

An August, 2008, issue of *The New Yorker* published his short story "The Dinner Party," which earned him a nomination for a Shirley Jackson Award. Other short fiction has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Best New American Voices 2007* and *New Stories from the South 2007*. Ferris's nonfiction has appeared in the anthologies *State by State* and *Heavy Rotation*. *The New Yorker* included him in its 2010 "20 Under 40" list.

His next novel *The Unnamed* was published in 2010. Fiametta Rocco, Editor of Books and Arts at *The Economist*, called it "the best new novel I have read in the past ten years." His third novel, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* came out in 2014.

Joshua Ferris lives in New York (*Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 5/8/2014.*)

Book Reviews

Ferris depicts Paul's difficulties: in the workplace, he struggles to say good morning, has problems with the office manager.... [He's] an appealing—albeit self-involved—everyman, but Ferris's effort to take on big topics...feels more like a set of thought experiments than an organic or character-driven story.

Publishers Weekly

As in his earlier novels, Ferris is both laugh-out-loud funny and even profound, often on the same page. [Paul O'Rourke's] journey to self-awareness is designed to be both amusing and thought provoking, allowing readers to take their own existential ride.

BookPage

(*Starred review.*) Utterly compelling....Ferris brilliantly channels the suburban angst of Yates and Cheever for the new millenium.

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) A bizarre case of identity theft forces a dentist to question his beliefs in this funny, thought-provoking return to form by Ferris.... Smart, sad, hilarious and eloquent, this shows a writer at the top of his game and surpassing the promise of his celebrated debut.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. In the book's opening paragraph, Paul O'Rourke tells us that...

The mouth is a weird place: "not quite inside and not quite outside...but something in between...admitting access to an interior most people would rather not contemplate—where cancer starts, where the heart is broken, where the soul might just fail to turn up.

What kind of thematic concerns does this paragraph hint at for the book as a whole. Consider a later statement Paul makes that he is always "on the outside looking in."

2. How do the conditions of his patients' mouths affect, or perhaps simply correspond to, Paul's general view of humanity?

3. How would you describe Paul, his attitudes toward people and life, his relationship with women—in fact, his overall engagement in life? Betsy Convoy, his dental hygienist, accuses Paul of having a low opinion of humanity. Is that a fair assessment?

4. How has Paul's father's suicide affected his life as an adult?

5. What does baseball represent to Paul? Why is he such an avid Red Sox fan, and at the same time, why does he despair after the Sox finally win the World Series? SPOILER ALERT: Consider, too, the final pages of the book when Paul buys the Chicago Cubs cap...and agrees to play cricket with the Nepali kids in the street.

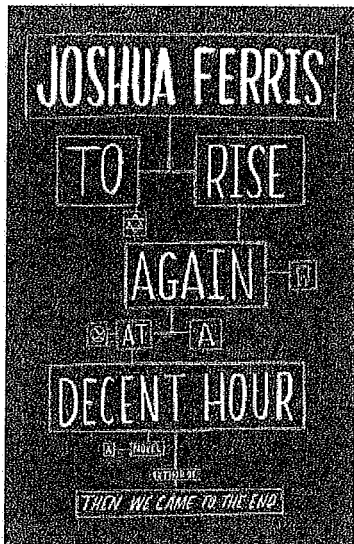
6. How would you describe Paul's relationships with women, primarily Samantha Santacroce and Connie Plotz. What does he want from them and from their families?

7. Paul tells us, "Everything is always something, but something—and here is the rub—could never be everything. What does he mean?

8. Why doesn't Paul believe in God? He tells us that he would have liked to: "Now there was something that could have been everything better than anything else." Why does he doubt?
9. What are the blog posts and Tweets in Paul's name about? How do they affect Paul? At first he is angry but becomes less and less so as the messages progress—why the change? Why do the posts offend Connie's Uncle Stuart? Are they antisemitic?
10. Who are the Ulms...and the Amalekites...and the Edomites? What is their relationship to the Hebrews in the Bible? The Ulms believe God has commanded them to doubt his existence. How is it possible to doubt the existence of God, who has revealed his existence to you?
11. What were Paul's reasons for not wanting to have children with Connie? SPOILER ALERT: He changes his mind toward the end of the book—why? What revelation does the pregnant patient elicit in Paul? Contrast his reaction to the expectant mother with his reaction to the marketing executive who just earlier had delayed treatment of his three cavities.
12. In what way is the billionaire hedge fund manager Pete Mercer a foil for Paul O'Rourke? How are they similar—and how are they different? SPOILER ALERT: Why does Mercer shoot himself after learning about Mirav Mendelsohn and Arthur Grant? How does Paul react to Mirav's story?
13. What is your reaction to the story of Arthur Grant and his desire to convert to Judaism? Consider how Paul O'Rourke's story parallels (to some degree) Grant's. What about Mirav—why after so many years has she returned to the fold?
14. Is this book religious...or anti-religious? Does Paul end up believing in God or not?
15. How has Paul changed by the end of the book? What do you predict for him?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)

top of page (summary)



Popularity: ★★☆☆☆

To rise again at a decent hour (May 2014)

Author: Ferris, Joshua

Adult Fiction

Description:

After noticing that his identity has been stolen and used to create various social media accounts, Paul O'Rourke, a man with a troubled past, begins to wonder if his virtual alter ego is actually a better version of himself.

Book Appeal Terms: Definition of Appeal Terms

Genre: Literary fiction; Psychological fiction; Satirical fiction

Character: Introspective

Tone: Irreverent; Reflective; Thought-provoking

Writing Style: Stylistically complex; Well-crafted dialogue

Persistent link to this record (Permalink):

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=noh&tg=UI&an=1030>

Database:

Novelist

Booklist:

Ferris returns with his third novel, another dark comedy in the vein of his well-received debut, *Then We Came to the End* (2007). Paul O'Rourke is a Manhattan dentist so disillusioned with the world that he doesn't even like it when his favorite baseball team wins the World Series. More than anything else, he dislikes religion, other people, and the modern technology that forces him to interact with other people. He calls cell phones "me-machines" and nicknames one of his patients "Contacts" for texting during a procedure. That's why he and his staff are shocked when a website for their practice suddenly appears online. Soon after, a Facebook page pops up, followed by a Twitter profile, all impersonating Paul. Infuriated, he tracks down his imposter and uncovers a fringe religious sect that worships Amalek, the father of a biblical tribe destroyed by King David in a holy war. As he tries to recover his stolen identity, Paul begins to question who he really is. The protagonist's sharp inner dialogues are laugh-out-loud hilarious, combining Woody Allen's New York nihilism with an Ivy League vocabulary. The narrative occasionally stumbles and spins out in the novel's latter third, but Ferris' unique voice shines. --Morgan, Adam (Reviewed 04-01-2014) (Booklist, vol 110, number 15, p22)

Publishers Weekly:

Paul O'Rourke, the main character of Ferris's (*Then We Came to the End*) new book, is a dentist. And he's a good one, informed and informative—even if the mouths that once seemed so erotic have devolved into caves of bacteria, pain, and lurking death. Ferris depicts Paul's difficulties: in the workplace, he struggles to say good morning, has problems with the office manager (who's also his ex-girlfriend), and likewise has problems with the devout Catholic hygienist, who can't see why he doesn't believe. A constant ruminator and obsessive Red Sox fan, Paul would like to believe and belong, but he can't. And then the Ulms, who claim to be followers of Amalek (a figure from the Old Testament), hijack his Internet presence and claims him as their own. As an angry and incredulous Paul reads "his" tweets, learns about the unlikely history of the Ulms, and tries to figure out what it all means, readers may find themselves questioning whether the drama of the Ulms amounts to much. Paul is an appealing—albeit self-involved—everyman, but Ferris's effort to take on big topics (existential doubt, grief, identity, the Internet, the lure and limits of religion, and the struggle to floss in the face of life's meaninglessness) feels more like a set of thought experiments than an organic or character-driven story. Agent: Julie Barer, Barer Literary. (May) --Staff (Reviewed February 17, 2014) (Publishers Weekly, vol 261, issue 07, p)

Library Journal:

This third novel from National Book Award finalist Ferris features Paul O'Rourke, a bundle of nervous contradictions who's shocked when someone starts impersonating him online. Worse, the online Paul looks to be better than the real thing. -- Barbara Hoffert (Reviewed December 1, 2013) (Library Journal, vol 138, issue 22, p68)

Kirkus:

/ Starred Review */* A bizarre case of identity theft forces a dentist to question his beliefs in this funny, thought-provoking return to form by Ferris (*The Unnamed*, 2010, etc.). In 2011, Paul O'Rourke has a thriving practice on Manhattan's Park Avenue and a throbbing sense that things could be a lot better. His nights are troubled by insomnia and a bed cooled by a recent breakup. His days feature patients who don't floss and three staffers—including his ex—who unsettle him in their own curious ways. As the novel opens, Paul's world quickly goes from bad to weird, and it's clear that Ferris is back in the riff-rich, seriocomic territory of his first novel, *Then We Came to the End* (2007). A confirmed atheist who sustains a ritualistic devotion to the Boston Red Sox, Paul's romances have exposed him to the tempting fervor and trappings of Catholicism and Judaism. Still, he resists fiercely when a website, a Facebook page and blogging comments mysteriously emerge in his name and he discovers that the man behind them fronts a quasi-Jewish sect founded on the value of doubt: "Behold, make thine heart hallowed by doubt; for God, if God, only God may know." With almost Pynchon-esque complexity, Ferris melds conspiracy and questions of faith in an entertaining way, although his irreverence and crudity in places may offend some readers. Full of life's rough edges, the book resists a neat conclusion, favoring instead a simple scene that is comic perfection—an ending far sweeter than the Red Sox had that year. Strangely astray in *The Unnamed*, Ferris is back on track here. Smart, sad, hilarious and eloquent, this shows a writer at the top of his game and surpassing the promise of his celebrated debut. (Kirkus Reviews, March 15, 2014)

About the Author

Full text biography:

Joshua Ferris

Birth Date : 1974

Place of Birth : United States,Illinois,Danville

Nationality: American

Occupation : Novelist

Table of Contents:

Awards

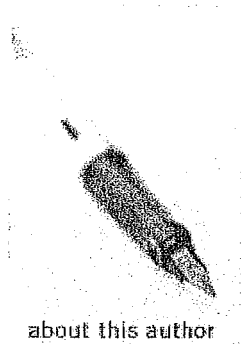
Personal Information

Career

Writings

Sidelights

Related Information



Awards:

Glenn Schaeffer Prize, for an emerging writer; Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the Barnes and Noble Discover Award, and National Book Award finalist, all for *Then We Came to the End*; named one of the *New Yorker's* "20 under 40" writers in 2010; Dylan Thomas Prize and Man Booker Prize shortlist, both 2014, both for *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*.

Personal Information:

Born November 8, 1974, in Danville, IL; married Eliza Kennedy; children: Cooper. **Education:** University of Iowa, B.A., 1996; University of California, Irvine, M.F.A., 2003. **Addresses:** Home: New York, NY. Agent: Julie Barer, Barer Literary, LLC, 156 5th Ave., Ste. 1134, New York, NY 10010. **E-mail:** ferris.joshua@gmail.com.

Career Information:

Writer. Davis Harrison Dion, Chicago, IL, advertising staff member, 1998; Draft Worldwide, Chicago, former staff member.

Writings:

- *Then We Came to the End: A Novel*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Unnamed*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2010.
- *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2014.

Contributor of fiction to anthologies, including *Best New American Stories* and *New Stories from the South: Best of 2007*. Contributor of nonfiction to the anthologies *State by State: A Panoramic Portrait of America*, Ecco, 2009; and *Heavy Rotation: Twenty Writers on the Albums That Changed Their Lives*, edited by Peter Terzian, HarperPerennial, 2009. Contributor of short fiction to periodicals, including the *Iowa Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Granta*, the *New Yorker*, *Tin House*, and *Phoebe*.

Sidelights:

Joshua Ferris is a graduate of the University of Iowa, where he studied English and philosophy, and of the M.F.A. program at the University of California at Irvine. His short stories have appeared in various publications, including the *Iowa Review*, *Best New American Stories*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Phoebe*, and *New Stories from the South: Best of 2007*.

While working on his writing in his spare time, Ferris was employed as a copywriter for an advertising agency in Chicago, a job that served as the inspiration for his debut, *Then We Came to the End: A Novel*. Published to both critical and popular praise, the book began as a form of catharsis, into which he poured his frustrations regarding his day job. However, the eventual result was instead a book about the average worker and his feelings regarding corporate America in a time of economic downturns and layoffs. The book is also noted for its stylistic achievement, in that its viewpoint is first person plural. Alden Mudge, in a review for the *BookPage* Web site noted: "This choral voice is technically difficult. But the effect here is both exhilarating and thought-provoking."

James Poniewozik, writing in the *New York Times Book Review Online*, called Ferris's effort "expansive, great-hearted, and acidly funny." Stephen Morrow, writing in the *Library Journal*, remarked that "with so many books on office life, it's nice to see someone add fresh spark and originality to the subject." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor praised the book, stating that it "succeeds as both a wickedly incisive satire of office groupthink and a surprisingly moving meditation on mortality and the ties that band."

In *The Unnamed*, Ferris's follow up the highly regarded *Then We Came to the End*. This time the author focuses on a man who has a strange compulsion to keep walking. "With his second novel Ferris makes it clear that he has absolutely no intention, for the moment at least, of repeating himself or creating an authorial brand," wrote Jason Pinter for the *Huffington Post* Web site. Tim Adams, writing for the London *Guardian*, noted that Ferris's second novel "offers a different, much darker take on the ties that no longer quite bind us, inventing an unlikely malady that undermines all sense of community and relationship but seems to arise out of some of the same anxiety of alienation."

The handsome Tim Farnsworth is a successful New York lawyer who appears to like his work and love his family, both his wife, Jane, and his daughter, Becak. Tim, however, has been suffering from a strange illness or compulsion that causes him to go out walking until he finally becomes exhausted, blacks out, and falls to the ground wherever he may be. When a big case is about to come to trial, the compulsion strikes again, causing Tim to walk out on his job. This time the compulsion keeps recurring as Jane rescues him after several walking fits, each time Tim staying away longer and longer.

"The lives he is drawn to depicting, in this novel and the first one, seem all about control, the need for it, and ultimately the impossibility of it," wrote Adams in his review for the *Guardian*. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor viewed the walking metaphor as combining the "themes of family, sickness, and the uncertain division between body and mind."

Tim's "illness" has no name, and doctors and psychiatrists are stymied but nevertheless make tentative diagnoses that include multiple personality disorder, clinical delusion, and as one doctor calls it, "benign idiopathic perambulation." Tim, however, thinks that the cause of his problem is spiritual rather than biological. He continues to seek help and is drugged and even chained to the wall to keep him from walking. As the novel progresses, Ferris depicts the inescapable impact that Tim's problem is having on the family as Tim becomes estranged from his wife and daughter. Eventually, Tim also starts to fall apart physically, such as losing fingers and toes to frostbite as the incessant walking takes a toll.

"Ferris is an intrepid writer—he doesn't provide a solution ... but he does explore all of the consequences," wrote Victor Or in a review for *Library Journal*. Noting that "the audacity and dexterity on show make up for any flaws," *Telegraph Online* contributor Tim Martin added: " *The Unnamed* can be tough to read because of the skill Ferris brings to his evocation of suffering, particularly in its final pitiless chapters, but it is clearly an important and individual work, a stage in the development of a significant talent."

Ferris's third novel, which was published in May 2014 and swiftly nominated for the 2014 Man Booker Prize, is a meditation on the solitude atheism can produce. Ferris actually began the novel that would become *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* years before its eventual publication. In an interview with Jonathan Lee for the *Paris Review*, he explained that he had written a 250-page tangent for his debut novel exploring the life of a young child who had been indoctrinated by an ancient religion. A decade after he shelved these pages, Ferris revisited them. He began carefully reshaping the embryonic novel, incorporating new protagonists into the prose and jettisoning ones who were unsatisfactory. He told Lee: "Slowly it evolved into the story of a private detective investigating a possibly ancient

religion. ... But with the help of my two editors I came to see that the private detective, who's inherently a kind of mediating narrator, or a cipher, wasn't working for me. ... I needed a narrator right at the center of the novel, encountering the religion for himself. He eventually became a dentist because I need my characters to have jobs in order to feel real to me. People have to work. I thought, Why not make him a dentist? It doesn't get any more real world than that." The focus of the novel that emerged from this painstaking and deliberate process eventually came to rest on Paul O'Rourke. Paul is an atheist who is slowly being poisoned by his absence of belief. He is a despairing man, bereft of positive identity or community. Paul's pessimistic approach to the world is leeching at him. One day, Paul's dreary life is upended; someone begins to impersonate him online, using various social media profiles to create a character with a more tangible, vital personality than his own. More strangely, Paul finds that the phony Twitter and Facebook accounts using his name, which have begun to mushroom across the Web, are posting comments about the modern-day descendants of Amalek. In the Hebrew Bible, the Amalekites were ancient antagonists of the Jews. Their religion has been defunct for centuries. Paul, a kind of passive atheist, finds himself the unlikely magister of a cult long thought dead. He undertakes a quest to discover who has usurped his identity. As *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* unfolds, Paul is forced to confront the inadequacy of his lifestyle and the cancerous barrenness that is eating at him.

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour generated polarized reactions from critics, with some commending Ferris for his experimental, contemplative take on existential despair and others critiquing him for terminal structural defects they located in the work. Many reviewers, for instance, found the novel larded by torpid passages exploring Paul's mental state. While these may have added to their understanding of Paul's depression and mania, they also distanced reviewers from the novel's scant narrative. Ron Charles, writing for the *Washington Post*, opined: "There are still long patches of blather; three pages about hand lotion, for instance, exemplify the author's tendency toward self-indulgence." Other reviewers were miffed by *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour's* transparent philosophical agenda. Assessing the novel for the *Daily Beast*, Tom LeClair contended that "there's something slightly reductive in the novel's theological arguments. *Then We Came to the End* was subtle in its social observation and wit; *The Unnamed* was profound in its study of self-defeating obsession. Perhaps because it's a ribald comic novel, *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* seems less artful and more artificial, jiggered into being by a novelist who wants to try out new chops." These reviewers may have been ambivalent about Ferris's third novel, but others were charmed by his willingness to experiment with styles and subject matter. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, for instance, called *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* "Smart, sad, hilarious and eloquent, this shows a writer at the top of his game and surpassing the promise of his celebrated debut."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Advertising Age*, March 5, 2007, Simon Dumenco, author interview, p. 30.
- *Booklist*, November 15, 2009, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *The Unnamed*, p. 21; April 1, 2014, Adam Morgan, review of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, p. 22.
- *Books*, March 11, 2007, Art Winslow, review of *Then We Came to the End: A Novel*, p. 3.
- *Bookseller*, May 14, 2010, review of *The Unnamed*, p. 13.
- *Boston Globe*, May 10, 2014, John Freeman, review of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*.
- *Campaign*, October 13, 2006, author profile, p. 23.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, June 5, 2014, James Parker, review of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, March 2, 2007, Tina Jordan, review of *Then We Came to the End*, p. 72; January 22, 2010, Thom Geier, review of *The Unnamed*, p. 71.
- *Guardian*, May 17, 2014, Tim Adams, author interview.
- *Independent*, February 21, 2010, Robert Epstein, review of *The Unnamed*; June 7, 2014, James Kidd, review of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, p. 26.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2006, review of *Then We Came to the End*, p. 1234; November 15, 2009, review of *The Unnamed*; March 15, 2014, review of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*.

Joshua Ferris Takes On Atheism In 'To Rise Again'

Fresh Air. 2014. From *Literature Resource Center*.

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GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Staring into the mouths of his patients all day, the dentist in Joshua Ferris's new novel becomes obsessed with decay and death. He wishes he had religious faith and could believe in something larger than himself. But to him, church is just a dark, bus station of the soul.

Something else this dentist doesn't have is his own website. He doesn't want one. But someone impersonating him starts a site, as well as a Twitter account which he uses to proselytize for a religion that sounds ancient but that no one has ever heard of. Joshua Ferris's new novel "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour" is his third book. His first novel, "And Then We Came To The End," was a satire set in the office of an advertising agency during the end of the dot-com boom and the beginning of the bust. In a review of the new novel, Lauren Groff wrote in The New York Times book review, Ferris is as brave and adept as any writer out there.

Joshua Ferris, welcome back to FRESH AIR. Let's start with a reading from the very opening of your novel.

FERRIS: (Reading) The mouth is a weird place, not quite inside and not quite out, not skin and not organ, but something in between; dark, wet, admitting access to an interior most people would rather not contemplate; where cancer starts; where the heart is broken; where the soul might just fail to turn up. I encouraged my patients to floss. It was hard to do some days. They should've flossed. Flossing prevents periodontal disease and can extend life up to seven years. It's also time-consuming and a general pain in the ass. That's not the dentist talking. That's the guy who comes home, four or five drinks in him. What a great evening, ha ha's all around, and the minute he takes up the floss, says to himself, what's the point? In the end, the heart stops, the cells die, the neurons go dark, bacteria consumes the pancreas, flies lay their eggs, beetles chew through tendons and ligaments, the skin turns to cottage cheese, the bones dissolve and the teeth float away with the tide. But then someone who never flossed a day in his life would come in, the picture of inconceivable self-neglect and unnecessary pain - rotted teeth, swollen gums, a live wire of infection running from enamel to nerve. And what I called hope, what I called courage, above all, what I called defiance again rose up in me. And I would go around the next day or two saying to all my patients, you must floss, please floss, flossing makes all the difference. A dentist is only half the doctor he claims to be. That he's also half mortician is the secret he keeps to himself. The ailing bits, he tries to turn healthy again. The dead bits he just tries to make presentable. He bores a hole, clears the rot, fills the pit and seals the hatch. He yanks the teeth, pours the mold, fits the fix and paints to match. Open cavities are the eye-stones of skulls and loan molars stand erect as tombstones.

GROSS: Oh, thank you for reading that. That's Joshua Ferris reading from the opening of his new novel, "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour." Why did you choose dentistry as the opportunity to reflect on the inevitability of the body's decay and ultimate death?

FERRIS: Well, I guess it started when I was probably 22, 23, and I went to the dentist. And I said, what is going on with my mouth? I mean, I had a gum problem that would seem to be the result of Typhus or, you know, the prick of a needle on a beach somewhere. And the woman just looked up at me and said - the dental hygienist, she said, son, do you floss?

GROSS: (Laughing).

FERRIS: And I said, no, of course not, that's a ridiculous question, flossing is no fun. And she said, floss. And sure enough, that took care of my problems forevermore. And I thought it was absolutely fascinating that something so simple and sort of, you know, unknown. I mean, I knew you should floss, but I didn't know that it could actually help my gums. And from that moment forward, I flossed and I flossed every day, and something so simple was so relieving of pain. I was kind of fascinated by dentists from that point forward.

GROSS: But you also have the dentist being the observer of the body's decay because he's looking at decaying teeth and bone...

FERRIS: Yeah.

GROSS: ...And wounds in the mouth and sores, and so, like, he's just the observer of the deterioration of the body.

FERRIS: Yeah, well, you know, when we go into the dentist, basically we go in, sit in the chair, try to bear up and then flee, you know, as quickly as he can. Here's a guy - I'm thinking of a guy who's got to be there every day - eight, ten hours a day - who has no relief from that decay, who has no relief from the worst mouth problems that people suffer from. And he's already kind of dour. You know, he's already kind of a pessimist about the world, and when he has to spend all of that time inside these wrecks of mouths, it just sort of makes things worse. So it works him down and works him down to the point where at the beginning of the book when we first meet him, he's pretty much in constant despair.

GROSS: And at the beginning of the book, he pretty much finds his patients' pain and his patients' mouth problems to be oddly reassuring. He says, like, now you know what he knows, that luck runs out and death is inevitable. And he talks about, you know, the enjoyment of watching the entitlement end, the immunities of great privilege have expired. You're no different from the next guy. You're mortal, and it's ugly.

FERRIS: Yeah, fun thoughts.

GROSS: I don't think my dentist is like this at all, by the way. (Laughing) I have a great dentist. I really don't think he takes pleasure in my pain.

FERRIS: Well, you know, it's wonderful when you can go into the dentist and feel that, you know, things are pretty good. The dentist tends to remind you of pain and the possibility of decay and disease, and I think that's part of the reason that dentists are sort of chronically misunderstood. And nobody wants to go see a dentist. It reminds you of some of the things that, you know, you would prefer to go without. I don't know that he's celebrating people's awareness, but because he's so painfully aware of the daily problems that he confronts, he might take a little bit of comfort, as you say, in the recognition by other people who live blithely, that they, too, are mortal and have these concerns.

GROSS: The dentist in your novel, the main character in your novel, wants something greater than his work and golf and playing banjo on the side. He says, I would've liked to believe in God. By believing in God, I could succumb to ease and comfort and reassurance. Why can't he believe?

FERRIS: I took as the basic premise that a kind of heaven on Earth is a religious identity. The ability to believe comes with the reassurance of immortality, of forgiveness and also I think a community of like-minded believers. This guy is so reasonable in a kind of, you know - in the kind of neo-atheism way, in the kind of Dawkins-Hitchens model; if you think clearly about the world, there is no possible way you could allow for a being greater than the human being. Any divinity whatsoever is off the table.

So I started with that basic premise and wanted to see where he lacks because of that belief. Does that highly reasoned and kind of cutthroat authenticity, the commitment to atheism, what does it do to a person in his life? Does it make him cramped at all? Where does he find community? These were the questions that I began the novel with.

GROSS: He really would like to believe - and he says about his chief dental hygienist, Betsy Convoy, who's a widow - he says about her, I always considered her alone, but she was never alone. She was with the tripartite company of the father, the son and the Holy Ghost. He envies people who have faith.

FERRIS: Yeah absolutely. You know, I mean...

GROSS: He thinks they're wrong, but he envies them.

FERRIS: Yeah, you know, if he could believe, he would believe. You know, he's just too committed to these - to the rational creed of atheism. What he sees all around him, however, are people who are believing, who do have those reassurances and comforts that are discussed early in the book and that have a community, have a built-in community of people who not only believe like them but also support and comfort them through the night. He doesn't have that and he doesn't have that mostly because he's committed to this idea, to this intellectual principle. And it alienates him from the mass of humanity.

GROSS: Your main character the dentist, grew up Protestant left his faith. His ex-girlfriend is Jewish and he and envies Jewish people because of secular Judaism. The fact that you can basically be an atheist, but still be a Jew, and still derive cultural identity, and a sense of belonging to a tribe. Did you experience that yourself?

FERRIS: When I was growing up my mom took us to church in a kind of fitful way. She meant to go every week but of course we missed some weeks because we were just busy or you know I had siblings that were crazy and we couldn't get into the car fast enough so we would skip church. We went to a couple of different Protestant denominations. So I actually joked to her later on in life that we had multiple denomination syndrome. We didn't know where we belonged you know. One week we were Catholic, the next we were Lutherans. So I kind of share with the main character a biography that just is a little adrift religion wise. When I was in college, I would look in on people who came from much stronger traditions and they were carrying their traditions through college. They were committed to them, they were hanging on because it gave them you know some tether to the communities that they had left the homes that they had left. And I really envied it, I saw a lot of strength there, I saw a lot of beauty there. I saw the attachment to traditions and religions that I didn't have, and I envied them I think in the same way my main character does.

GROSS: And specifically, did you ever envy Jewish people who have the ability to not believe but still be a part - still identify as Jewish and be considered a part of the tribe.

FERRIS: Yeah, sure. I mean when I went to the University of Iowa, I roomed with a guy who was from the Northwest suburbs of Chicago. And he was Jewish and he and I became best friends, and he was you know expressing a lot of doubt with respect to God in general you know - the divinity, the existence of the divine being, but at the same time he was going to the Hillel and he was participating in high holidays and I went to my first Passover that year. So he was still very much amongst people who understood him and who he understood and he got to participate in the traditions. And it didn't really matter what he believed. It may have mattered to him but as I saw it from the outside in he was very much a part of this community and that community had just never been an option for me. And so I found it to sort of partake of the best of both worlds.

GROSS: If you're just joining us my guess is Joshua Ferris. His new novel is called "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour." Let's take a short break, then we'll talk some more. This is FRESH AIR.

(MUSIC)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Joshua Ferris. And his new novel, "To Rise Again At a Decent Hour," is about a dentist who sees himself as facing his patient's mortality all the time as he deals with their, you know, decaying teeth and rotting gums. And at the same time, he wants to have faith in God. But he can't, and he doesn't. So the main character in your novel, the dentist, who looks into rotting mouths all day and sees his job as part mortician because he's dealing with so much decaying and already dead tissue - do you think, in part, he craves religion because he sees the - because he looks mortality literally in the face every day?

FERRIS: I certainly think that's one of the things. I mean, he's making things bleed constantly. He can't quite get out of that mode. And so that's a kind of permanent reminder of not only how we end up and the misery and pain that may overtake us at the end of life, but I think it makes him question people's behavior. And why it is that we've been placed on earth? Have we been put here to make meaning or should we just sort of blithely and obliviously move through our days without concern for the larger questions? And so I think these things are entering in his restless curiosity for how we should conduct life is coinciding with his constant reminder that we're mortal - that the time we have on earth is limited.

GROSS: Joshua, in your novel, somebody eventually steals the online identity of this dentist. The dentist doesn't really have an online identity. He doesn't do social media. He doesn't have a Facebook page. But suddenly, there's a Twitter account in his name. There's a Facebook account in his name. And the person who has taken the account in the dentist's name starts posting these biblical sounding passages that really aren't from the Bible at all. And I'm going to ask you to read a couple of short excerpts from these passages that sound biblical but are not.

FERRIS: If thou makest of me a God and worship me and send for the psaltery and the tebrit (ph) to prophecy of my intentions and make war, then ye shall be consumed.

GROSS: Let's stop right there.

FERRIS: Yeah.

GROSS: ...Before you read the next one.

FERRIS: OK.

GROSS: So he's basically saying, hey, don't do this in my name - don't make war in my name.

FERRIS: The god of that passage, yeah.

GROSS: The god of that passage, yes.

FERRIS: Yeah he's saying, you know, look, all is well and good. Believe in me. That's fine. But certainly don't conduct war in my name. And if you don't, then I will guarantee you safe passage through the world. This is a very - obviously a very different approach, I think, to, you know, the gods of many religions that basically say I am the one God and the only God.

GROSS: OK. Read another excerpt.

FERRIS: And Sofec (ph) gathered us anew, and we sojourned with him in the land of Israel. And we had no city to give us name, neither had we king to appoint us captains, to make of us instruments of war. Neither had we lost a follow, save one. Beyond - make thine heart hallowed by doubt. For God, if God, only God may know. And we followed Sofec (ph) and were not consumed.

GROSS: OK. So this is very biblical sounding - you know, very fake biblical sounding. There seems to be a God, but you are hollowed by doubt. To believe in this God, you must also believe in doubt. That kind of doesn't make sense.

FERRIS: Yeah.

GROSS: Right?

FERRIS: It's a big contradiction, yeah.

GROSS: And I should say here that we don't know - at this point in your novel - we don't know who is writing this.

FERRIS: Yeah.

GROSS: And we don't know - initially they think, like, is this part of the Bible that I don't remember? And they realize, no, definitely not part of Bible. They don't know what this is about. But getting back to the question of the main thing you have to have is doubt about God - what sense does that make?

FERRIS: Yeah. Someone has made a website in his name for his dental practice. And that's freaky to him. He doesn't quite understand, and it's very upsetting. When they start posting these pseudo-biblical passages, he assumes they're from the Bible. And it gets him even more upset because now they're not only impersonated him, but also making him seem like a believer which he's not.

He asks his dental hygienist, Mrs. Convoy, who's the Roman Catholic where's this from? And she says, you know, this doesn't sound like the Bible. This doesn't sound like - at least the New Testament. So at this point, he's in unknown territory. As it turns out, this is a very specific god to a very specific religion that he's about to learn a whole lot more about.

And that religion specifically asks his followers to believe in a God who's only dictate is that they doubt him. Well, that's a tough one, you know? It's full of contradictions, and it doesn't make any logical sense. But a little later in the book, one of the impersonator - maybe the only impersonator - asks him how logical other gods are. And he points out that the Buddhist who must discover Nirvana has to do that by realizing a self that does not exist but the self must discover its own nonexistence.

Jewish belief dictates that you believe that God made man in his image but man is full of evil. Christianity dictates that you believe in God who is also a man of flesh and blood. So there are a lot of illogical definitions that get ascribed to God. And I was just sort of following along those lines, you know? God himself does not to resolve - be resolved of contradictions. In fact, it is one of God's greatest qualities that he is riddled with contradictions.

So I suppose that this follows along those lines. You know, how can you believe in a god who demands that you doubt him? Well, this is, ironically, for a religion founded on doubt, the real question of faith.

GROSS: Joshua Ferris will be back in the second half of the show. His new novel is called "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour." I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross, back with writer Joshua Ferris. His first novel, "Then We Came To The End," was set at an advertising agency at the start of the dot com bust. His new novel, "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour," is about a dentist whose thoughts turn to mortality while staring at the decaying teeth and rotting gums of his patients. He wants to have religious faith and believe in something larger than himself, but he's too full of doubt. He's puzzled and angry when he discovers that someone online has stolen his identity to start a website and Twitter account proselytizing for an ancient sounding religion that no one has ever heard of.

This dentist basically lives in fear of life in some ways. Like he doesn't want children because here's what he says, he says (reading) you might fear for the kids like every time he leaves your sight. I didn't want to live in perpetual fear. People don't recover from the death of a child. I never seriously considered killing myself, but once you have a kid, you take that option off the table. And options are important. So that's the reason he tells himself he doesn't want children. And earlier in his life, he and his girlfriend, who subsequently left him, he and his girlfriend got a dog as a prelude to maybe having a child. And as he's playing with the puppy, all he can think about is how the puppy's going to age, and then the puppies going to become a dog and die. And so, I guess I'm interested in hearing you think about somebody who lives in fear of life because life ends in death.

FERRIS: Well, at that point he's not really living. I think you see him in pain and despair throughout a lot of the book. And I think that takes, sometimes it takes the form of complaint and sometimes it takes the form of envy of other people who seem to have figured out the art of living in much more satisfying ways than he has. But he, you know, he is stuck in this, in part because he's a dentist. As you point out, he's always looking in this, into the mouths of those who have neglected themselves and seeing the rot and decay that define his life. But, you know, so he's stuck in this way of living that is so death dominated, he cannot find happiness. So when happiness is presented to him in the form of a puppy, in the form of a new lover, in the form of a new way of thinking about life, he forecloses it because it has to end. This is no way to conduct yourself. And it leads him into many cul-de-sacs of despair. And that's really the book's business, to get him out. To find out how he might not only live without fear, but in some satisfying way for himself, embrace something larger than his own limited personality.

GROSS: Do you suffer, or have you ever suffered from a disease like this? Where it's hard to start things because you know they're going to end and the ending is going to be so sad. So to spare yourself that sad ending, you just don't even begin?

FERRIS: It sounds basically like starting every new book.

(LAUGHTER)

FERRIS: It's just going to end in critical death. (Laughing) I don't really believe that. But I tell you what, it's a big hurdle to get over in those early months of starting a book, where you think oh, this again, my own limitations, my tics and tendencies, and it's only going to end up in something that is only partially satisfying to my sort of platonic ideal. So I think with respect to that for sure, you know. And it certainly crosses my mind, as a person, as a father, as a friend and as a son and a brother, that death hovers over so much of what we do, what we have to accomplish in the short hours that we have here on earth. And it can affect me, for sure. I mean, I can feel too limited by it and too scared of it and sad about it. And I think that that can, if I am not careful, qualify the living hours that are important to make the most of. And I have to really guard against it because otherwise those living hours are squandered, or at least qualified by something that I have no control over and that makes no sense to fret over.

GROSS: You mentioned you're a father.

FERRIS: I am.

GROSS: OK. Unlike the character in your book, who's afraid to become a father.

FERRIS: Yeah, I mean, that kind of fear would be useless to the conduct of my life. You know, I'm too interested in experience and in figuring out how to live. I think that this particular person. The dentist is, he's too constricted by his own thoughts. He's too much in his own head. And as I say, part of the business of the book was to get him out and into the world, much as a dentist, I think, who's sequestered in an office can't from 9 to 5. You know, I'm a writer, so I'm much more interested in making sure that I maximize my experience and find out what I think about it sort of retrospectively. You know, life is too interesting for me to spend too much time worrying about the mistakes I might be making.

GROSS: When your main character, the dentist, is nine years old, his father dies. His father actually commits suicide. And the boy's told that if he loves Jesus, that Jesus will eventually give him back his father in a sweet place called heaven, and that he'll be carried through this crisis. Did you have a crisis like that in your life as a boy?

FERRIS: I had a much more minor crisis. I watched a movie that was just terrifying around the age of 9 and I was certain that I was going to be kidnapped that night as I lay in bed. I was very distraught. And I went to my mother and I said here's what I've done, I've watched a movie you would not approve of, which itself is like admitting to God something terrible. And she said - she didn't, you know, punish me. She didn't want to see me in pain. She said pray to God. Pray to Jesus. And I did and by God it worked. I mean, it just totally took care of that. I thought well, if I pray to Jesus and Jesus is here, then I'm going to be protected and I can't get kidnapped. I had no worries for a long time after that because that's what I did. But, you know, after a certain point in time I started thinking, I imagine that there's been some kidnapping in which believers have gone away. (Laughing) You know, they've been the target. So I started to put two and two together and the praying no longer comforted me quite as much.

GROSS: I'm just curious as a father who is not a believer, I don't know how old your child or children are, but if one of them sees a movie and or hears something on TV that really terrifies them, what do you tell them? You can't tell them to pray to Jesus like you were told.

FERRIS: Yeah, let me answer this because I love the question. I have something that just happened yesterday. But I will say that I'm not sure that I'm entirely comfortable with being described as a nonbeliever. Only because there's this little shadow of a doubt that I keep open. I have a character in the book described herself as a non-practicing atheist. And I think that's how I would describe myself. You know, when push comes to shove and I'm forced to think reasonably, I affirm again and again that there is no God. But as a rule, as I sort of go through life, I find that that can lead to a dogma that is no more welcoming to my way of thinking than the dogma of believers. So I tend to want to keep the door open an inch, which I think sounds to many people maybe like cheating. But to me it's simply a matter of keeping not my options open, but my mind wide, as wide as possible and my heart open to new possibilities. With respect to my son, he - we just went to see "How To Train Your Dragon 2" on Sunday. And he gets very scared. Any sense of peril and he says I want to turn it off, I want to turn it off, even though it's being broadcast on the screen. What I've taken to telling him is to remember the seat he's sitting in, to remember that he's there on a fluffy seat with a hardback that he can touch his feet to the ground and feel right here in the world and not to worry. And I think what it does, hopefully, is remind him that he's present and that the sum of the peril that he's seeing on screen is happening there and not to him himself. I don't exactly know how I would counsel him were he to come face-to-face with actual endangerment. But I think remembering that you're present, remembering the present moment, is about as best as we can do.

GROSS: Why take him to a movie that you're pretty sure is going to scare him?

FERRIS: Well I, we covered it before. And he saw the first one and he wasn't that scared. I had read that this one had more peril or endangerment than the previous one. So we worked through it, you know, I said are you sure you want to go see it? And he said yeah. And I said well, so papa will be here, you can climb into my lap. You know, he's five. He's of the age, I think, where he can handle it and we worked through it. And, you know, frankly, I've been on tour for the last month and I felt guilty. So I thought well, we'll go and have some M&M's, and hopefully he'll forgive me for being away for so long.

GROSS: My guest is Joshua Ferris. His new novel is called "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour." We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(MUSIC)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Joshua Ferris, and his new novel is called, "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour." You wrote an article about how - and this gets away from your book, but it's kind of connected to it. You wrote an article about how you used to kind of be a foodie. And then you developed a gluten allergy. And the community and the pleasure that you'd focused on around food was no longer available to you in the same way. Can you talk about what you lost when you couldn't eat gluten anymore?

FERRIS: Well, Terry, I don't want to be too dramatic about it, but I lost everything.

GROSS: OK. (Laughing).

FERRIS: I lost it all. You know, I love eating. And eating, for a long time, was the way in which I would start the weekend, you know? I mean, I ate pretty consistently throughout the day. But then when Friday night came along, I went out with friends. I went out with my wife. I had a good time, and I ate what I wanted to eat. I can't do that anymore. And I look in at people - I see people

eating pizza on the street. I see them drinking beer in bars. And I am deeply alienated from them - not because, you know, they're doing anything I wouldn't be doing. Before I got this gluten allergy, I believed that such a thing, allergy to gluten, was absurd. Well, I think that, you know - in my more mystical moments I think that I have this now because I was so insensitive to those allergies. I can't eat the things that I used to eat and so, by virtue of that, feel pretty excluded from how I used to be - from who - from the very person I used to be. It may seem - as I say, it may seem dramatic. But so much of my recreation, and so much of my community, so much of my shared conversation with friends revolved around this thing. It wasn't just sustenance - it was ritual. It wasn't just an event - it was the true meaning of breaking bread. Now that I can't do that, I'm really trying to figure out where I should spend my recreational time and what it means for me to engage on some larger scale. I mean, of course it's the food that I miss the most. But it's also these tangential things that come with eating food, that come with participating in the eating of - the splitting of a pizza pie or the drinking of a beer with friends, that I no longer can do. And it compromises me. And I feel kind of at a loss.

GROSS: So has this increased your feeling of vulnerability?

FERRIS: Oh, sure. I mean, yeah, in amazing ways. I mean, I was sick for a long time. It took me about 10 years to really figure out what was wrong with me. And during those 10 years, I thought it was this, I thought it was that. I thought it was kind of mechanical, you know? I never once thought, despite its intuition, that it was something I was putting into my body. So once it came to my attention and I took it seriously and quit it, you know, it resolved itself fairly quickly. However, the very fact that it can come back with a little bit of au poivre sauce or...I ate - prior to that, I ate, maybe three months ago, a square of chocolate with some barley emulsifier. And that did it. So it is a vulnerability because, you know, at any moment in time, if I'm not incredibly vigilant, I could get very, very ill for three or four days. And that makes you aware of, what you normally think of as providing sustenance and strength, can come and bite you in the butt. And man, it really does take it out of me. So I do walk around a little bit more vulnerable than before.

GROSS: How do you prevent yourself from having a toxic envy of people who could do things that you can't, like drink beer, and eat bread and have pizza?

FERRIS: Yeah. I think the very easy answer to arrive at, but not necessarily to put into practice, is to recognize, at every moment, the incredible limitations that I have in general and to reconcile my - is to reconcile myself to those limitations and also to reconcile myself to how little control I have over them. Once I do that, I see the incredible broadness of my simple being. I can leave off concern for what I'm not capturing, what I'm not experiencing, and take solace, but also great delight, in what I do have, in the simple pleasures that I'm still allowed, in the delight in being human, in the interactions that are most meaningful to me. At that point in time, I'm not a kind of deprived being. I am a person who is acting from within with great power, with the power of the self to do what he can do, to realize his moments in time. It kind of goes back to what I would say to my son when he gets scared. Remember what you have. You have a soft seat, and a firm back and solid floor to put your feet on. If I can remember all of that for myself, then the things that I am excluded from no longer bother me. I think that what I do, though, is shift from the centered kind of person - the centered being that looks out into the world and gets delight from what he can get delight from, to the other person who sort of sees him from the outside-in, who sees all of the ways that I'm being, you know, denied or deprived and envies, you know, what I envy. If I - I do this a lot. I shift from one perspective to the next. This is sort of an occupational hazard. If I can remember to stay here in the center, and sort of in the belly, so to speak, then I'll be fine.

GROSS: An occupational hazard as a writer?

FERRIS: Yeah. You know, I mean, this is - basically, fiction is all about - writing fiction is all about perspective, seeing things differently from different points of view. And so if I - once I shift over to the guy that's looking in at me, as a kind of third-person actor in the world - if I focus too much on those limitations, I can get bogged down in all that's been deprived of me. But if I think of myself as a first-person actor, if I understand those limitations and work around them, or work with them and remember what I do - what I am in control of, you know, I maximize my experience on earth. And that's the only thing, as a person - not as a writer, but as a person - that I'm truly interested in.

GROSS: Joshua Ferris, thank you so much for talking with us.

FERRIS: Thank you, Terry.

GROSS: Joshua Ferris is the author of the new novel, "To Rise Again At A Decent Hour." You can read an excerpt on our website, freshair.npr.org. Coming up, Ken Tucker reviews a new album by Parquet Courts, a band that's been compared to the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth. This is FRESH AIR.

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THE NS POEM

Accidental Narratives

Jack Underwood

A crab on the phone box floor; the armless mannequin on the chapel roof at dawn; the plastic toad in the office biscuit tin; three cuts on your shin this morning to make the letter A; the wedding cake abandoned in the car park of the motorway services; the caraway seed in the turn-up of your jeans; the waxwork head of Chaplin in the bowling bag in the overhead locker of the night train to Munich; a slug exposed by the spotlight of a hushed concert hall; or the roaring magnificent intersection of these objects, which probably never existed, but we can each picture, drawn from our unique worlds at large, knocking like fish, trying to agree; meanwhile, either somebody else somewhere is reading this now, or no one else in the entire world is.

Jack Underwood's debut collection, *Happiness*, will be published by Faber & Faber in 2015.

Banal
retentive

Philip Maughan

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour

Joshua Ferris

Viking, 352pp, £16.99

Meet Paul O'Rourke. Paul is a wealthy, misanthropic, middle-aged dentist with a sparkling private practice on Park Avenue in New York City. He is both an atheist and a Luddite and, like many atheists and Luddites, he is utterly obsessed with religion and technology. He derives genuine, if all too infrequent, satisfaction from drilling and filling rotten cavities but comes unstuck on the question of flossing. "What's the point?" he asks. "In the end, the heart stops, the cells die, the neurons go dark... and the teeth float away with the tide."

It is Paul's staff who suffer most from this existential griping. "I am *haunted*," he whines in the ear of the head hygienist, Betsy Conroy, a devout Christian. "You think I alienate myself from society? Of course I alienate myself from society. It's the only way I know of not being constantly reminded of all the ways I'm alienated from society."

Paul's distaste for other people seems to stem, ironically, from a deep and nagging yearning to belong. He has no family

to speak of (father, suicide; mother, mad) and no religious tradition to fall back on – unless a ritualistic entanglement with the Boston Red Sox counts. He would like to make peace with the world, but cannot, provoking outbursts from him on everything from hand lotion to the ubiquity of the emoticon ":)."

"My relationship with the internet was like the one I had with the :)," he explains. "I hated the :) and hated to be the object of other people's :, their :- and their :>. I hated :-)) the most because it reminded me of my double chin... I swore never to use the emoticon ever... until one day, offhandedly and without much thought, I used my first :) and, shortly thereafter, in spite of my initial resistance, :) became a regular staple of my daily correspondence."

Each of Paul's former girlfriends is selected initially for her mouth – a window not to the soul, but to the gory space in which it fails to materialise – and also for the "close-knit and conservative families" they bring with them. Take the Plotzes – the large, happy, Jewish family that produced Connie Plotz, who remains an employee at O'Rourke Dental despite the couple's acrimonious break-up. ("I don't get pussy whipped," he explains in one of a handful of jokes that misfire spectacularly, "I get cuntgripped.") Likewise the Santacroses, "a picture-perfect family of Catholics whose tidy garage, sturdy oak trees, and family

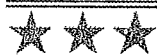
portraits through the ages would absolve all the sins and correct all the shortcomings of my childhood". In each case Paul comes on too strong and ruins his chances. "I would affirm God and convert to Catholicism and condemn abortion and drink Martinis," he asserts, failing to remember that Sam Santacrose is more than just a glossy lower lip and gets a say in their relationship, too.

In Ferris's 2007 debut, *Then We Came to the End*, it is the sense of unity fostered by the grinding tedium of office life that makes office life bearable. That novel is narrated in the first-person plural by the staff at a failing Chicago-based advertising firm, a communal "we" that stands in stark contrast to O'Rourke's lacerating "I": "'We love you, Paul.' It was really that 'we' I wanted more than anything else," he says. "For all my proud assertions of self, I really only wanted to be smothered in the embrace of an inclusive and coercive singular 'we'."

So it seems a little uncanny, even miraculous, when Connie discovers a website and Twitter account spewing pseudo-religious propaganda in Paul's name. Her discovery signals the beginning of the plotty part of the novel. Paul is told he is an "Ulm": the member of an ancient tribe formed by the Amalekites – a people mentioned in Genesis and 1 Chronicles, most of whom were slain at God's command by the Israelites – in the process of forging an irredentist pact in the desert wastes of southern Israel. What makes them unique is their affirmation of faith: to become an Ulm one must doubt the existence of God.

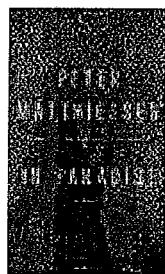
Ulmism is the Hitchensian Church of Atheism given form and substance, and a pretty dry excuse for a quest. Ultimately it is Paul's voice – crude, indignant, irate – that is most memorable. The desire for "connectivity" is an honest cry from a lonely professional, one that could be explored without the diversion to ersatz religion. His reflections on the day-to-day – "Pizza Fridays were no small thing"; afternoon mochaccinos are "a little joy" – ensure Ferris retains his title as the poet of the modern workplace, while the story of the Ulms strays on to dodgy ground. "Say what you will about the tragedies of the Jews," declares the group's leader, Grant Arthur, in the process of mythologising his own, more extreme version of Paul's rejection by the Plotzes, "at least they have been documented."

It is no surprise *To Rise Again*... has made the Man Booker longlist, now that Americans are being welcomed into that hitherto British-imperial sect. It signals the late acknowledgement of American preoccupations in our literature: heritage, self-determination, Israel – but if it wins I'll eat my hat. And I could. I have a great dentist. ●



In Paradise

By Peter Matthiessen



The only author ever to win the National Book Award for both fiction (*Shadow Country* [2008]) and nonfiction (*The Snow Leopard* [1978]), Peter Matthiessen published more

than 30 books in a career spanning 6 decades. He was also a Buddhist priest, a naturalist, a CIA operative, and a cofounder of the literary magazine *The Paris Review*. Matthiessen died of leukemia at age 86 on April 5, 2014, shortly before *In Paradise* was published.

THE STORY: In December 1996, world-weary, middle-aged Polish-American literature professor Clements Olin arrives at Nazi Germany's most notorious death camp, Auschwitz, for a Zen retreat, "a week of homage, prayer, and silent meditation in memory of this camp's million and more victims." While his fellow participants—Polish Jews, German apologists, Catholic novices, rabbis, a former monk, an evolutionary biologist, and one very abrasive and scornful dissenter named Earwig—tour the grounds, contemplate the past, and violently disagree over the nature of evil, Olin intends to research the tragic life of Polish writer and Holocaust survivor Tadeusz Borowski. His stay at the concentration camp, however, yields decidedly more than academic study, including romance and possibly the key to his past.

Riverhead, 256 pages. \$27.95. ISBN: 9781594633171

Chicago Tribune ★★
"Seventy years after Auschwitz, it would seem that there is not much left to say about the Holocaust, and, indeed, Matthiessen hasn't opened up any new conversations. Still, the questions he raises—about the nature of evil, about the complicity of all humankind in crimes of this caliber—are worth asking, over and

over again, not because of the dead but because of the living." SHOSHANA OLIDORT

San Francisco Chronicle ★★
"The culmination of a literary life that includes 30 previous books, this may not stand as his best or most original work (he reportedly considered that to be *Far Tortuga*). However, *In Paradise* will certainly challenge readers to consider some seemingly unanswerable questions concerning faith and the Holocaust."

ELIZABETH ROSNER

Washington Post ★★
"Without stooping to genocide pornography, he creates indelible vignettes about what remains and what took place here. ... And yet the book continually undercuts itself and questions its own motives." RON CHARLES

Cleveland Plain Dealer ★★
"Putting the ineffable into words, which Matthiessen had the knack of in *The Snow Leopard*, or achieving a perfect, transcendent ending to a novel, as he did in *Far Tortuga*, is rare in the career of even a great writer. So it's not particularly surprising that here, Matthiessen didn't come close to either one, the ineffable or the transcendent." MARK GAMIN

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette ★★
"Outside of Earwig and Olin, the characters are underwritten. They seem largely symbolic and never take on the quality of humanity that makes fiction absorbing." CARLO WOLFF

NY Times Book Review ★★
"To his credit, as a novelist Matthiessen never stopped attempting to navigate through the hardest questions and the least forgiving terrain his large world had to offer. But a novel narrated with such exhaustion can't hope to provoke much more than exhaustion from its readers, even when its creator was as expansive and rigorous as Peter Matthiessen." DONNA RIFKIND

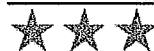
CRITICAL SUMMARY

Is *In Paradise* Peter Matthiessen's last words? "Please, no," groaned the *Miami Herald*. "Not this forlorn meditation, dark, so beset with melancholy."

While the novel challenges readers to consider questions about identity, faith, good and evil, and the Holocaust, many critics couldn't quite get past its undeveloped characters, repetitive writing, heavy-handed exposition, and curious tendency to undermine its own message with uncertainty and diffidence. The odds may have been stacked against Matthiessen from the start. After all, is there anything new to be said about the Holocaust, and, speculated the *Washington Post*, how can one say it in a meaningful way? *In Paradise* may have a certain appeal for dedicated fans, but others may want to remember the award-winning author by his previous works.

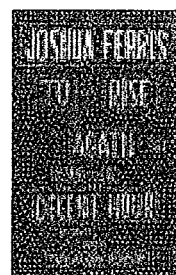
ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

FAR TORTUGA (1975): Matthiessen and many critics considered this poetic and powerful experimental novel, his fifth, to be his best. As the rickety, 60-foot schooner *Lillias Eden* leaves Grand Cayman's Georgetown harbor at dawn, its rancorous captain, Raib Avers, and his ragtag crew of turtle fishermen prepare for what will become an ill-fated last voyage to turtling grounds off the coast of Nicaragua. During their journey, they will confront modernization and the impending loss of their way of life, the vagaries of nature, and each other. Despite Matthiessen's use of Caribbean patois and untagged dialogue, determined readers will be rewarded with an absorbing drama of life on the sea.



To Rise Again at a Decent Hour

By Joshua Ferris



Joshua Ferris's best-selling first novel, *Then We Came to the End* (★★★★ SELECTION May/June 2007), a satire on the American workplace, won the PEN/Hemingway Award

and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Ferris is also the author of *The Unnamed* (★ ★ ★ Mar/Apr 2010), as well as acclaimed short stories. *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* is his third novel.

THE STORY: "My life didn't really begin," says Paul O'Rourke, a Park Avenue dentist and Red Sox fan, scarred by his father's suicide and adrift in modern life, "until several months before the fateful Red Sox summer of 2011." When a patient comes in to have a tooth extracted and claims he's an Ulm—an Amalekite, the ancient enemy of the Jews—as is Paul, his visit sets off a chain of bizarre events. Soon, an unauthorized Web site on Paul's practice starts pushing the modern-day descendants of Amalek, a group based on doubting God; phony Twitter and Facebook accounts follow. Paul, an atheist who has never been one for religion, soon becomes drawn into a cyberworld debate that angers anti-Semites and the Anti-Defamation League alike. As Paul struggles to learn why his identity has been stolen, he must face his painful past and uncertain future.

Little, Brown. 352 pages. \$26. ISBN: 9780316033978

Boston Globe ★ ★ ★ ★
"An engrossing and hilariously bleak novel about a dentist being shook out of his comfortable atheism. ... This splintering of the self hasn't been performed in fiction so neatly since Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*." JOHN FREEMAN

Washington Post ★ ★ ★ ★
"If you're afraid of dentists or demanding fiction, back away because *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* is a brilliant mess of a novel that drills at a raw nerve of existential dread. ... But at his best, which is most of the time, Ferris spins Paul's observations and reflections into passages of flashing comedy that sound like a stand-up theologian suffering a nervous breakdown." RON CHARLES

Los Angeles Times ★ ★ ★ ★
"This is the novel's peculiar brilliance, to uncover its existential stakes in the most mundane tasks. ... Much of the last third

of the novel involves an enmity between the Ulm and Judaism that Ferris neither completely explains nor justifies." DAVID L. ULIN

NY Times Book Review ★ ★ ★ ★
"Throughout the book, [O'Rourke] mostly spins his obsessions before the reader over and over again, like a betta fish furiously stubbing its snout on the glass walls of the fishbowl whenever anybody moves in the room. ... Building a novel intended to dazzle out of the dullest raw material takes oversize moxie, but there remains a gap between the book's intent and its final effect." LAUREN GROFF

New York Daily News ★ ★ ★ ★
"This third novel comically expresses the story of a Park Ave. dentist, Paul O'Rourke. Paul is forced into a spiritual journey of sorts when his Internet identity is stolen by a strange sect, the Ulms, who follow a figure from the Old Testament." SHERRY L. CONNELLY

New Republic ★
"Recognizable human motive is what's missing from *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, in which people seem driven primarily by whatever conversation or action will occasion the next set piece. ... One trouble is that Ferris appears to take his narrator too seriously—giving Paul pages to amplify upon thoughts that aren't nearly as interesting as 'What's for dinner?'" SARAH COURTEAU

CRITICAL SUMMARY

In his first book, Ferris cleverly satirizes the workplace; in his second, he despairs over personal suffering and weakness. Here he focuses on the splintering of identity as he meditates on belonging, belief, ritual, religion, and existence. Indeed, the Ulm people become a device to help Paul find a way to understand himself. But if the idea of reading about arcane discussions of biblical history entertains somewhat, Paul himself is not that compelling a character. "Asking for the likes of Nathan Zuckerman might be too much. Even a lesser-Woody Allen character here would do," mourns the *New Republic* reviewer about the self-absorbed protagonist. Worse, the

"long summaries of ersatz biblical passages and the equally long narrations of Red Sox games serve to slow the book down even further," comments the *New York Times Book Review* critic. Ferris might not quite pull off all that he had hoped for in this novel, but he certainly asks provocative questions about how, if at all, we find meaning in life.



And the Dark Sacred Night

By Julia Glass



Julia Glass is a longtime freelance writer and editor, whose 2002 debut novel, *Three Junes*, won the National Book Award. The characters of Fenno McLeod, a book-

store owner, and Malachy Burns, a critic, both appeared in that novel and in subsequent ones, and they reappear here as minor characters.

THE STORY: Hoping to shake off a midlife crisis, mopey husband and failed academic Kit Noonan sets out to find the biological father he never knew. His quest for a sense of belonging in the world upends the lives of everyone in his path—from his mother, who inexplicably keeps his father's identity secret, to his lovable stepfather, the grandparents he meets for the first time, and a host of quirky relatives and friends. On a journey that brings him all over the country and into contact with all manner of colorful characters, including a pet parrot in Greenwich Village, Kit begins to embrace the beautiful chaos of family, love, and self-identity in modern life. Pantheon. 379 pages. \$26.95. ISBN: 9780307377937

San Francisco Chronicle ★ ★ ★ ★
"Like Alice Munro, Glass builds sad, radiant worlds out of provincial enclaves and captures the atmosphere of whole lives in the space of a line or a paragraph or a

Doctor Doubt
Lauren Groff

The New York Times Book Review. (May 18, 2014): Arts and Entertainment: p21(L). From *Literature Resource Center*.
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<http://www.nytimes.com>
Full Text:

TO RISE AGAIN AT A DECENT HOUR

By Joshua Ferris

337 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$26.

Asked to create a list of brain-shatteringly dull topics for fiction, you might be tempted to include the following things that appear in Joshua Ferris's "To Rise Again at a Decent Hour": modern dentistry, pseudobiblical esoterica, the death rattle of a relationship, insomnia, shopping malls, other people's spiritual anomie, other people's use of social media, the perils of said social media, and baseball.

(Baseball? I kid! I'm a good daughter of Cooperstown. And at least baseball is not as deathly as its near cousin, cricket. Cricket is also in this book.)

What gives "To Rise Again at a Decent Hour" a fighting chance against the forces of tedium is that it's a Joshua Ferris book, and the author has proved his astonishing ability to spin gold from ordinary air. His debut novel, "Then We Came to the End" (2007), is a satire told in first-person plural about the office culture of an ad agency, a premise that seems iffy on the surface. The novel, however, is vibrant and hilarious and full of heart; it deserved every drop of the tsunami of praise that engulfed it on publication. His second novel, "The Unnamed" (2010), was received less ecstatically, mostly because it was very different from the first; it is about a man whose compulsion to walk is so debilitating and uncontrollable that his formerly comfortable life implodes. It is icy where the first book is warm, difficult where the first is easy, and terribly sad where the first is filled with romping joy. I like "The Unnamed" immensely for its clarity and for how viscerally the main character's anguished restlessness is reproduced in the reader. Still, anyone toggling between the two books would experience a sense of whiplash, and when "The Unnamed" was published it was as if the owner of an exuberant golden retriever puppy had shown up at the dog park with a pet ocelot. What kind of madman keeps an ocelot and a golden retriever in the same kennel? one wonders. What other marvels is he keeping there? Readers who admired both books also admire the author's range and ambition.

Ferris's third novel falls somewhere between the voice-driven power of the first and the idea-driven metaphor of the second. The narrator is Paul O'Rourke, a Park Avenue dentist, Red Sox fan and serial enthusiast of short-lived pursuits, including the banjo, golf, women and secular Judaism. Most deeply, he's a functional orphan deeply scarred in childhood by his father's manic depression and eventual suicide. His longing for connection and fear of being hurt are so magnetically opposed he finds himself suspended between them, a middle-aged mostly loveless insomniac so depressed he's unable to act on his own behalf. He's a funny depressive, though, and there are marvelous moments in this book, particularly when Ferris gives us only the distant side of a conversation O'Rourke has with his super-Catholic dental hygienist, Mrs. Convoy, so we understand the ridiculous things he says only by implication. There's a set piece about a stool sample so funny that when it returned to me two weeks ago with my own hygienist's scaler in my mouth, she had to take a sighing cross-armed break until I stopped laughing. O'Rourke does not live without affection, but the affection resides entirely at work, where Mrs. Convoy worries about his smoking habit and where his kind ex-girlfriend is the receptionist. The dentist wishes to belong to a religious tradition and is fascinated by others' fascination with God, but is stymied by being an atheist himself.

Suddenly into this midlife ossification some stranger drops a social-media cluster bomb. A website is made for the office, though O'Rourke did not want or authorize one. His fury slides to dread, then wonder when someone starts making bizarre claims about a lost biblical people called the Ulms (or Amalekites) in the name of Paul C. O'Rourke. According to a book called the Cantaveticles, which the impersonator quotes all over the Internet, the Ulms are a scattered group of descendants from a tribe practically wiped out by the Jews in the first recorded genocide. The Ulms' identity is not based on belief in God; rather, it is based on doubting God -- and to watch as O'Rourke is slowly seduced out of his doubts about this group, whose sole philosophical flag is doubt, is one of the pleasures in a book filled with them.

Yet O'Rourke is a true depressive; his longing is palpable, but he can barely rouse himself to act. Throughout the book, he mostly spins his obsessions before the reader over and over again, like a betta fish furiously stubbing its snout on the glass walls of the fishbowl whenever anybody moves in the room. This is clearly intentional, but it gives the narrative an airless, claustrophobic quality. The long summaries of ersatz biblical passages and the equally long narrations of Red Sox games serve to slow the book down even further.

Near the end of the novel comes this passage: "Baseball is the slow creation of something beautiful. It is the almost boringly paced accumulation of what seems slight or incidental into an opera of bracing suspense. The game will threaten never to end, until suddenly it forces you to marvel at how it came to be where it is and to wonder at how far it might go. It's the drowsy metamorphosis of the dull into the indescribable."

More than anything, this paragraph appears to be the kind of blueprint novelists sometimes slyly plant in their books to illuminate the project of the work at hand. It is valuable as a yardstick against which we might measure the book's

achievements. "To Rise Again at a Decent Hour" is an "almost boringly paced accumulation of what seems slight or incidental"; in the middle I did feel threatened it would never end; there is a "drowsy metamorphosis" in Paul O'Rourke. If I never found the novel an "opera of bracing suspense," it may be because I was so worn down by O'Rourke's incessant circling around his self-hatred and fear and inability to make a substantive effort, that when change does in fact come to him, it feels a bit limp and clammy. If I were a different reader -- a dental enthusiast, say, a Red Sox fan, a God seeker or an authority on alternate biblical history -- each recurring obsession might have given me an electric jolt, and the book would have maintained momentum; the ending would have been a real revelation. Building a novel intended to dazzle out of the dullest raw material takes oversize moxie, but there remains a gap between the book's intent and its final effect. This has to do more with the circular structure of the book's concerns -- Paul O'Rourke's glass fishbowl -- than with any failure of skill in Joshua Ferris, who (doubt not!) remains as brave and adept as any writer out there.

CAPTION(S):

PHOTO: Joshua Ferris (PHOTOGRAPH BY BEOWULF SHEEHAN)

By LAUREN GROFF

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One need not create a large body of major work in order to crack the history books. But a prolific artist whose output is for the most part gravely flawed is by definition problematic, and few artists of stature have been more problematic than Williams. Nor are all three of his still popular plays of equal quality. *Cat*, which has been revived repeatedly but without artistic success on Broadway, is a bloated period piece, a faded keepsake of the days when Broadway audiences could still be staggered by semi-candid talk of sexual heterodoxy.

On the other hand, I regard *The Glass Menagerie* as one of the two best American plays of the 20th century (the other being Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*), and I revised my once lukewarm estimate of *Streetcar* sharply upward after seeing a series of stagings that broke with the now iconic interpretation of the play enshrined in Kazan's 1951 film version, in which Stanley was played by Marlon Brando as a walking, talking phallus. *Streetcar* proves to be far more interesting when Blanche DuBois, not Stanley, is placed at the center of the action and presented not as a fluttery, ineffectual caricature of southern womanhood but as a mature woman of a certain age who is well aware of her sexual allure but cannot live with its implications.

Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh ends with a chronology of Williams's life whose final item, from 2011, is significant in this connection: "The Comédie-Française in Paris produces *Un tramway nommé Désir*, staged by American director Lee Breuer, the first play by a non-European playwright in the company's 331-year history." Of such tributes is immortality made. But the fact that *Streetcar*, *Cat*, and *The Glass Menagerie* are the only plays by Williams that have ever been successfully revived

on Broadway says much about the likely survival of most of the rest of his output. For like most autobiographical artists, he had only one story to tell, and after he transformed its characters into archetypes and told it twice—lit-

erally in *The Glass Menagerie*, symbolically in *Streetcar*—he had little choice but to tell it again with increasingly predictable variations. Small wonder that postmodern audiences stubbornly insist on preferring the real thing. ➤

Ferris Wheelhouse

To Rise Again at a Decent Hour

By JOSHUA FERRIS

Little, Brown and Company,
352 pages

Reviewed by FERNANDA MOORE

PAUL O'Rourke is a miserable man. To an outside observer, his life looks fine: He is a dentist with a thriving Park Avenue practice, a nice apartment in Brooklyn Heights, and all the usual upper-middle-class perks. To Paul, however, the world is a dismal place. The mouths his patients open wide aren't just mouths; they're doorways to "an interior most people would rather not contemplate—where cancer starts, where the heart is broken, where the soul might just fail to turn up." Cavities are "the eye stones of skulls"; molars "stand erect as tombstones." Even urging his patients to floss is much more than standard office procedure; to Paul, it represents "what I called hope, what I called courage, above all what I called defiance" against the inevitable time when "the heart stops, the cells die,

the neurons go dark, bacteria consumes the pancreas, flies lay their eggs, beetles chew through tendons and ligaments, the skin turns to cottage cheese, the bones dissolve, and the teeth float away with the tide."

Everyday happiness does not cheer Paul, who sees right through the shallow pleasures that sustain lesser mortals. "Everything was always something," he complains. "But something—and here was the rub—could never be everything." No hobby or diversion or relationship or cultural pursuit outlasts his disdain. He balks at ordinary courtesies, refusing to greet his staff politely ("I would say good morning sparingly, begrudgingly, injudiciously, or tyrannically.... What was so good about it anyway, the too-often predictable, so-called new morning?"). He worships his girlfriends until the inevitable moment when he doesn't, and then he sabotages the relationship and picks their characters apart. Even Paul's obsessive love for the Boston Red Sox has curdled: "The greatest disappointment of my adult life came in 2004, when the Red Sox stole the pennant from the Yankees and won the World Series," he says, gloomily.

In other words, Paul O'Rourke is a whiny, pretentious jerk. And thanks to a relentless first-person narrative that's composed almost

FERNANDA MOORE writes about fiction monthly in this space. Her short fiction has appeared in COMMENTARY as well.

exclusively of angry rants, we're stuck inside his roiling, misanthropic brain for the entirety of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, Joshua Ferris's third novel.

What Paul would *really* like, he says, is to believe in God. Religion, he thinks, could be the something that is everything, if only he could submerge his "reasoned, stubborn, skeptical thoughts" long enough to truly buy in. But Paul can't be bothered to read the Bible, which reduces him to "tears of terminal boredom." He taunts his Catholic hygienist with obnoxious jabs at her faith, and he sneers at the great churches of Europe, which he visited with his office assistant/ex-girlfriend Connie. "To me, a church is simply a place to be bored in," he says, after calling Connie (who's Jewish) a hypocrite for acting as if "the real God, the god of Dante and chiaroscuro, of flying buttresses and Bach" could be found in a European cathedral. Paul holds Judaism, which he finds "blessedly free of punishment and priggishness," in slightly higher regard than Christianity, but his truly embracing any religion is out of the question.

Over and over, he insists that he is categorically unable to believe in anything as absurd as God, and he never misses a chance to scoff at those who do believe. "I'm not immune to the allure of their fellowship of comforts. I, too, like to take part in sanctifications, hand-holdings, and large-hearted sing-alongs," he sniffs. "But I would be damned, literally damned, if any God I might believe in wanted me to go along with the given prescriptions."

The real problem, then, isn't that Paul is reasoned and stubborn and skeptical. The real problem is that he's a snob. When the plot takes a religious turn, we rub our hands together in glee: Surely Ferris must be setting his protagonist up for some

kind of divine reckoning. What a treat it will be to see this awful man brought to his knees in humility or worship or both! One unremarkable day, a patient still woozy from anesthesia buttonholes Paul in the waiting room, insisting that they're both members of a mysterious sect called the "Ulms." Then a website for Paul's practice—with strange, Biblical-sounding quotations appended to his biography—pops up on the Internet. Paul, furious, emails the site administrator to demand that the page be taken down. "I don't appreciate being associated with any system of belief. I'm an atheist," he insists. But Paul's fictive online presence mushrooms, and soon his Ulm-obsessed doppelganger is posting and tweeting and commenting in Paul's name all over the Web.

We are subsequently forced to endure Paul's semi-hysterical rants—none of which breaks new ground—about the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, iPhones (which Paul, proudly, calls "me-machines"), emoticons (Paul despises them but uses them anyway), and numerous other topics (cellphone contact lists, celebrity magazines, reality television) only tangentially related to the theft of Paul's identity. The way Connie moisturizes her hands vexes Paul for five full pages. It's difficult to convey just how tiresome this is. Only the idea that we are headed for a payoff—throughout, Ferris teases the reader with little snippets of plot—keeps us turning the pages.

Ferris introduces an enigmatic hedge-fund billionaire who may or may not be an Ulm and weaves together a hodgepodge of intrigue based on the themes of persecution, exile, skepticism, and cultish secrecy. There are ancient manuscripts, religious historians, rare-book dealers, and mysterious messengers who appear in Paul's office bearing coded messages. There's even a sexy "forensic anthropologist" in a Red Sox

cap, who shows up with genealogical documents proving Paul's an Ulm. What's more, Ulmish doctrine looks interesting at first. Its central tenets seem to involve martyrdom and doubt, exile and belonging, and persecution and entitlement; in other words, it's a perfect cult for Paul, whose emotional state perpetually toggles between all of the above. As Paul's correspondence with his online double flourishes, he is challenged and catechized; slowly, he begins to drop his guard. Perhaps the Ulms will do an end run around Paul's religious antipathy, and Ferris's novel will turn out to be a thought-provoking saga of modern-day conversion. Perhaps we'll even get to see Paul grow up.

Unfortunately, this collapses into a confusing, inchoate mess. After straining much too hard to make too many metaphysical points, Ferris fumbles his plot: Several 11th-hour digressions (including a long story involving a doomed romance between the founder of Ulmism and an Orthodox Jew) fatally cripple the narrative. Ferris does allow Paul an embarrassingly trite moment of revelation: After a long dark night of the soul on his balcony in Brooklyn, Paul concludes that his own life, "and the city's and the world's every carefree, winsome hour, were perfectly without meaning." Several pages later, he doesn't even make sense. "I was having a thought that was identical to other people's. I was on the inside with this thought," he blathers. "No longer alien to the in. I was in the very in."

Ferris is a writer of talent; his first novel (*And Then We Came to the End*) was an engaging, affectionate, and beautifully crafted send-up of a Chicago advertising agency, while his second (*The Unnamed*) was both eerie and fascinating. But *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* isn't in their league. In the end, it's a baffling, nonsensical disappointment. »