

Funny look at a not-so-funny subject; Book examines dark side of the world of business

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By Terrence Hackett

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NONFICTION.

The Big Bing: Black Holes of Time Management, Gaseous Executive Bodies, Exploding Careers, and Other Theories on the Origins of the Business Universe

By Stanley Bing

HarperBusiness, 346 pages, \$24.95

In fall 2001, when news surfaced about the financial scandal that engulfed accounting giant Arthur Anderson and energy behemoth Enron, writer Stanley Bing was no doubt shaking his head, sporting a sarcastic grin and mumbling to himself, "I told you so."

It wasn't necessarily that Bing--a pseudonym used by the writer best known for his magazine articles lampooning the business world-- had inside knowledge of the now-infamous accounting chicanery. But the highly relaxed business ethics, greedy executives and pervasive me-first mentality that came to light in the wake of the scandal lie at the heart of Bing's writing.

His new book, "The Big Bing," is a collection of his columns published in magazines such as Forbes and Esquire. The humorous, mean-spirited tone, rambling style and wide range of business-related topics are captured by the book's subtitle: "Black Holes of Time Management, Gaseous Executive Bodies, Exploding Careers, and Other Theories on the Origins of the Business Universe."

The world that Bing describes is as dangerous as it is depressing. It's rife with backstabbing co-workers; sadistic, ogre-like bosses; and corporate rank and file who are often clouded in a haze of fear and self-doubt.

Bing writes from his personal experience of nearly 20 years in an unnamed large corporation, describing a cast of white-collar characters all often marching in lock step to the drumbeat of self-interest.

"In business, politics is the art by which people work together to achieve their individual selfish ends," he writes to begin the chapter "Tales From the Political Crypt." "These can also coincide with the best interest of the company, by the way, so it's not necessarily a bad thing. And it's not that different than what goes on in the halls of government. We even have those guys with the huge helmets of white hair."

In today's climate, Bing's candor and humor are likely to resonate with a wide range of people. Those among the unemployed struggling to find work will take heart in his loud and liberal company-bashing. Those clinging nervously to their jobs--expecting the next wave of layoffs, salary cuts or benefit reductions--will likely find a degree of empowerment in Bing, given his knack for cleverly articulating their worst fears.

"The header of our parent division, in Houston, decides in the years of nervous, mercantile colonialism that the stock price could use a boost," he writes in the essay "I'll Get You in the End." "He sells us. Lots of high-fives at GHQ, and all of my friends lose their jobs. It's a brilliant piece of

business, don't get me wrong. I see that. Since then, sue me, I haven't liked the kind of people who divest things to improve the value of their options in the name of shareholder rights. Up theirs!"

Given that the book consists of dozens of individual, self-contained vignettes--with titles like "The Care and Feeding of Jerks," "Why Consultants Generally Suck" and "Even Paranoids Have Enemies"--it should make for good train reading or a brief lunchtime departure. Bing's strength no doubt comes from his need as a columnist to hook people from the get-go and keep them reading.

Anyone who has been uncomfortable at a company holiday party, for example, will be inclined to nod and smile while reading the first two sentences of his essay "Drinking on the Job":

"It was well into the corporate Christmas shindig when the chairman and I found ourselves face-to-ruddy face at the bar. The noise swirled around us like a monsoon as waves of liveried servants passed by with indistinguishable blobs on plumed toothpicks and, yes, I was loaded."

In addition to rendering these scenes and providing his unvarnished observations, Bing also offers his candid insider advice to the reader, drawing on either his personal experience or the experience of one of a seemingly endless numbers of friends who are investment bankers, lawyers and corporate middle managers.

In "Drinking on the Job," for example, he admonishes us to never turn down a drink offered by a boss or potential boss. He describes his friend Les attending an early morning interview for a prime software-company job and "a free-wheeling entrepreneurial type" executive greeting him in his suite with a bottle of vodka.

"`Have a blast?' the boss inquired," Bing writes. "Les, taken aback, replied, `I don't think so, sir. I just had breakfast.' The exec looked him over for a long moment, then politely asked, `What are you, some kind of pansy?'"

Bing is frank and unapologetic as he describes the litany of vicious and unsavory moments from his days in business. Because his style is prone to substantial exaggeration, it's hard to assume that all of the events he chronicles are factual. But as a reader, taking in another of Bing's predominantly funny, well-written anecdotes, the facts don't quite seem to matter so much.

And while Bing can be guilty of wordiness in his regular, long-winded rants, this becomes part of his charm. At times he even makes himself the target of his own humorous attacks. In "Rage Against the Machine" he writes:

"I am standing at the baggage claim at Kennedy airport in New York City, consumed by rage. I haven't been so angry since the last time this happened. I feel the blood rushing to my face, a churning geyser of bile launching itself upward into my esophagus. My head is spinning, and I believe that if I were just a couple of years older I might have a stroke. Where is my . . . limo?"

In between his anecdotes, he also offers up quizzes that let us determine if we are good liars and what circumstances we feel equate to an "ethical atrocity." Bing also continually offers kernels of business-survival advice, such as not to be afraid to acquire enemies: "`Only a doormat earns everyone's approval.'"

While it's easy to imagine that Bing is frequently writing with his tongue firmly in cheek, there are enough moments of personal reflection in his essays to suggest that at least some of his use of humor amounts to a well-honed survival skill.

In one essay he writes--sarcastically of course--about his envy for a friend who hit it big during the dot-com craze. In another he describes his father's consistent disapproval of him as a boy and the pain it caused. In these moments his joking is still funny, but it is also slightly revealing of the person behind the comic's mask:

"He's gone now, my dad, but that doesn't eradicate him from the List. Not at all. Who would I be without my resentment against my father? What would fuel the perpetual furnace of my anger? No, my dad remains indispensable. As long as I am me--and that looks like a life sentence--he stays. Call it continuity."

Other stories delve into his relationships--unsuccessful and otherwise. He even sadly recounts the death of a pet. The concluding message of the book is somewhat surprisingly not one of cynicism and rancor, but of bona fide hope.

"The place in which you work is soft, spongy, and amenable to manipulation," Bing writes in a piece dated April 26, 2003. "In fact, you have many tools you can use in your daily effort to establish control over the organization and, not coincidentally, your view of yourself."

After many years of pleasantly mean-spirited observations about the business world, Bing's parting thoughts seem as much a personal revelation and affirmation as they do an encouraging message to those who may feel they are mired in the trenches of corporate America.

Terrence Hackett is a Chicago writer and former management consultant.

[Illustration]

PHOTO GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO: (Book cover.) GRAPHIC: Illustration by Barrie Maguire.

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