

Hardcover: US

All walks of life

Joshua Ferris proves he's more than a one-hit wonder with his second novel, a tale of undoing whose protagonist suffers from an illness that compels him to walk until he drops

BY HELLER MCALPIN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO

Second novels, particularly those following wildly successful debuts, are notoriously challenging for writers. Yet Joshua Ferris, whose brilliantly original first novel, *Then We Came to the End* (2007), was nominated for a National Book Award and won the PEN-Hemingway Prize, makes it clear with *The Unnamed* that he is no flash in the pan.

Nor is he a one-note novelist. Where his first book was a hilarious and ultimately moving lampoon of the often juvenile behavior that prevails in office cubicle culture, his new novel is altogether darker in tone. It is about a happily married, highly successful Manhattan lawyer, "a handsome, healthy man, ridiculously horse-healthy and aging with the grace of a matinee idol," whose life falls apart because of a strange illness of unknown origin or cure that compels him to walk to the point of total exhaustion.

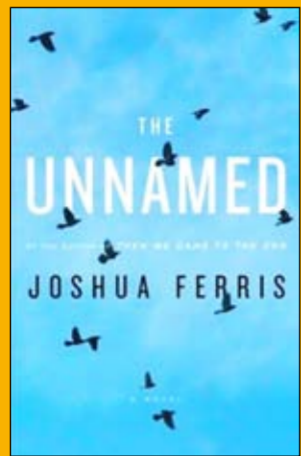
When the spirit moves him, Tim Farnsworth takes off, regardless of weather or legal duties. He treks until he drops. If he's able, he calls Jane, his wife of 20 years, and she drives to the Bronx or the wetlands or wherever he's crashed to pick him up, often in the middle of the night — but that gets old fast. They try countless doctors, medications, even handcuffing him to the bedpost, but to no avail. (Their teenage daughter wonders why they don't hire someone to safeguard him, and so do we; we also wonder why they don't institutionalize him.)

With masterly control, Ferris tracks the dashed hope of remissions and recurrences, the toll on Tim's marriage and career, and the devastation of his body and mind. His novel is filled with beautiful, haunting images, including a steamy city that's "a wading pool of cement heat" and "Geese with the white underbellies of bowling pins" squawking overhead. Some passages evoke Jon Krakauer's similarly intense tale of compulsive adventure, *Into the Wild*.

The Unnamed is existential nightmare fiction: Tim loses his cozy life and high-powered job, fingers and toes to frostbite, his sanity and, ultimately, his very sense of self. When new tests turn up nothing more specific than the vague non-diagnosis of "benign idiopathic perambulation," he thinks, "It was more of the same, exactly what he feared — greater inconclusiveness, additional absence of evidence, the final barrier removed from boundless interpretation. He was anything anyone wanted him to be — a nutcase, a victim, a freak, a mystery."

As he is taken over by his illness and "the enormity of a crumbling life," Tim's struggle becomes a

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THE UNNAMED

BY JOSHUA FERRIS
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REAGAN ARTHUR/LITTLE BROWN

battle between body and soul, each grappling for supremacy. His loss of control — like that of Gregor Samsa, who wakes up as a giant bug in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* — is emblematic of the human condition, essentially unfathomable and absurd.

Unlike Ferris' first novel, which was written from a hip, hard-to-pull-off first person plural point of view — we — *The Unnamed* is written in third-person narrative that generally keeps close pace with Tim's increasingly deranged psyche, backing away periodically for objective case-history-style updates, such as: "His condition never went into remission again, the walking never ceased."

Ferris paints another scathing portrait of corporate America (via Tim's reprehensible law firm), but what deepens *The Unnamed* and makes it so devastating is the heartbreaking chronicle of the Farnsworths' marriage and abiding love through cycles of illness and remission (including her cancer and alcoholism). Ferris writes, "The long matrimonial haul was accomplished in cycles. One cycle of bad breath, one cycle of renewed desire, a third cycle of breakdown and small avoidances, still another of plays and dinners that spurred a conversation between them late at night that reminded her of their like minds and the pleasure they took in each other's talk."

At once riveting, horrifying and deeply sad, *The Unnamed*, like Tim's feet, moves with a propulsion all its own. This is fiction with the force of an avalanche, snowballing unstopably until it finally comes to rest — when we come to the end, so to speak.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KLIPSCH

WIRELESS SYSTEM SENDS BACH OR BOWIE INTO YOUR LIGHT BULBS

Klipsch, the speaker manufacturer, has come up with a twist on multiroom audio: wirelessly sending music to light bulbs around the house.

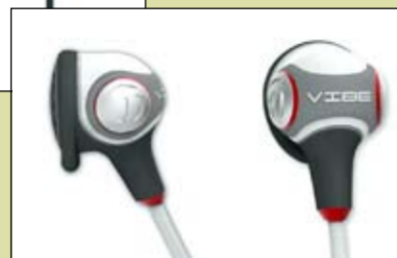
Its LightSpeaker System transmits music from a PC or iPod to a screw-in unit that combines a 20-watt speaker with a 10-watt LED lamp. A music source is plugged into the included transmitter, and a remote is used to both dim the lights and control the sending of the stereo signal to pairs of speakers. The transmitter can control up to four pairs of speakers, and send two different streams of music to them.

At US\$600 for the starter kit, plus US\$250 for each additional speaker, the system doesn't come cheap. Klipsch argues that with the lamp's expected 15-year life, simple installation and no need for in-wall wiring or amplifiers, the product will pay for itself in five years.

It's doubtful that many consumers think like that; most focus on the up-front cost. Otherwise, US\$80 LED replacement lamps would be selling like hotcakes.



Above: Sony's MDR-NC3000 Digital Noise Canceling Earbuds.



Right: Technocel's Ear Vibe stereo headset.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TECHNOCEL AND SONY

EARBUDS THAT DANCE OR NOT, AND HAVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Technocel, an electronic accessories company, introduced what it calls the Ear Vibe, "the first stereo headset that vibrates to the beat of your music" at the Consumer Electronics Show earlier this month. The US\$30 earbud-style headphones begin to move a bit when they encounter low-frequency notes. It's kind of a makeshift bass enhancement.

Perhaps it's somewhat coincidental that at the same trade show, Sennheiser, which makes audio accessories, displayed a new line of headphones that it had developed with Adidas. One of its selling points, Sennheiser says, is that the products "are insensitive to vibration." Go figure. For a more upscale version, serious listeners might consider Sony's latest effort in noise-canceling technology: the Sony MDR-NC3000 Digital Noise Canceling Earbuds, priced at a budget-canceling US\$300.

The tweak with Sony's headphones is artificial intelligence, which automatically selects the optimal noise cancellation mode based on the outside environment, like a plane, a train or an office. The headphones, which will run for about 20 hours on an AA battery, come with a variety of fittings to accommodate up to seven different sizes of ears. They will be available in next month.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOWERS & WILKINS

BOLDLY GOING WHERE BOSE HAS GONE BEFORE

Bowers & Wilkins — formerly called B&W, but that clashed with BMW — is the highly regarded British sonic innovator and maker of loudspeakers. Think of the company as the British Bose.

Some years ago, Bose began to chase another segment of the consumer market beyond loudspeakers, by introducing headphones and computer desktop speakers. At the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Bowers & Wilkins introduced headphones and computer desktop speakers.

The Mobile headphones are Bower's first for the consumer market, but the move is not surprising because the company has been after the iPod/iPhone customer for a couple of years with its Zeppelin and Mini Zeppelin iPod speaker docks. The Mobiles are designed as noise-isolating, not noise-canceling, and have sealed cups that wrap around the ears.

They should be available later this month, said a Bowers & Wilkins representative, who added that the ear pads were made of the "softest sheep leather from New Zealand."

STANDING GUARD OVER A LOST PHONE

Thoughts of cellphone security often dwell on the danger that hackers pose, but the far more likely threat comes from a phone that is simply lost or stolen. That leaves your personal information, photos and whatever else (you didn't store passwords on your phone, did you?) open to snooping.

WaveSecure, a free app for Android (also available for a variety of other phones, including Nokia), lets you use any computer to lock down your lost phone, locate it, erase the memory and, if the phone is recovered, restore much of the contents.

WaveSecure offers more features on some other phones, like allowing users to set automatic backups, which are not part of the Android app. The company said it was working to add that and other functions for Android, including backing up music, applications and settings.

In the meantime, the Android Market keeps a list of apps you've paid for, so you should not have to buy them again for your replacement phone. Music can be backed up to your computer. As for settings, make notes. You're on your own.

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Taiwan's secret weapon

When it comes to music, Taiwan punches far above its weight. So much so, argues Marc Moskowitz, that it is reshaping the PRC's culture

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

I first encountered Marc Moskowitz when I read his extraordinary study of the Taiwanese cult of propitiating fetus ghosts [reviewed in the *Taipei Times* on Aug. 12, 2001], one of the best books I've ever read about Taiwan. Now he's come up with *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow*, less sensational perhaps, but more far-reaching in its implications.

It's a study of Mandarin-language pop music, or Mando-pop, and it quickly becomes a paean of praise for Taiwan. Not only does it assert that this musical genre is far more serious and interesting than many critics have supposed. It goes on to demonstrate that its Taiwanese practitioners easily outstrip all others, taking a huge swathe of the vast worldwide Chinese-speaking audience by storm.

This thesis implies even more. What it suggests is that Taiwan — which could be viewed by those who only look at the politics of the case as being a tiny entity doomed to be dominated and eventually

absorbed by its far larger neighbor — is in the process of winning some sort of culture war for the hearts, and even the minds, of the entire pan-Chinese population.

Shanghai was where the Mando-pop genre was effectively born, Moskowitz tells us, in the 1920s jazz era. But it's Taiwan that is today "the undisputed ruler in this terrain." As for Beijing, it can be heard "shouting its condemnation of the music from the periphery."

"Taiwan's counter-invasion [of mainland China] has had profound effects on PRC culture," he writes. Rather than spawn a watered-down version of Western popular music, as is sometimes asserted, it has created a new musical ethos — a blend of traditional Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese and Western musical styles that has been transformed into something new and entirely delightful for Chinese-speaking audiences.

"It is nothing less than astounding," Moskowitz insists, "that Taiwan, which houses 23 million people, can dictate the musical tastes of a nation of 1.3 billion," so much so that the

government in Beijing "seems to worry that Taiwan is the proverbial tail wagging the PRC dog."

This isn't all. Crucial to the book's argument is the idea that Mando-pop subtly subverts any assertive, male-oriented, patriarchal view of life — something authoritarian regimes have embraced everywhere in the world, and throughout history. In its place this soft southern music envisages a more feminine ethic — women as "emotional, gentle, and passive victims," plus "a wider range of possible male identities," notably this music's characteristic *wenrou* (溫柔, "sensitive, tender") stance.

There's another consideration too. The lack of politics in Mando-pop, and its focus instead on personal lives, is actually a radical political statement. The celebration of people's individuality, and their individual existences, represents in many ways, the author argues, "an ideology for what China's future should be."

In a crucial chapter, Moskowitz argues that the dominant place of women in Mando-pop means that a feminized stance has become

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CRIES OF JOY, SONGS OF SORROW

BY MARC L. MOSKOWITZ
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associated with a sophisticated, internationalized lifestyle, though men may in reality often write the

music and lyrics that the women perform. Assertive masculinity is seen as uncouth, and associated with an unpleasant recent past, a time best forgotten and, at least implicitly, disdained.

Melancholy too, and the often secret feelings of isolation and loneliness that come from living in a rootless urban environment, are themes that are especially valued by this music's audiences. One of the author's Shanghai interviewees says that in Europe people are more open, but the Chinese tend to cover things up. As a consequence they like this genre's sad songs because they're talking about feelings everyone has, but that Chinese sometimes have a hard time expressing.

There is much else in this fascinating book. The focus is everywhere on Taiwan (Moskowitz interviewed 18 people in Shanghai, but 65 in Taipei). Taiwanese KTV, the implications of the decline of CD sales following the arrival of downloading to MP3-players, the reputation of Taiwanese Aborigines for an explicit sexual

allure, a fan base that's built up from live performances leading to recording contracts, rather than companies recording a relative unknown and then promoting their product — all these are discussed.

There are many photos of Taiwanese singers, too, several of them (including a dramatic one of Elva Hsiao (蕭亞軒) promoting the Hong Kong movie *Infernal Affairs* (無間道) on the book's front cover) credited to the *Taipei Times*.

Many prominent figures from the music business feature — Chang Chen-yue (張震嶽), Jolin Tsai (蔡依林), Wu Bai (伍佰), Jay Chou (周杰倫), David Tao (陶喆), Bobby Chen (陳昇), Singapore's Stefanie Sun (孫燕姿), who made her career in Taiwan, and Taipei music producer George Trivino, among others.

Moskowitz allows his opponents to have their say, notably those — including some in Taiwan — who consider Mando-pop beneath their consideration. He quotes former *Taipei Times* reporter David Momphard, writing in 2003 ("Taiwan, where pop music is

largely a pantheon of pretty faces") and considers the accusation that Mando-pop singers rarely write their own songs, concluding that there's no reason why such a system should necessarily be inferior to that prevailing in the West. Western singers rarely produce their own music videos, after all.

Moskowitz concludes as follows. "Mando-pop has dramatically reshaped PRC culture to make it look, act and sound more like Taiwan. It has ushered in a wealth of cultural values ... It has introduced transnational and global values in spite of the government's best efforts to prevent this and it has provided a model to prioritize the individual in opposition to state and Confucian ideals."

These may seem large claims to make for what the author accepts is "seemingly benign music." Even so, Moskowitz at the very least makes the case that there is a case to be made. As such, and despite its comparative brevity, *Cries of Joy, Songs of Sorrow* is a notable and welcome publication.