

BOOK REVIEW



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

Published by HarperCollins, 346 pages

\$38.95

Reviewed by Anne Papmehl

The Big Bing is a corporate survival handbook written by business humourist Stanley Bing. Whatever you do for a living, says the author, “a job is a job.” “People are people,” writes Bing. “And if you have to do a job with other people, that job begins to take on a human dimension, with all the annoying, bizarre, and grand displays of which we as a species are capable both individually and as a group.”

The book is a collection of two decades worth of columns that Bing has contributed to Esquire and Fortune magazines, artfully arranged to form a cohesive whole. In these writings, a befuddled Bing wryly observes, theorizes, and muses on the bizarre quirks of the executive class in his corporation, while at the same time aspiring to be part of it, or at least enjoy some of its perks.

The Big Bing studies organizational behaviour at its best and worst. From his first entry level position to his final attainment of grandeur or “veryness” in the executive suite, Bing takes us on his laborious climb up the organizational ladder, pointing out the more ridiculous aspects of business practice and corporate culture while sharing handy tips on how to not only survive it but get what you want.

Getting what you want requires strategy and the possession of some valued skills like the ability to give good phone, take lunch with distinction, and sneak in an afternoon nap without getting caught. There is much more within Bing’s corporate mole purview and he discusses it all: difficult bosses, consultants, business travel, meetings, mergers, and how to lose your temper strategically. “Scream at people, if you can,” he advises. “At the same time you’re asserting your human rights, strip others of theirs. This is one of the big perks of truly stressed out people.”

What particularly stresses out Bing is technology, which he elaborates on in the chapter “Big Tech Attack.” He covers every aspect of our tech dependence: cell phones, spam, and why it’s okay not to want a palm pilot. E-mail is one of our biggest time-wasting addictions, but thankfully there is “e-hab.”

Bing gives a hilarious account of our over-reliance on e-mail in the column entitled, “Log Off, You Losers!” in which Bing, Bob, and Ted try to arrange a conference call through an assistant. “By the time it was over, I believe more than 100 e-mails of one form or another had crossed the electronic portal, popping up like cockroaches that keep pouring into a nighttime kitchen no matter how many efforts you make to kill them.” In Bing’s world, phone reigns supreme. “Aside from the credit card, the phone is the ultimate business tool.”

A highly literate man, Bing’s ability to play with language is admirable and impressive. At times it’s salty, other times bombastic, and sometimes downright simple, but always funny. Literary allusion, albeit in altered form, appears from time to time, such as the reference to the famous line from Dante’s Inferno in his column entitled “Abandon all hope, ye who hit ‘enter.’”

He also injects a few linguistic inventions of his own like “schmendrick.” “A schmendrick,” Bing explains, “always speaks his mind. A schmendrick trusts other people simply because they are sitting close by and having a beer.”

But it’s not just the wit and humour that hold our attention; it’s also the deft storytelling via Bing’s friends, colleagues, and bosses, all representing universal business archetypes that most of us are familiar with, or recognize within ourselves.

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The book is divided into 11 chapters, each dealing with a specific organizational theme and concluding with a “latte break” where you’ll find things like the corporate ethics quiz or 20 good reasons to cry. “Twenty-four-year-old MBAs who earn over a million dollars a year and complain their lives are empty” is one such theme.

If you’re looking for a break from the more dour business and financial books out there, take The Big Bing with you on your next long-weekend retreat. •