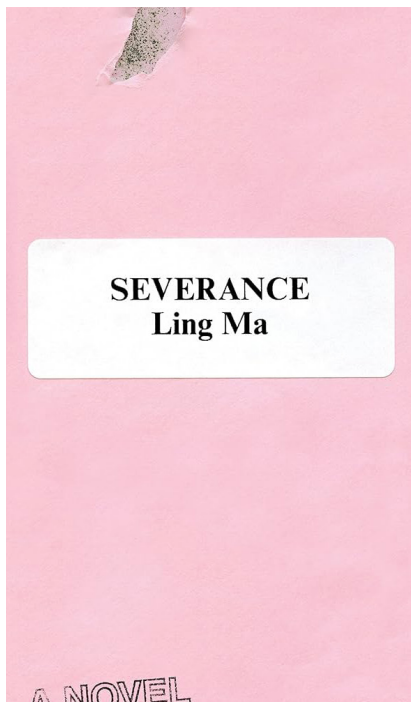


Book Review: *Severance* by Ling Ma

Reviewed by Alexis Wall



Some apocalypses arrive with fire. Ling Ma's *Severance* begins with office routines, production schedules, and a woman who keeps going to work anyway. That is what makes the novel so unsettling. Its deepest horror is not chaos, but routine: the deadening pull of work, the comfort of repetition, and the quiet way people are absorbed into systems that no longer serve them. For readers interested in ethics, labor, and cultural production, *Severance* offers more than a survival story. It offers a warning.

The novel follows Candace Chen, a millennial office worker in New York City whose job involves overseeing the production of Bibles manufactured overseas. As Shen Fever spreads and the city slowly empties, Candace

continues going to work, clinging to routine even as everything around her unravels. Its opening line, "The End begins before you are ever aware of it," perfectly captures the novel's movement. In *Severance*, collapse is not sudden. It is gradual, procedural, and embedded in everyday life.

One of the novel's strengths is how effectively Ma tells the story by centering repetition, numbness, and routine. That choice makes the social critique much sharper. Candace's decision to keep reporting to the office sounds absurd, but it is believable, perhaps because many of us know what it feels like to keep performing normalcy in the middle of dysfunction. That is where much of the horror of the book lives. It is also what makes the novel feel like such a powerful allegory for modern life.

From an ethical perspective, Candace's work in Bible production raises questions about commodification, labor, and the uneasy relationship between meaning and profit. A sacred text becomes just another object in a global supply chain. In that sense, the novel seems to suggest that industries built around culture and meaning are not immune from becoming hollowed out by routine and commerce. Readers in the publishing industry may find this especially resonant. *Severance* reflects concerns that feel familiar to the field: invisible labor, outsourcing, burnout, and systems that depend on people continuing to produce even when the purpose behind the work has become thin.

Ma is effective in her critique of modern dependence and consumerism. Early in the novel, Candace remarks, "We didn't know how to survive so we Googled everything". The line is humorous, but it also reveals how removed people have become from direct knowledge, self-trust, and each other.

The detached voice is one of the novel's most intriguing qualities, though it may not work for every reader. At times, I found myself putting the book down, not because it lacked insight, but because Candace's emotional distance can make the narrative feel cold. Still, that distance fits the novel's larger themes of numbness and repetition. Not all readers will agree with this point, particularly those who prefer more emotionally expressive protagonists or stronger interpersonal dynamics. The later sections involving the group of survivors are also less gripping than the portions set in New York. A few of the secondary characters feel more symbolic than fully developed, which slightly weakens the novel's momentum.

Even so, *Severance* remains a thoughtful and well-crafted novel because its style supports its message. By the end, the novel broadens its critique beyond Candace's personal experience, observing, "To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems." That line captures the novel's larger significance. It is not just about surviving the end of the world; it is about the systems people uphold every day, often without question, and the emptiness that can emerge when productivity replaces purpose.

Although *Severance* is not a traditional text on ethics in publishing, it still fits meaningfully within those conversations. It adds to current discussions

about labor, value, and cultural production by showing how systems built around meaning can become detached from the people within them. I would recommend this novel to readers in publishing, to scholars interested in labor and cultural critique, and to general readers drawn to literary fiction that is both unsettling and observant. Despite some emotional distance and a less engaging supporting cast, *Severance* is well worth reading for anyone interested in the ethics of work, the cost of routine, and the quiet violence of impossible systems.