

## A grave take on satire

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### Greg Hassall

As a former funeral director, Robin Baker is not surprised to be drawn to a twisted tale with themes of murder and madness, writes Greg Hassall.

THE publication last month of Robin Baker's debut novel should warm the heart of aspiring young writers everywhere. Baker, 27, wrote

Killing Richard Dawson between the ages of 18 and 22, while majoring in creative writing at university. He sent it to a few literary agents but it was rejected and he eventually put it aside.

"I not so much forgot about it as moved on," the Perth writer says. "Life gets in the way. Full-time work and getting out of uni, you don't really have the time any more. Then I

re-read it last year, more as a straight story than something I had written, and ended up enjoying it more than I remembered."

He decided to resubmit it and, within a week, saw an ad placed by a new publisher, Pantera Press, looking for manuscripts. He sent it in and Pantera accepted it, making Baker its first fiction signing. "I sent it off not expecting any feedback other than, 'Yes, it's good, keep going,' or 'Give up, you're never going to make it.' So it was very surprising but very pleasing at the same time."

In the years between writing the novel and getting it published, Baker worked briefly as a teacher ("That just came out of having an English degree and not having any direction") before quitting and becoming - of all things - a funeral director. Given that Killing Richard Dawson is a twisted tale of murder, madness and Gen Y disaffection, it's tempting to see in Baker's career choice the manifestation of a profoundly morbid streak. The reality, however, appears more prosaic.

"It started off as a bit of a joke," Baker says. "I kind of figured, who the hell wants to work in the funeral industry? I figured there'd be plenty of work going. I subsequently discovered it's quite the other way around ... but, luckily, within a week of my teaching contract expiring there was an ad in the paper for a funeral director, so

I applied and I got it."

In person, Baker combines the quiet formality you'd expect of his former career with the slight unease of a writer on his first publicity tour. Thoughtful and polite, he seems the unlikely creator of such a nihilistic and violent book.

Told from the perspective of an alienated university student, Killing Richard Dawson describes a succession of soulless social engagements and increasingly unhinged behaviour. The narrator lives with his senile grandmother and struggles to make meaningful connections, moving in a small circle of acquaintances for whom he has little affection. There are shades of American Psycho but with a distinctly Australian air of suburban ennui.

Baker says he enjoyed the challenge of making an "inherently unlikeable" character sympathetic. "Even though he does these horrible things you still sort of feel sorry for him in some ways and hopefully, by the end, you kind of like him a little bit," he says. "I think he has good intentions but he's just so in his own little world, so out of it, that he doesn't know how to act in society."

Baker admits he's attracted to dark and challenging themes. "I like thinking and talking about the darker end of the spectrum," he says. "I think when people are happy they're content to just tread water and float and it's only when you sort of get caught in the rip that you need to fight to stay afloat - and I think that's when people's true colours come out.

"That's why I like putting characters through the wringer, putting them through hell just to see how they're going to come out at the end."

Killing Richard Dawson is an ambitious novel, full of ambiguity and narrative tricks, particularly in the final chapters. Baker says early drafts of the book were even more experimental but people who read it found it too strange. He recalls some salutary advice he received from an author at a writers' workshop. "He told me that it's much easier to get famous and then get weird rather than the other way around, so that's when

I made it a bit more of a standard first-person story with dialogue and narration and I started getting much more positive feedback."

It's impossible to talk about the novel's twists without spoiling the ending, so Baker prefers to describe the

book in broad terms. "I tell people it's a black comedy, a romantic thriller, which is about as general as you can possibly get," he says.

It says something about Baker's sensibility that he describes the book as a comedy or romance and he admits not everyone shares his reading of it. "The thing that surprised me the most about the feedback is people focusing on how dark and disturbing it is and how uncomfortable it makes them," he says. "I've always thought of it as more of a straight-out comedy."

Baker is clearly thrilled to have a novel published but insists he'd write regardless, simply for his own enjoyment. It's easy to be cynical about such statements from writers but Baker has the track record to back it up, having written constantly since he was eight. He started with short horror stories and wrote his first novel between the ages of 13 and 17 ("It wasn't particularly good but at least it was finished"). Killing Richard Dawson came next and, at 23, he launched into the next book, a novel about a "disgruntled twentysomething feng shui consultant who is a drug-abusing con man". Titled Chasing the Sun, it will also be published by Pantera.

"It's taking a bit longer, that one," Baker says. "As my interests change as I get older, what it's about sort of changes as well. I think one of the things that has thrown me is that a lot of the characters are vampires. This was pre-Twilight, so that came out and I was, 'Oh no.' I have no real interest in vampires as such, it's more of a metaphorical sense. But now that vampires have become this other thing, I'm having to consciously try to stay away from that as much as I can.

"It's not a vampire novel, it's a novel with vampires in it. I sort of looked at the rules [about vampires] and cut out all the boring ones, the ones I didn't like. They are there to serve the story, not the other way around."

One thing we won't see from Baker any time soon is a novel set in the funeral business, even though he enjoyed Alan Ball's television series Six Feet Under. "I'm quite uncomfortable writing anything too specific about the industry just in case people recognise themselves," he says. "It's an industry where you need to be aware and respectful of people. The majority of people you meet, it's the worst day of their life, so you've got to be conscious of that all the time."

Given his success at resurrecting novels from his youth, might it be time to revisit that first effort, written during his

mid-teens? Baker gives a wry smile. "That's something

I can't quite bring myself to read just yet," he says.

Killing Richard Dawson by Robin Baker is published by Pantera Press, \$24.99.

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