

Black comedy is hard on Gen Y

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KILLING RICHARD

DAWSON

Robin Baker

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Generation Y is often thought of as a generation with nothing to believe in. It's a Nietzschean approach to life with more sex, interesting pants and even fewer ideals. In this novel, one member of the generation is given something to believe in: killing Richard Dawson.

Once you learn the biography of author Robin Baker, *Killing Richard Dawson* is the kind of novel you might expect him to write. Baker was an English teacher and then a funeral director before the new Australian company Pantera Press decided to publish his first novel, also Pantera's first novel. Baker's debut puts his linguistic ability to unusual use, twisting themes such as death, malaise, nightclubs, generational angst and more death into the shape of a black comedy. Baker also happens to be a member of the much-disparaged generation Y.

Killing Richard Dawson is a darkly comic story about a boy. His father dies when Richard is small and a few years later his mother commits suicide by putting her head in the oven. Our protagonist mistakes the attention she's paying the oven for a lengthy cleaning session and goes to bed to sleep while she dies. It's all rather bleak.

Killing Richard Dawson is narrated by this boy when he is an unhappy twentysomething and a contemporary university undergraduate. As a listless student making the most of the university experience by eating a \$1.50 container of fries in the campus cafeteria and planning which nightclub to complain about, he is part of the generation Y cliché. When he calls his friend by the nickname "Fatty Mel" because she joins him for meals and shows signs of developing an eating disorder, it goes beyond cliché. Even more so when Mel dies.

Generation Y plays its role in this novel as a collection of the senselessly apathetic. Baker's characters have an approach to life that is pointedly devoid of meaning, hope and passion. When the protagonist confesses that he's depressed, his friend Beau comforts him by dismissively suggesting he's got company: "We're all depressed. That's the single main defining characteristic of our generation. But what can you do? Just roll with it, man. And try not to let it run you over."

Here Baker is out to satirise youth culture. He can't equal the misanthropic agility of someone like Evelyn Waugh, who made merry with the vacuous recreational methods of the bright young things in the 1920s, but his intent is similar. A conversation in *Killing Richard Dawson* runs for pages while several friends debate which nightclub they should go to, in a way that is realistic, amusing and unflattering.

As befits such a dark tale, the main character is something of an antihero. He's socially awkward, violent and filled with hatred. His mental stability is questionable, even more so when halfway through the novel he starts to feel that he's crawling with ants. These aren't the qualities of a glorious hero. Literature is, of course, populated with many unpalatable protagonists; Stendhal, Dostoevsky and Salinger are responsible for a few famously successful creations. But the question is, can readers relate to Baker's narrating voice?

The genre of black comedy is perhaps more accessible in film than it is in literature if the type isn't of immediate interest. It's not an easy style. In *Killing Richard Dawson*, the comic element that supplements the blackness is open to interpretation. Black comedy demands a balance between horror and levity to create something grotesquely funny. The humour coaxes you into accepting the deaths, to disregard the actual consequences of what's happening. The humour in *Killing Richard Dawson* is sporadic. The darkness is not.

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