This is the author’s radio script of this article.

Review for Writers Radio by Gillian Dooley recorded 1 September 2007.

Rohypnol is Andrew Hutchinson’s first novel, a study of the amoral world of a seventeen-year-old boy who seems to recognise no boundaries, no right or wrong, just the pursuit of sensation and power in a continual present without regard for consequences.

The narrator, whose name we don’t ever learn, is part of a Melbourne gang of five young men whose crime of choice is date rape. Threaded through the narrative of his involvement with the gang are his reports of sessions with an attractive female psychologist which he represents as contests of will: he is always one step ahead of her, aware of all her theories about body language and techniques for breaking through to disaffected youth; and a kind of manifesto of what he calls ‘The New Punk’, which he is apparently writing as part of his ‘therapy’:

So I’m writing this for them. A requirement. I’m writing about everything.
How everything went wrong. My parents, paying good money for my therapy, I want them to read this. I want them to know all of it. But most of all, I want them to know that this – the therapy, the police, the court trials – I want everyone to know that this won’t change a thing. The psychologist, the concerned families, the people who know better – I want them all to read this and know I will not change. (8)

In scenes that make A Clockwork Orange seem mild and optimistic, this boy and his friends charge through life with reckless, destructive energy, living at the edge because ‘normal life is too normal’, and ‘tomorrow we could be dead. That is the worst that can happen to us.’ In fact it is not the worst that could happen, as some of the gang eventually learn.
The New Punk, he writes, ‘is not about guilt. … Guilt is for people who think they can be forgiven. … The New Punk is about rejecting guilt. … Note to psychologist: I do not feel guilty about what I have done. … I refuse to be a safe little nobody. … The New Punk is not about guilt. What’s done is fucking done.’ (174-6)

Hard, uncompromising stuff. But occasionally humanity tries to break through this carapace – not often; but sometimes, where his mother is concerned, for example, or his imagination takes him into other people’s worlds, he softens momentarily. Such as when he is looking at the train tracks ‘stretching into the underground tunnels beneath Federation Square. They are dimly lit and heartbreaking. I imagine homeless people who’ve died down on those crossways and sleepers.’ (171)

Are we invited to see redemption for this young man in these few hints of compassion? This is left unresolved. Meanwhile, *Rohypnol* is a bravura performance of an extremely disturbing voice. The characterisation is deft and exact, and the storyline, though chopped and fragmented, gradually comes into focus. Although the narrator’s words are designed to shock and outrage, in the end the book itself, through the skill of the writing, manages to present an overall view broader than that of this intelligent young psychopath.