Gordon Graham’s funny and disturbing novel *Top Bloke* is a beautifully sustained satire on the effect the modern world can have on a weak mind.

Gerard Oakes, the hero and narrator of this story, has an unerring instinct for self-deceit, using every tired platitude he has picked up from motivational sales courses and football training to build up an ego which actually has a more urgent need of knocking down to size. “I’m a strong man,” he says, “they don’t come much stronger, always determined and focused clearly on the goals ahead, but these reversals I’ve had, they’ve taken their toll. … I can’t let this stuff get the better of me, I’ve got too much pride for that, from now on I’ve got to think only about me. If I don’t, who will?” He manages to take every setback, large or small, in his stride, using all the tricks pop-psychology has to offer, until he ends up in situation even he can see is hopeless – and becomes a blubbing wreck.

Like all good novels with anti-heroes, Graham manages to make his readers want contradictory outcomes. Gerard is an idiot, and a dangerous one at that, and you couldn’t call him likeable. Somehow, though, we don’t want to see him destroyed – just locked up where he can’t do any more harm.

Graham’s impersonation of the hapless and hopeless Gerard never falters. The language is perfectly judged. The whole book is narrated in the present tense, keeping the momentum all the way through: there is just enough jargon and cant to keep Gerard’s unfortunate personality in the foreground without interfering with the narrative flow. Relentlessly, Gerard goes on
blaming his problems on stress, conspiracies and bad luck, when we can see that he’s constitutionally incapable of sustaining the shallowest relationship or the most worthless job. It is stress, he reasons, which loses him his place in the footy side and causes him a string of financial problems – never mind that he offended the umpire and failed to pay his bills.

Gerard’s downhill slide is accelerated by his obsession with Australia’s second-worst mass murderer, Lester Allardyce. The fact that he had known him slightly gives him a disproportionate sense of his own importance, and a compulsion to prove it to the world. Unwittingly he becomes more and more like Lester, who he regards, of course, as a complete loser. The only people he manages to keep convinced of his own continuing success as an elite athlete, top executive, and smooth operator, are his parents: a mother from whom he obviously inherited his tendency to think in cliches, and a hen-pecked father – a frighteningly pathetic pair that Gerard idolises. Meanwhile, his girlfriend, employers, business associates and mates all discard him and melt away as he becomes madder and less reliable.

The skill of this book is undeniable. The morality might trouble some. Like a Quentin Tarantino movie, *Top Bloke* has us laughing out loud at situations which are brutal and horrific as well as bizarre. Mostly Gerard is pathetic, but this novel is a reminder – if we needed one – of what can happen when the weak-minded are convinced of their superiority, and can get their hands on the firepower to demonstrate it.