

Review of *Working Class Zero* by Rob Payne (Pan Macmillan, 2003)

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

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Working Class Zero is the unpromising title of a novel by Rob Payne, set in Canada, which has just been published in Australia. I expected something flippant and superficial, but I was pleasantly surprised. It turns out to be a clever, satisfying and absorbing novel.

Jay Thompson, the first person narrator and main character, at 30 is working in a bank in Toronto. This is not normally a job thought of as working class, but, as he explains, "This is the factory of the new millennium, the new working class, where industrious drones keep track of other people's wealth as it accumulates." Jay gets promotions which amount to more responsibility with no more money – "HMS Trust, a multi-billion dollar institution, one of the most successful trust companies in the country, can't pay the shareholders if we don't all take a hit."

Jay's life is an endless round of tedium and irritation. Perhaps oddly, I was reminded of Jane Austen. Rob Payne manages to make us care about the drab details of Jay's life, perhaps because, like Austen, he gives the narrative a constant but very muted kind of ethical grounding. Time will tell, I suppose, whether Rob Payne will still be admired 200 years from now, but in the meantime, I enjoyed *Working Class Zero* immensely.

This novel is apparently a sequel. Rob's web page tells us of an earlier book, *Live by Request*, not yet published in Australia, describing the career of Jay's rock group. Members of the group are characters in the new novel, and there is the possibility of a revival at the end, so perhaps there is another sequel to come.

Payne has used a straightforward narrative style for *Working Class Zero*. There are no gimmicks, just good, well-paced narrative. The novel begins on one working day, and ends about six weeks later. We learn all we need to know about Jay's past and present – his divorced parents and dysfunctional family, his troubled relationship with his girlfriend, a PhD student specialising in "English Literature slash Antisocial Neglect of her Life Partner", his musical aspirations and so on. The background is integrated effortlessly into the story.

The novel is full of perceptive humour:

I think everyone has a year when they get frozen into their own personal style, never quite able to evolve and keep up with the new vibe, even if they listen to the right music and read enough fashion magazines.

Something always betrays that year. Forget about being an Aries or a Libra, water or air sign, I think we should identify ourselves by the year our feet stepped out of the primordial mud of our youth and became stuck in our adult identities.

But it's not all whimsy and stereotypes. When Jay's father has a health scare, he is struck by a sudden intimation of mortality: "If life is a journey, time should pull over at a rest stop sometimes – we should all be given a chance to get off and stretch our legs, collect our thoughts and reorganize." Payne manages to inject his philosophical messages with a light touch – "The secret is," he advises near the end, "to keep moving and try to see the people you love for what they are: flawed, beautiful and as confused as you."

Jay never gets to feel very cordial towards most of his fellow drones at the bank, especially his superiors, but he does show that his former band colleague Tyler is not only a pretentious prat but a good and loyal friend, his girlfriend Jan is not a self-obsessed vixen about to ditch him but equally anxious to make their partnership work, and that Jay himself is able, despite severe temptation, to resist the flirtations of a pretty 20-year-old and remain faithful. Yes, there is a happy ending, but it's a credible one, and there are threads left untied. Let's hope for that sequel.