

Bill Leak. *Heart Cancer*. ABC Books

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley in *The Adelaide Review*, October 28, 2005, p. 19.

Bill Leak is a cartoonist. His droll comments on politics amuse readers daily in the *Australian*. Not content with a string of awards for his newspaper work, he has decided to branch out into fiction. Unhappily, the skills required are quite different and Leak's first novel, *Heart Cancer*, is not a success.

Most importantly, he doesn't manage to convince us that his main character is worth the time it takes to read 282 pages. Frank Thornton is basically a thug with an artistic streak who falls backwards into a highly-paid job in advertising early in life, which, incredibly, he manages to retain through more than 20 years of idleness and insulting behaviour to a long-suffering boss. Frank relentlessly drinks, snorts coke and chases women, putting in an appearance at the office occasionally to secure the wherewithal, when not in hospital recovering from well-deserved beatings. The standard of his jokes is supposedly what makes him shine as a copywriter. If what he comes up with in dialogue is any indication, his forte is appealing to the lowest common denominator. A typical witticism is his description of an attractive young woman: 'Rather be in her than the Boy Scouts.'

In his forties, this disaster of a human being meets The One. We are assured that Frank's friends love him for qualities he doesn't know he possesses, and we have to take that on trust. What the exquisite Xin Xin Leroq sees in him is obscure too. Apparently her SNAG boyfriend is boring and she's hankering after a bit of rough.

Unfortunately their meeting precipitates a life-changing experience for Frank, and in the final pages of the book he becomes a reformed alcoholic. Not only does he reform himself, but he sets out to reform others, like Xin Xin's unfortunate junkie brother – by the delicate means of shipping him off to a prawn trawler in the Timor Sea against his will. With friends like Frank, who needs professional help?

The first part of the book is tedious, crude, self-indulgent and melodramatic. Frank is clearly meant to be viewed ironically, but unfortunately the distance between author and character just isn't large enough. I was reminded of Gordon Graham's *Top Bloke*, where a horrendous male is portrayed with perfectly judged detachment, resulting

in one of the funniest books of recent times. Leak secretly seems to admire Frank's appallingness, and the odd bit of breast-beating isn't enough to convince us that he really has a heart of gold underneath.

But the most truly nauseating part comes at the end, with Frank's conversion to the teetotal cause. We're solidly in Bryce Courtenay territory, although, blessedly, the word count is lower.

There are continuity problems here and there, too much repetition of the 'did you hear what happened ...?' variety, and the emotional logic driving the novel is often unclear. Altogether an unpromising start for a new career.