



## Incompetence

*Rob Grant*

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Bad is the new good. In the not too distant future the European Union enacts its most far reaching human rights legislation ever. The incompetent have been persecuted for too long. After all it's not their fault they can't do it right, is it? So it is made illegal to sack or otherwise discriminate against anyone for being incompetent. And now a murder has been committed and our possibly incompetent detective must find out who the murderer is. As long as he can find directions to get him through the mean streets.

## **Incompetence Details**

Date : Published 2004 by Gollancz (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780575074491

Author : Rob Grant

Format : Paperback 291 pages

Genre : Fiction, Science Fiction, Humor, Comedy

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## From Reader Review Incompetence for online ebook

### Adam Whitehead says

In the all-to-near future, the European Union is well on its way to becoming a single federalised state. Unfortunately, due to the passing of Article 13199 of the Pan-European Constitution ("No person shall be prejudiced from employment in any capacity, at any level, by reason of age, race, creed or incompetence,"), the continent is grinding to a halt. One detective is assigned to track down a dangerous killer, but finds his investigation complicated by blind nightclub bouncers, octogenarian male lap-dancers, priapic train stewards and airline ticket salesmen with attention disorders.

Incompetence, originally published in 2003, was the second original novel by Rob Grant, better-known to many SF fans as the co-creator of Red Dwarf. One of Grant's favourite topics, shown sporadically in Dwarf but reaching a kind of insane art form here, is the sheer, mind-numbingly unbelievable insanity that bureaucracy is capable of. Obviously the EU, with its perchance for fining corner-shop greengrocers who sensibly refuse to use measurements its customers find incomprehensible thousands of pounds for each infringement, is a tempting and irresistible target for his humour.

The result is a book driven by the type of comedic raging fury of the kind that Basil Fawlty would have channeled should he have ever chosen to write a novel (although this would be an admittedly difficult task for a fictional character) about the European Union. Our 'hero' is on the trail of a deadly killer but the case is interrupted by every five minutes by increasingly bizarre and convoluted brushes with EU law or regulations. He hires a car, but in the interval between hiring it in the office and crossing the parking lot to where his hire-car is waiting for him, it's been clamped for being parked in the wrong place. Trying to get on a train takes 22 pages of insane, and at times life-threatening, wrangling. The police attempt to stop a runaway car but can't come up with a way of doing it effectively so end up deploying anti-tank weaponry. And so on.

It's a very, very funny book. The laughs start on the first page and don't stop until the last. And it's not even as if the author is really succeeding at making a serious point about the EU. The situations the main character finds himself in are so insanely over-the-top they will almost certainly never happen, although there's a few that do seem somewhat plausible (like the one about the old guy who is accidentally declared dead and his wife receives a fat cheque from the government, so they decide to keep up the pretense he is dead).

In addition to the non-stop comedy and satire, there are a few nice moments of understated writing as well. There's a blink-and-you-miss-it moment towards the end where our (unnamed, by the way, I haven't just forgotten what his name is) protagonist proves how competent he is, even if the rest of Europe isn't. And to be honest the main, more serious plot is never really given a lot of time to develop, due to the constant misadventures and brushes with bureaucracy along the way.

But that's not too much of a problem. Incompetence (\*\*\*\*) is extremely funny from start to finish and constantly entertaining. The book is available now in the UK, but unsurprisingly not in the USA (possibly for fear that Americans would accept it as a serious and well-informed factual book about the EU), although Amazon.com has some import copies available.

I talked to Rob Grant at the Gollancz Autumn Party and he informed me that this book is being adapted as a stage play by a Swiss (I think) company. How on Earth they'd do the book on stage I'm not sure, but it would certainly make a superb movie or TV series at some point.

## **Claire Burns says**

Sarcastic but not my kind of book.

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## **Rumi says**

I've been keeping this book on my "currently-reading" shelf forever because I wanted to give it a worthy review, with examples of all the things that led me to believe that this is the worst book I've ever read.

What a shame that a good idea can turn out mediocre because someone didn't have the patience to work on it properly. I've noticed that a lot with books and movies recently. I was so eager to read this book after I saw it in the bookstore. I expected something splendidly satiric from it, but I was so wrong. It went on and on and on and on with desperate jokes and comparisons I'd expect to find in a third-grader's short story.

Go ahead and make up your own mind, I'm sure many of you would be as excited as me about this book if you see the cover, and you'd have seen everything worth seeing already. Oh, and the epigraph. Read that too. That's about it.

Anyways, from the looks of it, I don't think the author is the right person to criticize incompetence.

Also, I was in a great moral dilemma about whether to donate this book or throw it away so that it never reaches anybody's hands again. Decided to go with donation. Someone might enjoy it. A book with such a promising title page going so terribly bad is an interesting phenomenon in itself.

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## **Hobby says**

Probably the most sarcastic book I've ever read. Could not stop laughing.

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## **Geoff Battle says**

Incompetence is full of great humour, witty one liners and amusing thoughts. Rob Grant has a unique and old school sense of humour, which is undeniably English to the core. Incompetence is a great showcase for Grant, unleashing his style in a futuristic Europe, where stupidity is norm. Incompetence fails in the long term though. Despite the persistent humour, the actual story is rather mundane, through to a rather routine finale. With a better structure this book could have been great, however as it stands it remains good, if a little laborious at times.

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## **Arieh Offman says**

### **Funny AF**

Rob Grant's Incompetence is great. Red Dwarf brought me here, but this book will keep me looking for more

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of his particular brand of wit.

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## David Jones says

Review from <http://dwjjones1.blogspot.co.uk>

Harry is an deep cover agent for Europol dealing with security issues and possible international incidents. These occur almost on a minute by minute basis Europe is now one entity (The United states of Europe,) and is now tolerant of incompetence, and where everyday farce is almost mandatory.

Harry uses a number of different identities, including Harry Salt, Cardow Vasuler and Harry Tequila and communicates with other Europol agents via the medium of the personal ads section of various magazines. One of his contacts, Klingferm, has summoned him to Rome, however, before they can meet Klingferm is murdered.

As Harry starts to investigate it's clear that someone is committing a series of high profile murders designed to look like accidents. Following the trail, Harry travels to Paris and then onto Vienna, moving from one mishap to another, trailed by an Italian cop with anger management issues and hampered by a society that basks in incompetence, on the trail of a killer who seems anything but incompetent.

This is a weird novel, It's an old school Noir novel wrapped in a futuristic comedy setting. To be honest the book is ropy in most places as it seems to be very shallow and just lumbers from one gag to another. These gags while funny are not held closely enough together by the plot and the character development leaves alot to be desired, especially from a writer that gave us Lister, Rimmer, The Cat and Kryten. The characters are too two dimensional and almost like a characterful of themselves. From the angry Italian police officer to the overly sexual French girl it plays on stereotypes and the good bits of the novel are outweighed by the bad for the most part.

It's an ok read if you like that sort of thing but personally if your looking for a humor filled Noir style book I would recommend Only Forward by Michael Marshall Smith over this.

4.5 out of 10

I might hold on to this book though as the way the EU is going it might become a guideline for the future.

Peace

Deejay

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## Martin says

The author obviously has a flair for writing. Unfortunately this flair may be limited to haiku, as on or about the eighth line I started to get sever pain in the front right lobe of my brain: This is the first time I have ever experienced deja vu as other than an existential event.

The first chapter was tough going. The author has a particular style and likes to hammer it home paragraph after paragraph remorselessly. Things got better for me further in, but I think this was a combination of my acceptance that there was no escape from the incredulity thinly laced with story, and my speed reading over

the most obvious diatribes.

This book is a strange combination of second-rate EU bureaucratic mythos, gore and customer service one can freely enjoy at any 'restaurant' in Birmingham city centre.

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### **Cristina says**

One of my favourite books.

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### **Matthew says**

Incompetence is a comedy noir-esque novel by Rob Grant, best known for his work as one half of Grant Naylor, the writers of Red Dwarf. Set in the near future where United States of Europe Article 13199 has banned basing hiring and firing practices on a person's competence level, Harry Salt - deep undercover agent for an British/European intelligence agency - has to unravel the mysterious death of fellow cell member Klingferm, committed by the anonymous and dangerous Jack Appleseed.

If that sounds a bit heavy going for a comedy novel, there is no need to fret: 'Incompetence' doesn't let things like an international race to find a cold-blooded murderer before he kills again get in the way of hilarious multi-chapter rants against easy targets like airport security, train timetables, and hotel service.

This results in a slightly disjoint feeling, as the plot-humour balance is left completely out of whack. For example, somewhere around the book's last 20 pages, Grant realises that he's managed to avoid telling an actual story and has to rush the exposition in less space than he spends describing the humiliations Harry undergoes on a train journey.

Incompetence is a theme, with the running gag that competent people are stuck in low grade positions such as sergeant or intern professor, while psychopaths and the truly stupid are elevated to the upper echelons. Possibly Grant had heard of the Dilbert principle, which describes this sort of career advancement precisely, where nature takes the least productive members of the workforce and places them away from the useful people - higher up in the pecking order, but out of the way nonetheless. This is an overly pessimistic view, but I'm sure everyone has had that 'one boss' whose position escaped all reason and common sense, so the sentiment will ring somewhat true.

The story is told in the first person by the protagonist, a largely frustrated 'big man' detective-spy who takes enough physical punishment throughout the novel to last several lifetimes. He is incredibly bad at keeping track of his shoes, and simultaneously has the best and worst luck of anyone alive.

Fond of metaphor and similie, Harry peppers much of his inner thoughts with Red Dwarf-esque random comparisons, such as describing the room afforded by airlines for hand luggage to have 'the same cubic capacity as a stingily filled beef sandwich with the crusts cut off'.

This feels a bit weird, for a couple of reasons: First: Harry (or Grant, rather) is not fond of using clichés, so every metaphor is a bizarre, never-before-heard moment of confusion for the reader. Secondly: Because this style of writing is so Grant Naylor, it's hard to escape the mental image of Red Dwarf's Rimmer rattling off one of his similarly-worded non-standard metaphors. This isn't a problem, but people familiar with the boys

from the Dwarf will definitely recognise the style.

Using Harry as a mouthpiece for rants happens throughout the novel. A lot. I already mentioned the plot is largely pointless, and it's because of Grant's tendency to focus on a strictly plot-unrelated elements for chapters at a time. There is a storyline in there, but the book is largely about picking on bueraucracy and making sure Harry is having a bad time for the reader's pleasure, or both. One chapter is devoted to an argument between Harry and a stationmaster at an out-of-place train station. While hilarious, there's absolutely no point behind it. In the end, when the plot is thrown at you, it's hard to care.

The revelations are equal parts obvious and obtuse: A particularly gifted and well-read reader might have been able to piece together some of the subtleties of the utterly irrelevant plot before the reveals, but the major elements are so heavily hinted at it makes me wonder if Grant titled the book after the kind of people he thought would be reading it.

Harry isn't the only character in this competency-challenged world. Other characters include hothead police captain called Zuccho, prone to fits of violence and extreme rage, Gina Pallister, whose role in the novel extends purely to being the only attractive person that Harry meets, and an elderly couple where the husband is legally dead and the wife collects related cheques. None of these characters really matter, because they won't appear again in any important capacity. In Gina's case, she provides the novel's saucy bits and promptly doesn't show up again. The elderly couple are an amusing side story. Zuccho actually does show up again, but for no real reason other than the fact it saves Grant from writing another one-use character.

I tried hard to like 'Incompetence'. It's not a bad novel. The writing works, and everything is well described with a great sense of humour. I'm not sure it's my sense of humour, but I still found plenty of laugh out loud moments whenever Harry had to bash his head against the nightmare of red tape. My major problems with the book were the whole 'lack of a story' thing, and the ridiculous amount of time spent on certain scenes at the expense of the plot. The novel only decides it's actually a proper noir right near the end, and the tone change is noticeable and unpleasant, with the humour evaporating almost entirely, giving the impression Grant wanted to write two books but only had the advance for one.

If you're a Red Dwarf fan, or hate red tape with a fiery passion, Incompetence is probably the novel for you! If you want an actual plot, or characters to care about, you could do better, but maybe the humour can keep you going in their place.

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## Jon says

**Incompetence** begins fabulously, and I'm not just talking about the first page, or even sentence. Take a close look at the cover: notice the misplaced "e"? That's what caught my eye at the bookstore, and having never before heard of Rob Grant, I bought the book based solely on the strength of that cover alone. "Surely," I thought, "anyone who can purposely misspell the word 'incompetence' on the cover of a novel is a writer to be dealt with." In many ways I was right, but in many ways I think this novel fails.

First, let me set the stage. **Incompetence** is set in the not-too-far-off future, where a new European law has made it illegal to fire anyone for, well, being incompetent. The result is absolute chaos: businesses and government offices everywhere are suddenly overrun with idiots who can't--or perhaps just won't--do their jobs. And there's nothing anyone can do about it. **Incompetence** is political correctness taken to its satirical extreme, a slippery slope of such blatant logical fallaciousness to make Jonathan Swift blush.

So why do I think the novel fails? Let me go about explaining this by giving you the first sentence of the first

chapter (I think I'm allowed to do this in a public forum, anyway): "The flight was uneventful enough, except the pilot accidentally touched down at a slightly wrong airport and forgot to lower the landing gear, so we left the plane by way of the emergency chute, and I lost my shoes." Fabulous first sentence, right? It does everything a first sentence should do: catch your attention and drag you in, making you want to read more. In terms of first sentences, this one's a killer. In fact, every sentence in the book is just like this one.

So why did I only give this book three stars? Well, let me repeat the last few words of the previous paragraph by way of explanation, placing slightly different emphasis: *every* sentence in the book is *just* like this one. *Every* sentence is a punchline. If that still sounds fun, imagine reading 5,000 punchlines in a row. On the sentence level, this book works fantastically, and there are paragraphs that I thought brilliant and read aloud to my wife. On the chapter level, however, it got old--fast. Like speed-reading through a Primary School joke book. A plot can only sustain so much humor and craziness; it needs something concrete and level-headed to anchor itself, and to throw the comedy into relief--even if that only appears in the descriptions of things like desks and houses and trains. **Incompetence** lacks this breath of sanity.

In addition, every conversation in the novel is rife with incompetence, stupidity, and bad judgment; the main character is about the only person in the book to show any inkling of intelligence. My "willing suspension of disbelief" can only go so far, and painting 99% of the human race as sheer idiots--even satirically--is too far of a stretch for me.

I also have a problem with the book's ending, but I'll save those comments so as not to spoil it for anyone.

Would I recommend this book to anyone? Yes, of course I would; I still gave it three stars out of five. It's a good book, in many ways: generally fun to read, absolutely hilarious in parts, thought-provoking in its satire, and intelligent. More than likely you'll enjoy reading it--some of you might find it hilarious, and add it to your list of "favorite books of all time."

For me, however, it was just too much. Like having 5,000 cream pies thrown in my face in rapid succession.

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### **Kylie says**

So much fun

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### **Jessica says**

A fun book if you want a light read, but for all that set up, there's no satisfying climax.

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### **Martin Hall says**

Really enjoyed the style of writing, not to everyone's taste, it's more about the journeying and the bits in-between that I found most interesting, nice details and unusual subject matter.

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## **Thomas Jancis says**

This, according to a friend, was the funniest book he had ever read. He had been looking for it for years. As we walked away from the shop, he was chortling away as he read.

It was funny but the world's best? I guess it must be more about the time he read it.

Nothing really "happens" in this book. The love interest just "is" and appears in one scene. The great mystery of the killer is kind of obvious.

But you're not reading this for the biting plot. You're reading it for the setups and moments of humour. Once you accept that many of the people are just stock characters and won't affect the plot you can start enjoying the book and its little moments of madness. This is really a world full of idiots.

I expect to give it to my sister next time she wants a book that isn't too hardgoing but still fun.

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