



Roughnecks

James J. Patterson

Quinn O'Connell Jr.

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With this group of colorful characters, readers can become immersed in Patterson and O'Connell's detail about oil-drilling work.

Drilling for oil is a rough job, and the novel *Roughnecks*, by James J. Patterson and Quinn O'Connell Jr., provides a glimpse of that work and the uncertain lifestyle that comes with it. It follows greenhorn Zak Harper through his first experience looking for a job, joining a crew, learning to “throw chain,” and forming a camaraderie with his fellow roughnecks.

Roughnecks does a strong job of describing the work of a drilling crew, with numerous scenes that take the reader through the technical aspects and inherent dangers of the job. Coauthor O'Connell has experience in the job, and that shows in the story's level of detail. Making the main character a novice in the trade works well, giving other characters a chance to explain its workings—from the way crews move from job to job, to the hierarchy of roles, to the details of working the equipment—to Zak as well as the reader, without the exposition sounding forced. The story begins with Zak camping out and trying to find work, and ends with him being a valuable member of his crew. This is a world where, as one character puts it, “with a car and a thousand bucks a guy can pretty well start his life all over again, anywhere, anytime, anyhow.” The book takes place in the late 1970s at a time of change in the industry and conveys a certain nostalgia for the way Zak and his coworkers get by.

If there's an issue with the story, it's that at times the book can feel like a series of scenes without a real driver to the narrative. The characters move from one gig to another and experience challenges along the way, but without a clear objective in mind, the story does feel its length at points; *Roughnecks* is more than four hundred pages and is intended as only the first half of a two-part story. That said, it works quite well as a “hangout” story, spending time with a group of colorful characters and becoming immersed in their work and conversations. The men hit up local bars and share war stories about old jobs, deal with competition from other crews, confront their past mistakes, and save the life of an injured colleague, all while Zak and the audience learn more about what it takes to survive as a roughneck.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Winter 2015)

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