ELLIS, Bret Easton
1964-
American

PERSONAL: Born March 7, 1964, in Los Angeles, Calif.; son of Robert Martin (a real estate investment analyst) and Dale (a housewife; maiden name, Dennis) Ellis.

EDUCATION: Bennington College, B.A., 1986.

ADDRESSES:

Home-- Sherman Oaks, Calif.

Agent-- Amanda Urban, International Creative Management, 40 West 57th St., New York, N.Y., 10019.

CAREER: Writer.

MEMBER: Authors Guild.

WRITINGS:

Less Than Zero (novel), Simon & Schuster, 1985.

The Rules of Attraction (novel), Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Contributor of articles to periodicals, including Rolling Stone, Vanity Fair, Wall Street Journal, and Interview.

SIDELIGHTS: In 1985 twenty-one-year-old Bret Easton Ellis jolted the

reactions to the book echoed that of Interview magazine's David Masello, who called it "startling and hypnotic." Eliot Fremont-Smith of the Voice Literary Supplement, for instance, pronounced Less Than Zero "a killer"--he and other critics were almost unanimously impressed not only with the novel itself but also with its author's youth. "As a first novel, [Less Than Zero] is exceptional," John Rechy declared in the Los Angeles Times; it is "extraordinarily accomplished," a New Yorker critic concurred. Less Than Zero, wrote Larry McCarthy in Saturday Review, "is a book you simply don't forget." A college undergraduate at the time of the novel's publication, Ellis has been hailed by more than one critic as the "voice of the new generation."

Less Than Zero centers on Clay, an eighteen-year-old freshman at an eastern college who has returned home to Los Angeles, California, for

Christmas vacation. After a four-month absence from the city's youth-culture fast lane, Clay becomes reimmersed in a teenage world of money, casual sex, drugs, boredom, and rock and roll--a world that a Newsweek reviewer described as "the seamy underside of the preppy handbook." Via Clay's traumatized present-tense narrative, readers experience the lives of "the rich, unloved, unloving teen-agers of Los Angeles," Mary Jo Salter observed in the New York Times Book Review. Critics were struck by the sordidness of Clay's environment. Time's Paul Gray, for example, listing horrors in Less Than Zero that include rape, prostitution, and heroin, asserted that "Ellis conveys the hellishness of aimless lives with economy and skill." Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times called Less Than Zero "one of the most disturbing novels [she had] read in a long time."

For Kakutani, the narrative was made all the more disturbing by its "unnerving air of documentary reality, underlined by the author's cool, deadpan prose." Other reviewers mentioned the documentary tone of the novel as well, and several assumed Less Than Zero to be autobiographical. "Clay is all too obviously Bret Easton Ellis himself," wrote Terry Teachout in the National Review. Ellis was, in fact, also a young resident of Los Angeles who had gone away to a small eastern college--in his case, Bennington College in Vermont. But Ellis denies having written Less Than Zero about his own life, turning widespread critical assumption to the contrary into testimony for the convincing quality of his narrative voice. Kakutani, among others, praised Ellis's voice for its frightening realism, noting his "keen eye for grim details" and sensitive ear for the vacuous dialogue of jaded teenagers. Discussing Ellis's prose in the Times Literary Supplement, Alan Jenkins stated: "At times it reproduces with numbing accuracy the intermittent catatonic lows of a psycho-physical system artificially stimulated beyond normal human endurance." And although the novel presents a nightmarish world of "terminal boredom and mindless repetition," Jenkins continued, Ellis managers to keep Less Than Zero itself from becoming boring or mindless.

Some critics drew comparisons between Less Than Zero and J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye, an earlier novel of disaffected youth. Writing in the Detroit Free Press, Anne Janette Johnson explained that such comparisons could not extend "beyond the fact that both [novels] concern teenagers coming of age in America. Salinger's

self-pity, desire. The youths in [Less than Zero] are merely consuming automations, never energetic enough to be angry or despairing." Less Than Zero reminded Johnson more of the nihilism of the "lost generation" of 1920s and 1930s American authors like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald; for other critics, the novel brought to mind Jack Kerouac and similar "beat generation" writers of the 1950s. And Kakutani found echoes of Raymond Chandler, Joan Didion, and Nathanael West in Ellis's evocation of Los Angeles--"too many echoes," she complained.

Reviewers agreed, nonetheless, on the novel's indebtedness to a new medium that gained popularity in the 1980s: the music video, a short, lively visual production set to a rock-and-roll song. Reviewers pointed in particular to MTV (Music Television), a cable television station that broadcasts such videos nationwide and around-the-clock. The characters in Less Than Zero watch MTV throughout the novel and refer constantly to rock songs and artists. Additionally, Ellis divides Less Than Zero into brief scenes in much the same way that

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MTV is fragmented in quick-cut videos that seldom last more than three or four minutes. Fremont-Smith reported that Ellis called Less Than Zero "a very visual book" in which he employed a deliberately "staccato pace [and] the rapid layering of image upon image."

Before critics began dubbing his book "the first MTV novel," Ellis had anticipated such a reaction; according to Fremont-Smith, Ellis's publisher revealed that when Less Than Zero came out, Ellis was "anxiously awaiting the first review that tabs him as the first voice of the video generation." Since being thus categorized, Ellis has been called upon to offer in print his thoughts on life, and he has written first-person articles for publication such as Rolling Stone.

Ellis's second novel, The Rules of Attraction, continues in the vein of Less Than Zero, only this time, as R. Z. Sheppard reported in Time, "the village of the damned goes East." Rules is set in a fictional prestigious East Coast college and is concerned primarily with the lives of Sean, Lauren, and Paul. Most reviewers noted, however, that the academic side of college life was barely present. Richard Eder announced in the Los Angeles Times Book Review that "we actually catch a glimpse of one professor [. . .] and he is asleep on his office couch and reeks of pot." What is present is "drunken parties, drugs, sex, shoplifting, [and] pop music," according to Campbell Geeslin in People. Paul is gay and desires Sean, who is bisexual and longs for deeper involvement with Lauren, who pines after someone else. Ellis has met with criticism for the futility and bleakness of Rules of Attraction, but Scott Spencer in the New York Times Book Review lauded the author as "successful in portraying the shallowness of [his characters'] desires." Geeslin called Ellis's writing "exceedingly effective" and concluded, "If college these days is like this, it's a miracle that anyone survives, much less graduates."

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS: Less Than Zero was adapted as a film, produced by Twentieth Century-Fox, 1988.

AVOCATIONAL INTERESTS: Piano, playing keyboards in bands, reading, sculling.

CA INTERVIEW:

CA interviewed Bret Easton Ellis by telephone on May 19, 1988, at Bennington College.

CA: The first draft of Less Than Zero was written in 1982, according to Interview, and was 500 pages long. What necessitated the revision process that finally pared it down to 208 pages?

ELLIS: It was cut so much because I simply did not like the first draft. Around 250 pages were cut out of it, and I did a line-by-line editing with my professor, Joe McGinniss. That first draft was written very hurriedly, in a period of eight weeks. It was sketchy, really just notes. It wasn't even a full-fledged first draft of a novel, just page after page of outlines, ideas for scenes, or scenes that went on too long. The real writing, I think, came in the rewriting process. Usually, for me at least, it's the other way around. This time it was taking a huge barrage of papers, notes, and cut-up pieces of scenes and actually trying to make some sense out of them, getting them down in some sort of workable order. After that

was finished, then rewriting it a couple more times was a lot easier and less hectic.

CA: Had it already been accepted by Simon & Schuster when you made the initial cuts, or was that to come later?

ELLIS: That was to come later. I had done two rewriters on it before anyone at Simon & Schuster saw it.

CA: Wasn't there something of a rocky time before you were sure Simon & Schuster was really going to publish the book?

ELLIS: Yes. There were two editors who fought for the book at the house, who purchased it. One of them, Bob Asahina, was really solely a nonfiction editor; the other, Morgan Entrekin, was a fiction editor. Entrekin left the house around three months after they initially bought it, so the book stayed in limbo for a long time before Bob Asahina realized what was going on and then finally became the book's editor. And it had been awfully long time in the deliberation process; there must have been seven or eight weeks of voting on it. The company was harshly divided on it; there was a group who really wanted to pick it up and there was a group who were vehement about not wanting to publish it at all. I was afraid it just wasn't going to get published. I waited something like eight months until they finally came around and said, "OK, these are the changes that we want to make." It was a strange, slow process.

CA: Were you able to write other things during that time?

ELLIS:Yeah. I was in school at that time, then summer happened, and then I went back to school for a few more months. I was writing some short stories then, but I was really more or less waiting for the comments from Simon & Schuster, because they had expressed when they first purchased the book that they did want a number of things changed and that they wanted at least one major rewrite. I was wondering what they could possibly be doing with the book. And I kept thinking, after the initial excitement wore down, that nothing was going to happen.

CA: By at least one account, the book had its beginnings in your high school diary. If that's true, when did you begin to realize you had

ELLIS: It's been misinterpreted a lot that these were excerpts from my high school diary. I never really kept a diary in high school. I did write a lot of nonfiction pieces about the same topic when I was in high school in California, and these pieces were what eventually got me into a workshop that Joe McGinniss was teaching in the fall of 1982, in my freshman year. They were more or less pieces that I had sent out to local literary magazines with no real luck. But they did not come from a diary or anything like that. Bob Asahina, who finally turned out to be my editor at Simon & Schuster, had previously been at Harper's when I sent the stories there. When he eventually moved to Simon & Schuster and I sent the pieces there, he had not forgotten about them. It was Bob Asahina and Morgan Entrekin who more or less said, "These pieces might make an interesting book or novel if you want to give it a try." And I luckily had the time my freshman year to go ahead, with the urging of McGinniss, and attempt a rough draft.

CA: You dedicated the book to McGinniss, I noticed. Would you like to

comment further on his role as teacher and friend?

ELLIS: I really don't think there would be any book without him, in lots of ways. That dedication was very deeply felt. I don't know how he is with other students, but for me he was a true mentor. Without him I don't think I would have gotten an agent or gotten anyone at Simon & Schuster to take a look at any of that material, let alone anywhere else. He was very instrumental in that process. I guess I was just lucky to find someone who took that much interest in a freshman student who happened to come to his office one day and hand him these pieces. I was incredibly lucky.

CA: Was the interest in writing a big reason you chose Bennington?

ELLIS: Yes, it was. Most of the places that I had applied to had strong writing programs. In the end, it was just that I liked the structure of Bennington's program a little bit better than most other places, plus it was a bit smaller.

CA: You'd begun writing very young, apparently. Were there teachers or other people who gave you early encouragement?

ELLIS: I was always writing, but never that seriously until high school, and there were one or two teachers at the high school I was attending in California who gave me the initial boost, who seemed to say, "OK, I can tell you're serious about this." With their help, their initial positive reaction, I began to think about writing a lot more seriously.

CA: When the book was an instant success and you were a celebrity not only on campus but on national television, was the publicity scary?

ELLIS: Yeah, it was. At first I really didn't think there was going to be any. A lot of people at Simon & Schuster thought, "Oh, well, this will be a small first novel. We'll make back our initial investment, and it'll be OK." I thought the same thing: "This is the first novel, just like any first novel that comes out and gets nice reviews, and that'll be it." I was shocked at first to find out that I even had a publicist and that I was expected to do interviews. And that was a little scary at first. But I got used to it in a little while. And then I got tired of it for a little while. I guess that

you get used to it and it becomes less scary than it once was. You pretty much get your answers down pat after you do something like that for a couple of months. But I much prefer doing magazine and newspaper interviews to radio or TV ones, where you have to watch every word you say to make sure you make some sort of coherent sense and try not to stumble.

CA: Less Than Zero has enjoyed immense popularity in the Los Angeles area. Has it also angered some people because of its portrayal of the disaffected young and their less than exemplary parents?

ELLIS: I don't know; it probably has. I really don't get a lot of hate mail from people who read the book as an awful diatribe against life in Los Angeles. But I've heard some grumbling that it's sort of unfair and too harsh a portrait of life as lived out there. Again, it's just my view. I'm sure there are a lot of people who live in Los Angeles and don't see it as this horrible, nightmarish place. And again, in lots of ways I don't either. I do live there half the year

sometimes. It was just the city for this book, for the subject matter. Plus, I knew the locale, the geography. A lot of young people might disagree with its depiction of youth in the eighties, but I really haven't heard from that faction. Most of the response I've gotten has been fairly positive. They've said, "OK. Great. Finally someone has written a book about what really is going on."

CA: You also weren't saying that this is how things were everywhere.

ELLIS: No. It's site-specific; it definitely is Los Angeles. Similar stuff might be going on in other places, and I'm sure it is. But finally the book was much more a warning about where this could end up rather than a qualified document about where things are right now.

CA: Was it hard to get and maintain the tone of boredom that works so well in the book?

ELLIS: Yes, it was. Definitely at first it was hard to become so blase and so passive. But once I started getting into that character's head and his patterns of speech, then the writing came a lot easier. Finally I got so used to it that it wasn't a strain.

CA: I liked the device of inserting the memory scenes into the narrative in past tense, set in italics. Were they there from the beginning, or an addition that came during revision?

ELLIS: They had been there in the beginning, then I'd taken them out of the first draft. When I rewrote the final version, I thought they might give some clue as to what this narrator was about, so I placed them back in. In the original draft, they weren't interspersed throughout the novel; they were in one big chunk that came somewhere near the end. I thought it would be somewhat more effective if they were placed starting in the middle of the book and steadily progressing to somewhere near the end.

CA: Television plays an important part in the book. The characters are often watching MTV [Music Television] or playing video games. Do you feel that television has had a direct effect on the craft of your writing?

ELLIS: Unconsciously, I'm sure it has contributed to this

influenced my writing so much as other books that I was reading when I was growing up. Most certainly movies have been an influence. I don't see how any writer born after the 1940s or 1950s can not have been influenced by films. At least for me, they've made more of an impression and their influence has been a lot stronger than the influence of TV.

CA: You've said you'd like to collect enough short stories for a book. Do you think that's likely to happen soon?

ELLIS: I don't know. I have very ambivalent feelings about the stories. Sometimes I read them and like them. Other times I'm very apprehensive and think they need a lot of work. I really haven't worked in short stories for at least the last year, and some of them seem very experimental to me, very young, not as polished as I had hoped. But there are a couple that I like. I might do some rewriting on them in the future. I would like to see a collection, yes.

CA: You've expressed some concern about how the movie will turn out. Is it being made now, or still in the talking stages?

ELLIS: It's not in the production stages, but I think they're fairly serious about making it. I really have no quarrel whatsoever about what they do with it. Once it's out of your hands, it's up to them; they can do just about whatever they want with it. I just have strange feelings about turning that story into a sort of mainstream American film and some of the compromises they're probably going to have to make to get that vision up on the screen. But otherwise, no. I have nothing to do with the film adaptation.

CA: Like other young writers, such as David Leavitt, you've been thrust into the role of spokesman for your whole generation--appearing on panels, writing a magazine article on the subject. How do you feel about being put in that position?

ELLIS: Sort of uncomfortable. I first of all don't believe that there's one or two spokespeople for a generation, one collective voice who's going to speak for the whole lot. The problem for me and writers like David Leavitt is that we're at a time when there aren't that many of us, when the artists are getting a lot younger and most of them haven't come forward yet. So I feel very ambivalent about having to take whatever is going on with my generation and being the one to speak about it. What you have to do when you're asked to be on a panel like that or write a magazine article about it is just feel safe enough about your own opinion and go ahead and state it. You shouldn't feel burdened or pressured knowing that there are two million kids out there who might have differing opinions. But all in all, I do feel a little wary about being put in that position. It's just one of the things you have to accept and deal with.

CA: Not many people already have a best-seller to their credit when they graduate from college. Has that success convinced you that you should write fulltime now?

ELLIS: It gives you a little more confidence about your supposed skill. But there's also a sort of undefinable pressure. People are very hungry for a second novel. I am working on a second book, but I've been more or less taking my time. In terms of long-range plans, yes; I would like to have the freedom to become a writer. That's what

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