Hopping, Popping and Copping

Bret Easton Ellis seems to have been born to describe awful people, not to cure them.

THE INFORMERS
By Bret Easton Ellis.
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By George Stade

HENRIK DRESCHER

THE setting of Bret Easton Ellis's fourth novel is that of his first, "Less Than Zero" (1985), a critical and popular success made into a movie that was neither. In these two novels, the setting, Los Angeles and environs, has more motive force than any character. But the method of the new novel is pretty much that of Mr. Ellis's second, "The Rules of Attraction" (1987), set in the fictional and farcical Camden College in New Hampshire. In *these* two novels, affectless voices (to which names are attached) speak directly to the reader of their party hopping, narcotics popping and sexual copping, all of it joyless. In those three novels, the main characters are well-off college students who spend little time studying.

In that respect, they differ from Mr. Ellis's third, the notorious "American Psycho" (1991), set among New York wheeler-dealers a few years farther into Reaganomics. The publication of "American Psycho" was at first forestalled and then denounced by our cultural commissars and professional hand-wringers. What mainly aroused their censorious zeal was a tone of moral neutrality and the particularized descriptions of some especially nasty mutilations and murders (as hallucinated by the psycho), descriptions for which Mr. Ellis has a flair.

Although there are American psychos who mutilate and murder near the end of "The Informers," in this novel Mr. Ellis mostly returns to the material of his first, the method of his second and a few characters from each, as though this time to get them exactly right. And so he does, given his outlook and esthetics, both of which are exacting. "The Informers" is spare, austere, elegantly designed, telling in detail, coolly ferocious, sardonic in its humor, every vestige of authorial sentiment expunged.

The action (or inaction) takes place from 1982 to 1985. The hub of characters around whom a couple of dozen others circle is mostly male, absurdly rich, blond, assiduously tanned and with marvelous abs. "All these beautiful blond tan people (specimens!)," says a young woman visiting from Camden College, "staring into outer space." They are objects of desire to young women, to older women, to older men, to each other and each to himself, for Narcissus is their totem. They are nominal students at U.C.L.A., U.C. San Diego, the University of Southern California or Pepperdine, but they are pig ignorant of everything that does not stroke their senses. If they read at all it is GQ and Vanity Fair. "I never read. Boring," says one. They have heard of Reagan only because their parents attend fund-raisers in his behalf.

They are, however, educated consumers. They drive around aimlessly in Ferraris, Mercedes-Benzes, Porsches, Rolls-Royces, Jaguars, gorgeous machines that somehow always break down — when they don't crash. They wear Armani and Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent; they pick at their salads and sip on their Tabs in Le Dome and the Polo Lounge; they are connoisseurs of pot and coke and occasionally heroin. But they also know their Valium and Librium, their Nembutal and Demerol and Seconal, their Dalmane and Darvocet, although some go for nitrous oxide and animal tranquilizers, or even heavy doses of vitamin pill. Above all, they know their rock-and-rol sounds of the silence within them. "Song sometimes are uncannily appropriate," writes the Camden visitor.

They one-up each other by dropping names of the rock groups whose concert they have recently attended; entering their cars, they immediately turn on rock radio stations or slip in a tape; entering their rooms, they turn on MTV or slide in a cassette; tanning themselves by pool or beach they wear their Walkmans — the idea being not to hear themselves think. For similar reasons, they go to all the new movies or endlessly watch videos, however their bodies are otherwise engaged. And that's it, except for the hopping, popping and copping. "Basically her emptiness thrills me," says one of them about another.

Who's to blame? Mr. Ellis does not say, for his practice is to present, rather than to explain. Certainly, the older generation, those swingers in the record industry, in the studios, in television and real estate, are not what you would call good role models. Relations between parents or stepparents and children are bad: after a father dies in a plane crash, his son gambles away the funerary ashes in a gesture of good riddance. The parents are too involved in attending to their own addictions, their face lifts and serial marriages and predatory affairs, to tend their kids, who are unforgiving. But if the older generation's self-absorbed behavior is a cause, it is also a result — of an ambiance that includes the weather, wealth, the electronic reproduction of fantasy all around them: "I guess we can't escape being a product of the times, can we?"

THAT ambiance is colored, increasingly darkened, by images and motifs that accumulate on the periphery of the reader's field of vision: servants high on pot, dead rats in the pool filter, helicopters hovering, tumbleweed blowing across deserted streets. In casual asides, we hear of suicidal and anorexic daughters, of sons dying in car accidents, of someone's "hideous" mother whose "throat was slashed by some maniac," of overdoses, of drug dealers stabbed to death, of somebody shot in the head and skinned, of Carlos's arms found in a bag, of Tommy's body (or was that Monty's?) found empty of blood and vital organs, of Corey found sealed in a metal drum buried in the desert, of sundry disappearances, of body parts along the freeway. "There are a lot of frightened people in this town, dude." In a cluster of truly unsettling final scenes, the metaphors of vampirism and body-snatching that have been flickering through the novel become literal, for if those blond, suntanned beauties are like the Eloi of H. G. Wells's "Time Machine," there are Morlocks around to tend and devour them.

As in Mr. Ellis's other fiction, as in the fiction of most satirists, the emphasis is less on what individuates his characters or on what unites them with the whole of humankind than it is on the aberrations that unite them with a milieu. We get not so much rounded characters as a group consciousness careering into dissolution. For all that, for all of his studied neutrality, Mr. Ellis provides his readers with grounds for judgment and occasions for feelings other than dread and repulsion, as when parents falsify memories of those happy days when their kids were still kids, while their offspring remember only parental squabbling and self-regard.

In fact, a case could be made for Mr. Ellis as a covert moralist and closet sentimentalist, the best kind, the kind who leaves you space in which to respond as your predispositions nudge you, whether as a commissar or hand-wringer or, like me, as an admirer of his intelligence and craft. □

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Bret Easton Ellis Is Shocked. Shocked!

Bret Easton Ellis never meant to publish "The Informers." His latest novel began instead as a series of sketches — whose only function was to distract him from the book he was supposed to be writing. Begun in 1983, the sketches grew to fill "four or five big notebooks" over the ensuing decade, Mr. Ellis, 30, recalled in a telephone interview from his summer residence in Amagansett, L.I. Last year, when he seemed irretrievably stuck on the book he was under contract for — a novel about supermodels and celebrity — he offered the notebooks to his publisher instead. Pared down from 32 chapters, the finished book comprises 13 interconnected tales of dissolute, moneyed Angelenos and their disaffected children.

Some reviewers have taken "The Informers" to task for its violent content — which includes descriptions of vampirism and a detailed account of the stabbing murder of a child — and have drawn the inevitable comparisons to "American Psycho," Mr. Ellis's controversial 1991 novel.

QUINTANA ROO DUNNE
Bret Easton Ellis.

"I'm always shocked when people are shocked by violence in my books," Mr. Ellis remarked. "My concerns about it are more literary than because I'm interested in the macabre. What I've always been interested in as a writer is this idea of a group of people who seem to have everything going for them on the outside. Because of that, they have a lot of freedom. The theme of my fiction is the abuse of that freedom."

Over the years, Mr. Ellis said, he has become more or less inured to the criticism. "You get to a point where that really doesn't matter to you," he observed. "This time out, it's been almost scarily painless."

MARGALIT FOX