

Publisher Responsibility and Bret Easton Ellis

The fuss that has erupted over Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, its last-minute cancellation by Simon & Schuster and its immediate takeover by Vintage has brought to the surface all sorts of thoughts and emotions we had believed were long buried—along with the hoary notion of the “gentlemanly profession.”

Certainly any author has a right to have his work published—and never mind whether or not he or she is a serious artist (remember the Tasteless Jokes books a few years back, which made no possible claim to artistic merit?). The question for a publisher is rather: Do I want to have my name associated with a book like this, to be responsible for loosing it upon the marketplace?

The problem with Simon & Schuster's turnaround is not that they decided in the end that they were not that kind of publisher, but rather that for so long they proceeded, against clear signs of dismay from many of their own staff, on the belief that they were—and, worse, that they took no heed of what their own people thought. People who work in publishing tend to be idealistic, sometimes foolishly so; but they persevere, despite the poor pay and slow advancement, because they take pride in what they do. And it seems remarkable that a house that has such a keen sense of its image should have so long ignored the danger signals about Ellis's book, at first from within, and then, as press leaks began to appear, from without. As far as we can make out, there seems to have been quite widespread opposition within S & S to the publication of Ellis's novel from the time it was first presented at an editorial meeting. And the fact that it apparently took a media outcry to force a second look by senior management suggests they were too removed from the rank and file.

Those who were worried about the book are not necessarily censors. They were not saying the book should be suppressed, never to see the light of day; they simply didn't want their company, and therefore indirectly their names, to be associated with it.

Were they right? As is often the case in questions of this sort, a lot of people are leaping into print with commentary without having read the book. It seems to us, having dutifully read it (and for another reaction, see the quotes from *PW*'s so-far unprinted review, on page TK), that the book does transcend the

boundaries of what is acceptable in mainstream publishing. The extremely graphic nature of the brutality, the apparent reveling in pornographic detail, the sadistic excesses against homeless people, children and animals, as well as women, the strained attempt to record, in heated prose, the most revolting physical horrors imaginable, all seem to go far beyond the author's avowed attempt to satirically equate the materialistic '80s with the rampages of a Wall Street madman.

There are people—and Sonny Mehta at Vintage is one of them—who are persuaded that Ellis's work is to be taken seriously as a critique of our society. There is talk, by him and others, of Celine, Pasolini, Sartre, even Flaubert, as people who offended the mores of their time and yet were valuable artists. Once again, the question is not: Should the work be banned? but rather: Do *we* want to publish it? Are we so convinced that its virtues outweigh its calculated excesses that we feel easy about putting our name to it? Is a valuable social critic striving to be born in Ellis, or is he simply a young writer with a terrific knack for with-it brand names in clothes, food, restaurants, clubs, who decided he had to gain attention this time out with something really outrageous? And now the irony is that the very press attention that helped kill the book at one publisher will probably ensure its success at another.

Revolting and sadistic work is published every week, in magazines like *Hustler* and countless others less known, for a readership that apparently craves such material. Publishers are entitled to publish it, and customers to read it. Yes, we *do* care about the First Amendment. But we also care that book publishing should not be so anxious to stay in touch with a perhaps debased popular taste that it abdicates its responsibilities.

Does such a judgment represent merely one person's taste, and is it therefore arguable? Of course. Will the republic fall if Ellis's book is published in its present form? Unlikely. Will publishing have moved one step further away from what used to be quaintly called “standards”? We think so.

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