

EDITED BY MADALYNNE REUTER

Vintage to Issue Controversial Ellis Novel After S & S Cancellation

Simon & Schuster, amid cries of corporate censorship, announced the cancellation of its soon-to-be-shipped hardcover of *American Psycho*, Bret Easton Ellis's hotly debated novel that contains vivid details of a dozen brutal killings, on November 14.

Forty-eight hours later, Vintage Books announced that it would publish it as an original trade paperback as early as possible in the new year "to swiftly reach the widest possible readership" following its "immense coverage" in the media.

Ellis received a reported \$300,000 advance from S & S and will keep it, according to his agent, ICM's Amanda Urban, who negotiated the deal with Richard Snyder, chairman of Simon & Schuster, after the book's cancellation. She said seven publishers had been interested in taking over publication. No figure was disclosed for the Vintage acquisition, but a usually well-informed source said the price was \$75,000.

Penguin, which held the paperback option, had earlier declined to exercise it. A senior Penguin executive would not comment on the reason, but noted that Penguin turned it down before the S & S decision.

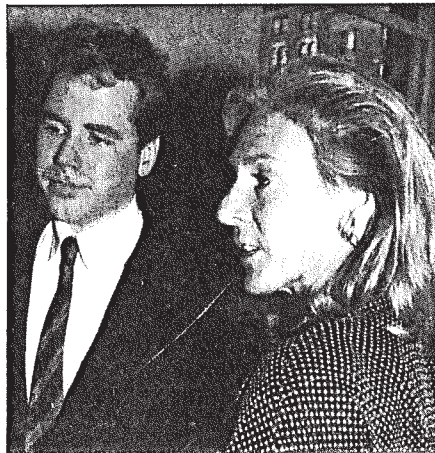
Part of the media's excitement focused on the fact that a book, only a month away from being shipped, was not withdrawn because of threat of legal action, but due to purported pressures brought by the chief executive of the conglomerate parent.

Paramount's Role

Although he denies it, Martin Davis, chairman of Paramount Communications, reportedly grew dismayed by the increasing furor over the book's violent passages, especially by accounts in *Spy* and *Time* magazines,

and asked Snyder to withdraw it.

Through a spokesperson, Davis said, "It's absolutely not true that it was my decision to cancel the book. It was Simon & Schuster's decision. But I was aware of the situation and unequivocally support it."



Bret Easton Ellis and his agent Amanda Urban at Sonny Mehta's party for Michael Herr's Walter Winchell last May.

Snyder also denies any pressure. He said the nature of the book reached his attention when he saw the recent piece in *Time* and, after reading the novel, made his decision to withdraw it.

"It's not a First Amendment issue," he told *PW*. "It's not a right of free expression issue. I was advised that the book could be placed elsewhere and I made the decision on the basis of taste. The author has gained considerably, and the public will be able to make up its mind."

PW's as yet unpublished review acknowledges the book's tone by calling it "a grisly, gritty gross-out," but the reviewer also says, "this uninhibited satire carries to its logical savage absurdity the cool yuppie lifestyle of Patrick Bateman, 26, whose avocation is torturing and dismembering his female victims and festooning his apartment with their body parts."

To *PW*, Ellis character-

ized his novel as "equal amounts of black comedy and satire of the 1980s, especially of life in Manhattan, but it also delves into the mentality of a madman, a serial killer." He said he would be the first to admit that the madman's actions are appalling, but he casti-

gated the press for concentrating on the horror and missing the point of the satire.

The cancellation of the book, Ellis said, "came out of the blue and I was completely stunned." He said he had thought that all concerns had been dealt with and that the minor problems of press reaction and reviews would be handled after publication. Ellis said there had been "rumblings" in the company when the book was first submitted a year ago, but that both Charles Hayward, president of the trade division, and Robert Asahina, his editor on all three of his novels, believed in the book and Hayward "did a good job in calming everyone down."

Ellis said his relationship with Asahina goes back to 1982 when he was submitting short stories to Asahina at *Harper's* magazine. "He is an extraordinary editor and a really good friend," Ellis said. "I know he was in disbelief over [the

cancellation], and I hope it hasn't damaged our friendship."

Turmoil over the book erupted again at the publishing meeting in the summer, according to a former S & S editor, when Asahina, "the book's only supporter," distributed tip sheets and about 10 "horrific" pages and caused impassioned reactions, especially among the sales and marketing people. "There was a general feeling in-house that the book was going to lose money unless somehow the negative press backfired and it became an underground hit," the former editor said. "They were planning to do maybe 20,000 copies." (Other reports put the final number of copies at 40,000.)

Ellis said, "It would have made more sense to me if Dick Snyder had read the book when it first came in and sat down with me and explained why he couldn't publish it. But when it happened this late in the game it makes me question how he deals with Simon & Schuster."

Snyder pointed out that he gave up day-to-day operating control of the trade department six years ago. Noting that he now runs a \$1.5-billion-a-year corporation, he said he was "very pleased and proud" of how the people in the trade division run it. He said he is involved only when a proposed book reaches a certain purchase price.

Snyder, who had been quoted in earlier reports as holding Hayward and Asahina responsible, refused to allocate blame. "An error in judgment was made, and as chief executive I assume full responsibility for that."

Taste or Censorship

Despite the denials by Snyder and Davis, part of the publishing world persisted in a belief in corporate censorship.

Amanda Urban said, "Refusing to publish a book at this 11th hour without explanation raises the question whether there is a form

Was It Censorship? Some Reactions

Robert K. Massie
Authors Guild

What a sad day for Simon & Schuster, to have to watch a great publishing house coming apart! The junior staff upset about the book, the senior staff going ahead with its publication and Dick Snyder overruling people like Charlie Hayward and Alice Mayhew, or being forced to because of Martin Davis.

I'm appalled at what has been done to Mr. Ellis. It's a breach of contract. He's a Simon & Schuster author and got a huge chunk of money for this book; presumably they knew what he was writing about. And to have Dick Snyder—a hands-on, tough-guy, two-fisted publisher—tell us that he didn't know what the book was about when news of this book has been circulating for a long time is just too hard to believe.

If you step back from the picture you see a perfect example of the conglomeration of the publishing business as more and more power over publishing ends up in the hands of people who are not publishers.

How dare Davis, chief executive of the company that churns out those Friday the 13th gore movies, attack this book on the grounds of taste? No 12 year-old kid is going to read the Ellis book but they will get to see the butchery in those films.

Thomas McCormack
St. Martin's Press

I had one of our editors read it quickly and he said, "I think we have to take this book seriously." We were seriously considering the book for ourselves.

The sheer fact that a book causes offense to some is not reason enough for a responsible publisher to cut and run. If that were the case we would never have had books by Genet and Celine.

No, it was not too late in the gestation period for the publisher to change his mind. Every publisher can't read every book that comes through the house. Editors have a great degree of autonomy and often the publisher doesn't know that an editor has overstepped his or her bounds until the page proofs start circulating and the complaints start coming in. Simon & Schuster didn't forfeit their right to reject the book by doing so late in the process. It's their reasons for canceling it that I object to.

Wendy Strothman
Beacon Press

Sometimes an author's or an editor's reputation can cloud a publisher's editorial judgment. If Joe Schmo had submitted that manuscript, it would have been rejected long before it reached this point. Beacon Press has a big stake in freedom of expression issues, but this is not a First Amendment issue.

Roger Straus
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

I do not consider this a First Amendment matter—it is a matter of taste. Simon & Schuster was wrong for not rejecting it sooner, but they have every right to reject it.

I think it is sad that a publishing house like Knopf/Vintage, so distinguished in the past, should see fit to publish this book. Their motive escapes me, but it seems unusual that they are putting it out in a hurry, in paperback, at a cheap price in order to cash in on its notoriety and what we already know about its content.

Martin Garbus
Frankfurt, Garbus, Klein & Selz

There is no First Amendment to stop publishing houses from censoring books—the First Amendment only applies to state censorship. Under the Simon & Schuster contract, the publishing house can refuse to publish. But the larger question is whether publishing houses, because they are in the media business, have a larger obligation than merely contract law.

I think they do—one that recognizes they are profit-driven, but also recognizes that they nonetheless cannot stop books they don't like or feel are pornographic.

If they describe books that way, they may encourage prosecution of the books under obscenity laws—something local and federal prosecutors are itching to do.

Joyce Meskis
Tattered Cover Bookstore

There is a difference between selection and censorship. Publishers and booksellers have the First Amendment right to choose what to publish and what to sell. They select material based on the image they want to project. So it is the right of another publisher to seek to publish that unselected material and for the bookseller to sell it, as protected material, to the marketplace.

—CALVIN REID

of censorship going on here. Nor is the issue one of taste. What is involved here is a giant corporation responding to pre-publication controversy and strong-arming its publishing division into abandoning its own tradition of fearless publishing.

"What is also involved is the sanctity of a contract," Urban continued. "Publishing is a business dependent on contracts. Accept the principle that any publisher, author or agent can, at a whim, abrogate a contract and we are left with chaos."

Vintage was chosen, Urban said, because it could publish quickly and because

of Sonny Mehta and a "good, pre-existing relationship."

Mehta, president of Knopf and Vintage, published Ellis's first book, *Less Than Zero*, as a trade paperback original in England under the Picador imprint, which also published Ellis's second book, *Rules of Attraction*, after Mehta's departure for New York.

Of *American Psycho*, Mehta said, "It is a book with ambition, a book of serious intent." Of the debated sections, he said, "Think of Pasolini, of Genet. It's all a matter of taste and judgment."

Mehta also said that

American Psycho "struck me as being right for the Vintage Contemporary list, the sort of thing it was created to do. The book was in great danger of being prejudged and predigested without its audience having read it."

Asahina, even though he moved from S & S to the Summit imprint, had completed his editing of the book. Mehta, who said the book would be published in late February or early March, said he expected that "changes will be purely aesthetic, if there are any."

Ellis said, "Even before the cancellation, I would

have said Sonny Mehta is probably the smartest publisher in New York. He has instinct and taste—ironically. He has a very literary sensibility but also knows about the business of publishing books, in terms of getting books out there, in making reading exciting to people who might not usually buy books. He seems to have read everything, which is not completely rare in publishing but still is a surprise, especially in a president of a company. If Sonny had published my book in the first place, none of this would have come up."—MADALYNNE REUTER