

The Killing of a Gory Novel

But Ellis's 'American Psycho' rises again

The presses were set to roll last week on brat-pack novelist Bret Easton Ellis's third book, "American Psycho." Ellis, 26, had pocketed his \$300,000 advance from Simon & Schuster, and review copies were ready to go. The word of mouth was already out—and that was its problem. Some S&S staffers were appalled by Ellis's amorality tale of the Investment Banker from Hell—repulsive snob, obsessive fop and compulsive killer. They were revolted by the gory dismemberings and vivid sexual perversities sprinkled through its 366 pages. Spy magazine excerpted an account of the protagonist in the act of fellatio with a victim's severed head—prompting Richard Snyder, chairman of Simon & Schuster, to sit down and read the galleys, admittedly for the first time. A few days later the house announced it would halt publication. "'American Psycho,'" Snyder said, "is not a book that Simon & Schuster is willing to publish."

If Ellis had invented a screw, and a hardware company decided not to produce it, the world would have taken scant notice. But this was a book, a novel, automatically subject to the presumption that it might be another "Ulysses." No one in publishing circles could recall a major work of fiction being withdrawn so close to publication, except for legal reasons. Robert K. Massie, president of the Authors Guild, called the cancellation "a black day for American publishing." The controversy reached all the way to Martin Davis, chairman of Paramount Communications—Simon & Schuster's corporate parent—who was widely suspected of having ordered the book killed. Although Davis was consulted, both he and Snyder insisted the decision was Snyder's. Ellis's agent, Amanda Urban, warned that the unilateral abrogation of a contract could lead to "chaos." Of course, chaos can spell opportunity; she quickly sold the manuscript to another publisher, so that Ellis—and she—got paid twice.

Sacred temples: The episode raised two questions: was the book worth publishing? and was its cancellation a principled editorial decision—or the panicked response of rage-conscious philistines who have invaded the sacred temples of literature? Ever since he published his first novel

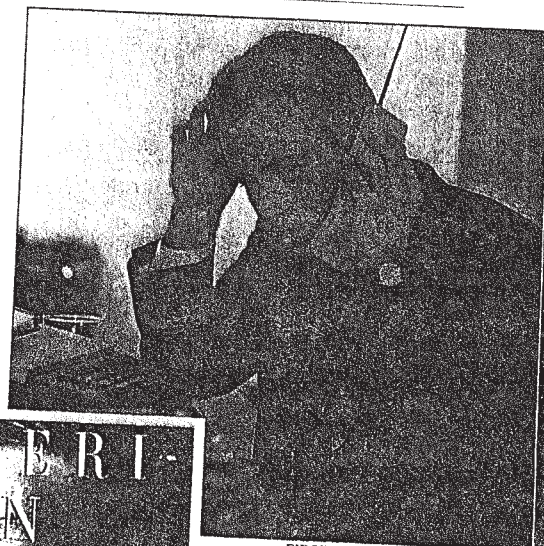


GERD LUDWIG—WOODFIN CAMP

when he was just 20, Ellis has had his detractors, and they were out in full force (although not so forceful as to be quoted by name) for "American Psycho." "Less Than Zero," published in 1985, explored in listless prose the world of rich, alienated California teenagers and made Ellis—together with Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz—one of the leaders of the Young Decadents school that attracted so much despair in the last decade. But his second book, "The Rules of Attraction," was a failure, and his critics charge that Ellis set out to shock his way back into the spotlight. What else, they ask, could account for passages like the one in which his hero ran battery cables to the breasts of a woman, "turning them brown." The next morning "the smell coming from her burnt corpse is jolting and I have to open the venetian blinds, which are spattered with burnt fat from when Christie's breasts burst apart electrocuting her..."

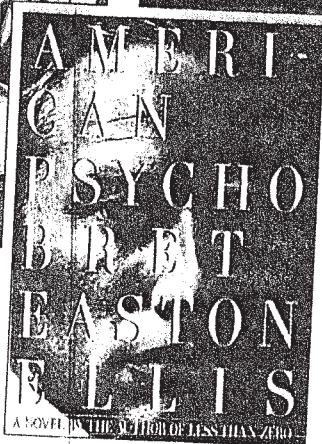
Ellis, of course, doesn't see it that way. He considers it "very clear there is a moral tone to the book [which] lies in the direction of the author abhorring this kind of behavior." His accounts of serial murder and torture—which by his count occupy only 10 percent of the book—were drawn from extensive research in the annals of criminology, "from Jack the Ripper to John Wayne Gacy." He says: "There were sequences that were very upsetting to write but at the same time they felt absolutely necessary. They felt real and honest and true to the spirit of the book."

And in Ellis's favor is the evidence of the marketplace. Vintage, the trade paperback imprint of prestigious Random House, snapped the book up quickly, and



FIROZ ZAHEDI—ONYX

Bloody shocking: Davis (above left) concurred with the decision not to publish; the author says the horror in his book 'is real and honest'



other editors such as Morgan Entrekin of Atlantic Monthly Press and Kent Carroll of Carroll & Graf said they would have as well. Ellis, said Vintage president Sonny Mehta, "is a significant writer writing in a documentary manner about a particular segment of American society. One may not necessarily like the book, but it does reflect something about our times."

Matter of taste: As for the ethics of canceling the book, Massie of the Authors Guild said this is just what everyone expected when big corporations took over independent publishers. Except in a sense it's just the opposite of what everyone expected: a big corporation walking away from a \$300,000 investment over a matter of taste. Granted the same company brought out "Friday the 13th," but Davis rejects the comparison. "Compared to this book," he says, "'Friday the 13th' would be endorsed by the Vatican." "We could publish this book today and exploit the hell out of it," he adds, "but that would be greed."

Greed! Who would dare to suggest that money plays a role in these calculations? Only Linda Marotta, the head buyer at a leading New York bookstore, Shakespeare & Co., who plans to order "American Psycho" "very big—definitely bigger than a week ago," she says. "This kind of attention just sells books like mad—whether people read them or not."

JERRY ADLER with CATHLEEN MCGUIGAN and SARAH CRICHTON