

Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?

By Roger Rosenblatt

AS a tale of contemporary foolishness, the story of the pre-publication, de-publication and re-publication of Bret Easton Ellis's novel "American Psycho" has just about everything. You might call it "delicious," unless you have read Mr. Ellis's novel.

Simon & Schuster was about to ship "American Psycho" to the bookstores when the novel's moronic and sadistic contents were revealed in Time and Spy magazines. The articles caught the attention of Richard E. Snyder, the chairman of Simon & Schuster, and Martin Davis, the chairman of Paramount Communications, which owns Simon & Schuster. Either Mr. Snyder or Mr. Davis, or both, decided that they did not want to publish Mr. Ellis's novel after all. An 11th-hour judgment at the top became a slap at Robert Asahina, the book's editor, and Charles Hayward, the president of Simon & Schuster's adult trade books division, who had accepted the novel. It also created a cause of sorts taken up by various voices in the book world.

Was Simon & Schuster acting cowardly or sensibly, if late? Was the megacompany Paramount exercising improper authority over its book enterprise? Should something like "American Psycho" be published by anyone any time anyway?

The last question was immediately answered by Sonny Mehta, the head of Vintage Books and Alfred A. Knopf, who rescued "American Psycho" on its fall from Simon & Schuster, assuming, reasonably, that the revolting publicity would bode well for sales. Or perhaps Mr. Mehta actually liked the book. That's something to consider, too.

So, what is "American Psycho"? Why are people saying such awful things about it? And what may we learn from this tale of our times?

"American Psycho" is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore. But that is unfair to sophomores. So pointless, so themeless, so everythingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it certainly would be the funniest.

Several times, in the middle of some childishly gruesome description of torture or dismemberment, I found myself chuckling with revulsion. Mr. Ellis quotes from "Notes From the Underground" in one of his epigraphs. I wondered: could this fellow really think that he, like Dostoyevsky, was being shockingly critical of the amorality of modern urban life? Why, yes! The rake.

Parental discretion is advised for the following paragraphs, but I have to give you a direct idea of the nonsense here.

Patrick Bateman (Batman? Norman Bates? Who cares?) is a Harvard graduate, 26 years old, is single, lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side, nurtures his appearance obsessively, frequents health clubs by day and restaurants by night and, in his spare time, plucks out the eyes of street beggars, slits the throats of children and does things to the bodies of women not unlike things that Mr. Ellis does

to prose. In the typescript I read lies the line: "Then she'll look over at Evelyn and I." Let's trust that Vintage will at least clean up the grammar when it publishes the book next month.

A designer serial killer, Bateman knows from Tumi leather attaché cases and wool-and-silk suits by Ermenegildo Zegna and wing tip shoes from Fratelli Rossetti and Mario Valentino Persian gloves and carambola sorbet and Ettore Sottsass push-button phones and business cards with "Sillan Rail lettering." (In case you can't tell, I'm out of my depth here.) He does have a way about him: "Oh,

wealthy, hair-slicked-back, narcissistic, decadent New York, of which, one only assumes, Mr. Ellis disapproves. It's a bit hard to tell what Mr. Ellis intends exactly, because he languishes so comfortably in the swamp he purports to condemn. Perhaps this is the tormenting ambivalence of his "twenty-something" generation, which he defined in The Times's Arts and Leisure section of Dec. 2. He wrote: "We are clueless yet wizened." Yes, that must be it.

Of course, you will be stunned to learn that the book goes nowhere. Characters do not exist, therefore do not develop. Bateman has no motivation for his madness — though there is one telling reference to his displeasure with a Waldorf salad. (My guess would be the urine.) No plot intrudes upon the pages. Bateman is never brought to justice, suggesting that even justice was bored. Nor is Mr. Ellis.

The novel may not be much as fiction or as social criticism, but its publishing history shows what a glorious nut box people can get in when they lose sight of what writing is supposed to be. Mr. Ellis got the process going with his lame and unhealthy imagination. The product of that imagination was then urged forward by his editors, who either did not read the book — a sin not unknown in a publishing era when it is more important to acquire a book than to edit it — or worse, did read the book and felt that it had something.

It does. What "American Psycho" has is the most comprehensive lists of baffling luxury items to be found outside airplane gift catalogues. I do not exaggerate when I say that in his way Mr. Ellis may be the most knowledgeable author in all of American literature. Whatever Melville knew about whaling, whatever Mark Twain knew about rivers are mere amateur stammerings compared with what Mr. Ellis knows about shampoo alone.

The Time and Spy articles caught the worthlessness of the book, and thus subsequently did Mr. Snyder and Mr. Davis. Quite rightly, they stopped the book cold. What then should follow as the night the day? Cries of "censorship," naturally, from the Authors Guild and other best-intentioned sorts who are understandably oversensitive to censorship threats

these days in an atmosphere poisoned by the malevolent ignorance of Jesse Helms and the cowardice of Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Even Helms & Company aren't wielding censorship. You remember censorship. Censorship is when a government burns your manuscript, smashes your presses and throws you in jail. When an artist is unable to get a government grant, it may be inconvenient, but censorship it ain't.

If a publishing house is not entitled to withdraw its own book, who is? As for the timing of Simon & Schuster's decision, better late than never.

Which brings us to the other cry of the misguided good guys. There was a loud to-do over whether Mr. Snyder acted on his own or on orders from Mr. Davis. The implication was that Big Corporation America (Paramount) is polluting the literary arts. Big Corporation America is rarely criticized by us writers when it deals out huge advances, only when it has something to say about what or how it wants to publish. When we sign our contracts, publishing is a business. When they are broken, it's an art.

The only person who polluted "American Psy-

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honey. The things I could do to your eyes with a coat hanger." He also drinks his own urine.

But his true inner satisfaction comes when he has a woman in his clutches and can entertain her with a nail gun or a power drill or Mace, or can cut off her head or chop off her arms or bite off her breasts or dispatch a starving rat up her vagina.

The context of these high jinks is young,

This story shows what a glorious nut box people can get in when they lose sight of what writing is supposed to be.

Roger Rosenblatt, the author of "Children of War," is a columnist for Life magazine and an essayist for "The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour."



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cho" (such a title) was Mr. Ellis. Let's say that the word to snuff the book did come from Martin Davis. Is Mr. Davis stripped of his responsibility to assert moral judgment simply because he owns the shop?

If Mr. Davis and Mr. Snyder went wrong, it was in waiting to find God in Time and Spy, and in paying too little attention to the book they were about to loose upon the world in the first place. They cannot be expected to read everything they put out, but they sure can be expected to remind their editors what goes and what doesn't.

Enter Mr. Mehta and Vintage Books, clearly as hungry for a killing as Patrick Bateman. The folks at Vintage seem to me to be the special scoundrels of our tale, whether they are being cynical and avaricious or merely tasteless and avaricious. Either way, they must have a mighty low opinion of the public's ability to distinguish between art that is meaningfully sensationalistic and junk. No one argues that a publishing house hasn't the right to print what it wants. We fight for that right. But not everything is a right. At some point, someone in authority somewhere has to look at Mr. Ellis's rat and call

the exterminator. (Will the Vintage people read that last sentence and reach for their copies of "Ulysses" and "Tropic of Cancer"? Or will they be honest enough to admit: "O.K. There's no civil liberties issue here. But there's plenty of dough"? You make the call.)

Finally, we come to ourselves,

Someone has to
look at Mr.
Ellis's rat and
call the
exterminator.

the muses of the story. It is our dough, after all, that everyone had in mind all along - Mr. Ellis, Simon & Schuster, Vintage Books. They saw us as lowlife and proceeded accordingly. Pause for introspection. Shall we prove them wrong? It would be sweet revenge if we refused to buy this book. Thumb through it, for the sake of normal prurience, but don't buy it.

That noact would give a nice ending to our tale. It would say that we are disgusted with the gratuitous degradation of human life, of women in particular. It would show that we can tell real books from the fakes. It would give the raspberry to the culture hustlers who, to their shame, will not say no to obvious rot. Standards, anyone? □

Authors' Queries

For a biography of the late Bruno Bettelheim, I would appreciate hearing from anyone with letters or anecdotes that shed light on his personality, his tenure as director of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School in Chicago (1944-73) and on any other aspects of his long career dealing with and writing about mentally disturbed children. I am also particularly interested in information about his years in Vienna before World War II, and his incarceration in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1938 and 1939.

RICHARD POLLAK
404 Riverside Drive
New York City 10025

For a book portraying America on the eve of World War II, I would appreciate hearing from anyone with memories, diaries or correspondence regarding those pre-Pearl Harbor days.

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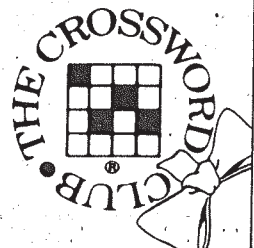
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