Esquire

SALLIE TISDALE: MY ORGASM, MYSELF

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The Case for Bret Easton Ellis

EVERY SEASON OR SO, there's a writer who serves the cause of literature best by being a sort of whipping boy, the kind of author for whom you can safely express contempt without having to read a single word of his or her work. The public flogging of such a figure has the almost sacramental effect of asserting that there are still *standards*, and that the generally fratricidal literary "community" even shares a few. Inevitably, this writer's books are neither as bad as their detractors (nearly everybody) would have you believe nor as good as the reflexive contrarians would claim. Often, the author has been the beneficiary of good looks, an infatuated media, and an overhyped first book that brought fame and riches. In the current literary ecology, this sets the writer up for the kill like a plump wildebeest separated from the herd.

Judging from the fusillade of hateful reviews recently fired at his narrative *The Informers* (Knopf), it's open season once again on just such a figure, the satanic baby-killer Bret Easton Ellis. The new book is "as cynical, shallow, and stupid as the people it depicts," sniffs *The New York Times*'s Michiko Kakutani in a consensus view. This isn't the first time that Ellis's fiction has been so warmly embraced. His last novel, *American Psycho*, proved so revolting that both Tammy Bruce of NOW and Roger Rosenblatt (the pit bull of the middlebrow) of *Life* tried to strangle it in its cradle. "Pointless," "themeless," and "everythingless," Rosenblatt hyperventilated in the *Times* months *before* the book was published. It's exhilarating to see books being taken so seriously, but is such bloviation merited? I mean, really: *everythingless?* Can Ellis's fiction possibly be that bad? That evil?

In the case of *American Psycho*, the answer is an unequivocal no. It's a horrifying but strong novel. It helped usher in the Golden Age of Dismemberment in American books and film, as evidenced by recent works by Quentin Tarantino, Oliver Stone, and Denis Cooper. The story of Patrick Bateman, a handsome clothes-and-hair-obsessed broker who also happens to be a serial killer, the novel is a comic, deeply misanthropic exercise in horror and transgression. (Ellis is Ann Beattie with a chain saw.) Despite Bateman's possessing the charisma of a robot, his looks and position assure that people will never discern his true nature, even though he is in the habit of blurting out in fancy restaurants such sentiments as "my need to engage in homicidal behavior on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected."

To transgress is, implicitly, to search for limits, and for Ellis and other writers of his ilk, violence constitutes a last-ditch attempt of characters to break through to deeper levels of feeling, to penetrate a vexation and boredom that conceals a nearly bottomless rage. In its flawed, gore-spattered, spoofy, sometimes dull, but unrepentant fashion, *American Psycho* equates the serial killer with the avid consumer. (One group shops till they drop, the other shoots till they drop.) Ellis is more catalog writer than poet; his language doesn't sing. But in his attempt to portray an all-American lethargy of soul, his book is far grander than the dainty, craft-ridden novels peeping up around it like daisies ringing a lightning-blasted tree. Indeed, if you accuse Ellis of anything, let it be naivete: It's hardly news that people are too swayed by glittering surfaces, not that it doesn't bear repeating from time to time. Beneath Ellis's fashionably black exterior beats the sweet, shy heart of a moralist.

Given the prissy, sanctimonious, downright hysterical reaction to *American Psycho* and *The Informers*, the temptation is to overpraise the new novel. Yet your first reaction to the book will likely be to hope that it represents Ellis's valedictory to the 1980s, because after the hard-to-stomach brilliance of *American Psycho*, *The Informers* marks time on familiar ground, the oft-satirized environs of Reagan-era Southern California, already depicted in Ellis's first work of fiction, *Less Than Zero*. The book features thirteen linked stories of betrayal and ennui and includes the standard affectless cast of space aliens, vampires, child killers, and—worse—movie people and USC frat boys. Reading *The Informers* after *American Psycho* feels a little like hanging out back at the mall after doing some hard time in the pen.

But like *American Psycho*, it's a far better book than Ellis is credited with. Kakutani complains about the shallow characters Ellis created, but please, give the guy a break! He's exaggerating the deficiencies of his frat dudes and Valley wastrels in the same way Flannery O'Connor distorted her Georgia rednecks into grotesques in order to make theological points. Ellis dreams up a Warholian nightmare in which everybody is absolutely deadpan, where the news of a murder or a mosquito bite is greeted with the same blasé equanimity. Everything is reminiscent of movies, TV. In one story, a son visits the site where his father died in a plane crash. A ranger there describes the father's corpse to him: "When I first saw it . . . it kind of looked to me like a . . . like a miniature hundred-and-ten-pound Darth Vader . . . yeah . . . like a little Darth Vader . . . from *Star Wars*, right?"

The novel is sequenced so that the stories progress from the banal to the horrific to—and I had to check this twice to make sure—the faintly hopeful, as the last two pieces pre-

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sent characters who display the nascent glimmerings of conscience. The soundtrack is the trash pop of the 1980s—Men Without Hats, A Flock of Seagulls. Of course, in *The Informers*, it's not just the songs that are disposable.

Nearly all the stories make that clear, perhaps none more so than "The Secrets of Summer," the vampire story that has already been much derided in the press as pricking the same bloody vein as *American Psycho*. The protagonist has a penchant for devouring raw steaks in movie theaters and for picking up Valley girls in local clubs. One night, he's sucking away on a date's neck, only to discover, to his chagrin, that she's high on heroin and that soon he will be, too. The bloodletting hardly dampens his partner's ardor, however. The next morning, our vampire finds a matchbook with the girl's phone number and a note: "Had a *wild* time," it reads.

Yes, the vampire symbolism is a tad obvious, but I'll take Ellis's bloodsuckers over Anne Rice's any day. They've got a better sense of humor. Indeed, what generally gets lost in all the harrumphing about Ellis's fiction is how deadpan, how slyly acerbic, he can be. "But aren't we, like, seeing each other or something?" the narrator of one sketch in *The Informers* asks his putative girlfriend. "I guess," she sighs. "We're together now. I'm eating a salad with you now."

As even that paragon of virtue and wilderness, Henry David Thoreau, wrote back in 1851, " 'Tis healthy to be sick sometimes." Ellis's fiction suggests that in a culture of spectacle (run, Juice, run), genuine feeling drains away, replaced by a ratlike craving for new sensations. We twitch uncontrollably, trapped in the big electronic web. In such a context, horror serves to shock us back to life. *American Psycho* and *The Informers* provoke rage partly because they appear guilty of the same behavior they lampoon, partly because they give us no comfort zone. Ellis rarely, if ever, allows his characters a moment of moral realization. That's the reader's job. His protagonists slink home after the gang bang, turn on MTV, and nod off on the couch. An evasive, befuddled maneuver to be sure, indicative of moral paralysis. We'd like to think we're better than that, and sometimes we are. But not always. People may not like hearing that, but as Ellis won't let us forget, it's the truth. ■

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