



## Ellis, Bret Easton (b. 1964)

by Steven Cordova

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Bret Easton Ellis is widely regarded as perhaps the most accomplished of the "Generation X" writers, that is, those writers born between 1960 and 1965 who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as the voices of a generation separate from the "baby boomers." Although he describes himself as a moralist, many critics have tagged him as a nihilist. His works are distinguished by transgressive themes, a fascination with popular culture, and a spare but resonant prose style.



Brett Easton Ellis.  
Photograph by Ian Gittler.  
Photo courtesy Vintage and Anchor Books.

Ellis has long acknowledged having had gay sex, but for most of his career he unequivocally claimed he was not gay. Then, in 2005, he began to discuss having had a six-year relationship with a man ten years his junior who died tragically young.

Ellis's fiction roughly mirrors his biography. His first four novels and one book of short stories are filled with sexually ambiguous characters. Then, in *Lunar Park* (2005), Ellis himself appears as a character, a middle-aged writer, who, just before the novel ends, begins a relationship with a younger man.

Ellis bears comparison to other queer authors who use semi-autobiography in their fiction; and queer authors who, because of their use of explicit sex, graphic violence, and metafictional techniques, are largely viewed as provocateurs who challenge novelistic conventions and traditional notions of "good taste."

Ellis was born on March 7, 1964 in Sherman Oaks, California, an affluent suburb of Los Angeles. His father was a wealthy property developer. His mother introduced him to the work of Ernest Hemingway, whose spare reportorial prose Ellis would emulate in his early novels. Ellis's relationship with his now-deceased father, who drank and continued to impose his presence on his ex-wife and three children even after a separation and divorce in 1982, was difficult.

Ellis took to writing as a boy, and finished a draft of his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, by the time he graduated from high school though it was not published until 1985, when he was a junior in college.

At eighteen, the author decided to distance himself, at least geographically, from his father's obsession with status. Ellis enrolled in Bennington College in Vermont where he fell in with an artistic crowd and received a B. A. in 1986. Ellis says that for him moving East meant finding culture.

### ***Less Than Zero***

*Less Than Zero* is a short coming-of-age novel narrated by Clayton, a sexually ambiguous eighteen-year-old student at Camden, a fictional college on the East Coast. As the novel opens, Clayton returns to a Los Angeles suburb for Christmas break only to find the same aimlessness and dysfunction he left home to escape. His fellow characters--young and old, parents and children--exist in a perpetual state of alienation fueled as much by materialism as by drugs and alcohol.

Clayton reveals his sexual ambiguity early in the novel when, though he is half-heartedly attempting to resume a relationship with his high-school sweetheart, he leaves a party with a young man. The next morning Clayton tells himself "it really wasn't that bad," but whether he is referring to his one-night stand with the young man or other events that took place the night before remains unclear.

*Less Than Zero* was a runaway success and established twenty-one-year-old Ellis as a literary phenomenon, a J. D. Salinger for the Reagan years, and the most successful member of a literary brat pack that included Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz.

### ***The Rules of Attraction***

*The Rules of Attraction* (1987) is also set at Camden and is narrated by a chorus of major and minor characters. In the opening pages of the novel, Victor, a primarily straight minor character, tells us how he masturbates another man in exchange for lodging while traveling across Europe. Paul, a major character, lusts for Sean Bateman, whom he claims to have slept with. Bateman, on the other hand, never admits as much.

While not as commercially successful as *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction* fortified Ellis's reputation as a nihilistic authorial presence who reports action but seldom comments on it.

Sex and drug abuse among the characters in *The Rules of Attraction* begins to defy realism. As Ellis's career progresses, heavy drinking and drug abuse become signature characteristics of his writing, as do violence and impossibly pristine settings in which beautiful characters wear expensive clothes.

### ***American Psycho***

With *American Psycho* (1991), Ellis's reputation took a turn toward notoriety. *American Psycho* is Ellis's first full-length novel and is narrated by Patrick Bateman (brother of Sean Bateman from *The Rules of Attraction*).

Patrick, a handsome yuppie who works on Wall Street, claims to have blinded a homeless black man and ruthlessly killed several women, a Chinese delivery boy, a fellow worker he envies, a boy, and a SharPei-walking "faggot" in Central Park. But it is never clear whether Bateman really harms anyone. Ellis provides narrative clues that leave the reader with the strong suspicion that Bateman may be deluded by his own greed and vanity.

Ellis even provides hints that Bateman may be gay. In a chapter entitled "Confronted by a Faggot," Ellis rejects Luis Carruthers, a coworker who is in love with him, while they are shopping at Barney's. But rather than rejecting Carruthers on the grounds that he is not gay, Bateman says, "I . . . don't"--I look around the store quickly to make sure no one is listening; he reaches for my knee, I brush his hand away--"find you . . . sexually attractive."

In "Health Club," Patrick objectifies himself through another man's eyes. "I should probably be stretching first but if I do that I'll have to wait in line--already some faggot is behind me, probably checking out my back, ass, leg muscles."

And in "Harry's," when Bateman denounces the anti-Semitic remarks of a coworker at Harry's restaurant, Bateman's best friend, Tim Price, calls him "The voice of reason" and "The boy next door." When Bateman challenges the epithets, remarking, "Yeah, a boy next door who, according to you let a British corporate financial analyst intern sodomize him up the ass," Price responds: "I said you were the voice of reason. I didn't say you weren't a homosexual."

*American Psycho* condemns male vanity and competitiveness, and illustrates how so much in American life--shopping, sex, violence--is flattened out into more or less the same experience. But it was widely misread as misogynist, racist, and homophobic.

Simon & Schuster, which paid Ellis a \$300,000 advance when it contracted to publish the novel, finally decided not to issue it. *American Psycho* was published by Vintage instead. A chapter of the National Organization of Women called for a boycott and the novel was frequently denounced as politically incorrect. But it is increasingly recognized as an example of transgressive art and has attracted a cult following.

### **Film Adaptations**

*Less Than Zero*, *The Rules of Attraction*, and *American Psycho* have been adapted for the screen. In interviews, Ellis is respectfully restrained when commenting on Marek Kaniévski's watered-down adaptation of *Less Than Zero* (1987) in which Clayton is made a more palatable hero. (In the novel, the only heroic thing Clayton does is leave Los Angeles.) Ellis is more receptive to Mary Harron's screen version of *American Psycho* (2000) and is enthusiastic about Roger Avary's *The Rules of Attraction* (2002).

The film version of *American Psycho*, which starred art house actor and sex symbol Christian Bale, has achieved such cult status that in 2005 Reel Toys released a Patrick Bateman action figure complete with briefcase, axe, knives, nail gun, etc.

Gerald Fox's documentary *This Is Not an Exit: The Fictional World of Bret Easton Ellis* (2000) features poorly-acted dramatizations of scenes from Ellis's first four novels and interviews with Ellis and his teachers. In these interviews, Ellis is generally affable and articulate, and especially earnest in defending *American Psycho*. He appears with his mother, with whom he maintains close ties, as he does with his two sisters.

### **The Informers**

*The Informers* (1994) is a collection of short stories loosely linked to each other and with Ellis's previous works. Characters from *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* make cameo appearances, and we are introduced to several new queer characters.

In "Bruce Calls from Camden," Bruce and an unnamed female narrator in Los Angeles communicate only by phone. They seem to be having a relationship of their own, but Bruce nevertheless details his affairs with another woman and another man.

In "In the Islands," characters around a dinner table discuss Julian, the drug-dealing male hustler who is Clayton's best friend in *Less Than Zero*.

As in *The Rules of Attraction*, in these stories Ellis shows that he is comfortable writing in women's voices. Ellis's women are often "young, tan and blond" and have copious amounts of sex, but sometimes they are older women who are perpetually stoned and have copious amounts of sex--or at least fantasies of sex--with younger men. These older women appear so often in Ellis's work that the reader begins to wonder if they may be extensions of his own amorous fantasies.

### **Glamorama**

Like most of Ellis's novels, *Glamorama* (1998) is narrated by an unreliable hero, in this case Victor, a male model and minor celebrity who claims that, in the midst of moonlighting as a nightclub entrepreneur in New York, he was captured by a ring of terrorists who are ex-models. Ellis's descriptions of sex and drug

abuse reach a fever pitch in *Glamorama*. The reader wonders whether Victor's tales may be delusional.

Ellis's use of violence has also escalated. However, with Victor's capturers bombing European public transportation hubs, the violence has taken on a wider philosophical and perhaps even prescient aspect.

*Glamorama* is also marked by wit, humor, and satire. Indeed, Ellis uses his skill with humorous dialogue and maxims to make apparent his moral point of view.

For example, Victor's outlook on life is stated in maxim-like dialogue, as when he remarks, "The better you look, baby, the more you see" and "being semi-famous is in itself difficult." His girlfriend Chloe's retorts are similarly aphoristic: "Everything you know is wrong" and "A mirror's your ideal mate."

Although the major characters are not easily identified with real people, famous people make cameo appearances in *Glamorama*. Since Ellis himself is a "celebrity author" known for the company he keeps, *Glamorama* might be regarded as the author's betrayal of his own celebrity world. It remains an underrated novel, but it has recently gained critical appreciation.

### **Lunar Park**

*Lunar Park* (2005) is Ellis's most personal and most playful work. Bret Easton Ellis, a middle-aged writer, narrates it, but his word can no more be relied upon than Patrick Bateman's in *American Psycho* or Victor's in *Glamorama*.

Ellis, the character in *Lunar Park*, lives in a wealthy suburb where children's behavior is controlled by psychiatric drugs in a fashion similar to the way wives are controlled by technology in Ira Levin's suburban gothic *The Stepford Wives*. Ellis has married Jane, a model turned actress, largely because they had a son together, a fact that she has only recently brought to his attention. In addition, Ellis is being haunted by the ghost of his dead father, who may also manifest himself as Patrick Bateman and other horrific creatures. Ellis may, however, simply be deluded because of his prodigious drug and alcohol intake or because he is solipsistic in the extreme.

Ellis the author may imagine himself married with children in *Lunar Park* in order to explore once again his familiar theme of the fractured family. Ellis, the character in *Lunar Park*, disrupts his family so greatly that his wife and children eventually reject him. Only then does he realize, "I needed to be in that house. I needed to be a participant. I needed to be grounded in the life of the family that lived there."

In musing about the son Robby, Ellis the character observes, "[I]t bothered me that so little of his life revolved around poetry or romance. Everything was grounded in the dull and anxious day-to-day. Everything was a performance." Ellis the author could as easily be writing about his real or his imagined father, himself, or a future imagined self.

### **Conclusion**

An indiscriminate purveyor of culture, Ellis mines high as well as popular culture. Moreover, he places his work within various literary traditions: *Less Than Zero* recalls J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*; much of *The Rules of Attraction* and *The Informers* is written in epistolary or diaristic form; *The Informers* is an homage to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*; entire chapters of *American Psycho* are mock album reviews, while others appropriate the language and tropes of advertising and pornography; *Glamorama* is a picaresque; *Lunar Park* refers meaningfully to *Hamlet*.

Ellis's use of language is especially skillful. Julian Murphet, in his excellent *American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*, makes much of Ellis's stylistic use of *parataxis* (the refusal of the prose to form complex sentences) and *reification* (the transformation of relationships between human beings into relationships between things).

What Murphet and others do not say is that Ellis also incorporates the language of advertising for its sounds (like the crisp sound "silk-crepe ties" makes when read aloud), the way a poet appropriates language. Ellis has said that he is an avid reader of poetry, an influence apparent in his trademark, long passages of dialogue that are heavily reliant on poetic rhythm.

Put another way, Ellis is at once a minimalist and a stylist. He emulates both the spareness of Hemingway and Joan Didion, on the one hand, and the more poetic, mannered style of Truman Capote and the New Journalists, on the other.

Ellis is far more of a satirist than, say, Edmund White or Andrew Holleran, but like those gay authors he relies on semi-autobiographical subject matter. As AIDS, death, and grief figure in their work, so they do in Ellis's as well. The word AIDS appears three times in the first three pages of *American Psycho*, and, later, in a graphic sex scene, Bateman and a woman negotiate the proper use of a condom.

Ellis also bears comparison to transgressive queer authors such as Jean Genet, William Burroughs, James Purdy, and Dennis Cooper in his use of pastiche, fantasy, and hallucinatory narratives.

Ellis's lover, sculptor Michael Wade Kaplan (who appears as Mike Graves in *Lunar Park*), died in January 2004 of heart failure after a night Ellis describes as a "blow-out" to celebrate Kaplan's thirtieth birthday. Ellis recently told *The New York Times* that he believes that Kaplan's death has contributed "a new layer of wistfulness and melancholy" to his writing, as manifested in *Lunar Park*.

This layer of melancholy represents a new development in Ellis's style and approach. It may help to attract readers who have been reluctant to embrace him because of his alleged lack of political correctness.

[Ellis's lack of political correctness came to the fore in 2011 and 2012 in a series of publicity-seeking tweets and statements that revealed an ugliness to his character, as well as a degree of self-loathing and homophobia.

In April 2011, Ellis said that watching popular actor Chris Colfer on *Glee* made him feel "like I had suddenly come down with the hivs."

In March 2012, Ellis described the trial of Dharun Ravi as "a witch hunt." Ravi was being prosecuted for his role in the September 2010 suicide of Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi.

In August 2012, Ellis tweeted that gay actor Matt Bomer, because he is out, was wrong for the part of Christian Grey in the film adaptation of the novel *50 Shades of Grey*.

In September 2012, Ellis came to the defense of hotel heiress Paris Hilton who was overheard saying that gay men who use grindr are "disgusting" and "probably have AIDS." Although Hilton promptly apologized, Ellis tweeted, "As someone who has used Grindr? Paris Hilton isn't that far off."

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## About the Author

**Steven Cordova** is a poet who was born and raised in San Antonio and lives in Brooklyn. His poems have appeared in *Calaloo*, *The Journal*, and *Northwest Review*, among other journals, as well as in the anthologies *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000) and *Expanding Borders: The New Latino Poetry*. His chapbook, *Slow Dissolve*, appeared in 2003 from Momotombo Press.