



BRET EASTON ELLIS

AMERICAN AUTHOR, 1985-PRESENT

AS REVERED BY HIS FANS THROUGH HIS CAREER AS HE HAS BEEN REVILED BY CRITICS, **BRET EASTON ELLIS** THE MAN AND 'BRET EASTON ELLIS' THE BRAND ARE TWO DIFFERENT PROPOSITIONS ENTIRELY. AND THOUGH HE'S SUBTLY EVOLVED AS A WRITER SINCE *LESS THAN ZERO* SHOCKED THE LITERARY WORLD IN 1985, HIS STYLE HAS REMAINED REMARKABLY CONSTANT THROUGH A CAREER WHICH IN 2010 SEES HIM REVISIT THE PROTAGONISTS OF HIS DEBUT NOVEL. **KRIS SWALES** QUIZZES THE CANDID AUTHOR ABOUT THE MAN BEHIND THE BRAND AND *IMPERIAL BEDROOMS*.

First impressions of Bret Easton Ellis can be deceiving. As he enters the foyer of Sydney's Blue Hotel he seems slightly on edge, constantly scanning his surroundings, his body in perpetual motion. He's still recovering from a reading and signing at the Oxford Art Factory that saw the venue as packed as it ever has been and Easton Ellis signing autographs into the early hours of the morning, and the spotlight and adulation clearly doesn't sit well with a man who does his best work alone. Easton Ellis was thrust into the spotlight as a 21-year-old when his debut novel *Less Than Zero*, about the nihilistic life and times of a group of Los Angeles teens mindlessly making their way from one party to the next, became an instant hit on publication in 1985. *The Rules Of Attraction* followed in 1987, and then came 1991's *American Psycho*, a satirical account of a 1980s Wall Street banker with questionable music taste who may or not be a serial killer. It was released amidst a storm of controversy, became a word of mouth hit as one reader passed it surreptitiously to the next, and assured each subsequent effort from Easton Ellis (1998's *Glamorama*, 2005's *Lunar Park* and the 1994 short story collection *The Informers*) was eagerly awaited by not just his dedicated fan base, but detractors with their

knives out ready to strike.

Now Easton Ellis is back on the road promoting *Imperial Bedrooms*, a return visit to the life of *Less Than Zero*'s Clay (25 years on and now a successful screenwriter) and his associates Blair and Julian. It's another wild ride through Ellis' incredibly detailed and nuanced literary world – a place you get the

feeling Easton Ellis would much rather inhabit than the slightly surreal public appearances he has to endure to spread its message to the world. "I got the ennui," Easton Ellis, who becomes warmer and more comfortable as the conversation progresses, says of the aftermath of his Sydney appearance. "E-N-N-U-I. It's French for depression. John Mayer has tweeted about this a lot – 'I'm in my hotel room, 2am, Denver, great show tonight, 30,000 people. Alone. Eating a sandwich now.' It's such a weird disconnect, to feel this rush of... I'm not going to call it love, but adulation, all of these people coming up to you with smiles on their faces and their hands out going, 'oh man, you changed my life, your book is the most amazing fucking book ever'. And it goes on – we started at 9.30 and I was still going at midnight, two and a half

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hours of signing books. You're whisked into a car with nowhere to go, your PR person's got kids so she's gotta get home – I don't want to talk to a single person.

"I'm in a relationship right now – I couldn't even deal with them, I didn't even text, I didn't want to do anything. You get back to the hotel room [his voice quietens], you open the mini bar and you make yourself a drink, you sit there in the dark and you have a smoke and you stare out over the [Sydney] Harbour. And you think about the disconnect. And this has happened before. And it's a princely problem in a way – it's not like you have cancer. Things could be a fuck of a lot worse."

DO YOU GET THE SAME COMEDOWN ONCE YOU'VE FINISHED WRITING A BOOK?

"I don't get postpartum depression when I finish a book. I'm happy when I finish a book."

DO YOU FEEL HAPPY ABOUT IMPERIAL BEDROOMS?

"No, I don't feel happy about *Imperial Bedrooms* – I don't really feel happy about any book when it's published. The whole process for me is about the writing of my book, about being in my office and fooling around with it and the pleasure I get from moving things round and re-writing things and thinking 'that would sound better this way' or 'let me edit that line of dialogue'. And I've read the book 50,000 times. There comes a moment on a reading of a book and it happens at the end when a copy comes back from the publishing house when it makes absolutely no sense – it's just words on a page. And then it's published, and it's put within these hard covers, and I can't even look at it."

DO ALL OF YOUR BOOKS MAKE SENSE TO YOU?

"[Said slowly and conspiratorially] It depends on what you are looking for. If you're looking for logic, if you're looking for a through way, then you might be lost a little bit. If you're just going with the experience, falling into it, then I don't know. It is true – I have fans, and I have detractors. I can't tell you how many times at a signing people come up to me with a copy of *Glamorama* and say, 'this is my favourite book'. And how many people go, 'I love all of your books – couldn't get through *Glamorama*'. They're mysteries. The answer to the mystery is always a letdown. But mysteries are intriguing, and not knowing the full truth about something is intriguing as well. But I just like the poetry of *Glamorama*. I like the humour of it and the shock effect of a lot of it, and I like Victor Ward ultimately. He starts off being a bit of a douchebag, but by the end I feel bad for him because he's just trying to make it. That was a big book for me to write, because so much of its inception came about with the idea of myself being replaced by 'Bret Easton Ellis' and my grappling with that. I was thinking about *Glamorama* in 1989, so I was thinking about this four years after *Less Than Zero* came out and

'Bret Easton Ellis' became this thing. And Bret, the guy who just jokes around with his friends and goes to the movies and drinks beer in the backyard or whatever – gone. That person will never be known to the rest of the world. 'Bret Easton Ellis' has a set of associations to it that is a brand – nightlife, young, rich, cool, drugs, paranoia, violence, freak outs. I am interested in that in my fiction – if you saw how boring my real life was, your mind would reel. So that is where *Glamorama* came from."

WHEN HE WAS IN AUSTRALIA RECENTLY KEVIN SMITH SAID THAT THE KEVIN SMITH OF CLERKS, CHASING AMY, MALLRATS DOESN'T EXIST ANY MORE – DO YOU SILL IDENTIFY WITH YOUR 'BRAND'?

"I totally agree with him on one point – the Bret Easton Ellis of *Less Than Zero*, *The Rules Of Attraction*, of *American Psycho* – gone. *Glamorama* – gone. *Lunar Park* – gone. You evolve and you keep moving forward, other things interest you, other ideas for books or how to approach books, or maybe it's not even books – film or TV or other things are interesting too. And I also cannot keep up that literary persona that I was trying to keep up when I was younger – it's inauthentic, and I can't keep it up any longer."

THE ESSAYS ABOUT THE CAREERS OF GENESIS, HUEY LEWIS & THE NEWS AND WHITNEY HOUSTON IN AMERICAN PSYCHO – WAS THAT BATEMAN, OR WAS THAT YOU?

"That was totally Bateman. I like to give the books over to the narrators, and the narrators often have taste in music that I don't have. I have a big taste in music right now, yet in *Imperial Bedrooms* I didn't think Clay really would, and he even misquotes a [The] National lyric in the course of the book which I thought was telling. They're one of my favourite bands right now, they're all I'm listening to. But Patrick Bateman liked those artists very, very much. It wouldn't have really made any sense to me to write four pages on The Replacements which is a band that I love, because Patrick Bateman wouldn't know who The Replacements were. But I figured out who this guy was and what his tastes were and what his apartment was like and what girls he liked and what was important to him, and then when I realised what his musical taste was those three acts fell into place for that period, for that time. It makes sense."

YOU'VE GONE THROUGH YOUR CAREER BEING REVILED, AND NOW YOU'RE, IF NOT ESTABLISHMENT, THEN AT LEAST ACCEPTED – DOES THAT SIT UNEASILY WITH YOU?

"I think I have entered into the establishment, yes I have. I don't care one way or the other, it doesn't matter to me. It never mattered that I was controversial, it never mattered that I'm part of the establishment. That's again talking about 'Bret Easton Ellis', we're not talking about the guy who sits in his office or hangs out with his friends. My concerns on a daily level they really aren't about this, they're not worried about whether I am too accepted or not accepted enough or if I'm reviled or whatever."

IMPERIAL BEDROOMS

IN IMPERIAL BEDROOMS YOU'VE COME BACK AND REVISITED CHARACTERS WHO ESTABLISHED YOU. WAS IT HARD TO GET BACK INTO THE HEADSPACE?

"I wouldn't do it if it was hard to get into the headspace – it's not a matter of it being difficult or easy or anything, it just happened. It was just, 'oh, Clay is in my head right now, and why is he in my head?'. And I started a conversation and the conversation becomes notes and the notes become a portrait of a character, and then through that character, if this is the narrative of the character then this is going to be the story. That's how the process works – it's just an emotional, organic process."

YOUR PAST TWO BOOKS HAVE ATTACHED YOUR STYLE TO A PARTICULAR GENRE – GLAMORAMA WAS AN ACTION THRILLER, LUNAR PARK WAS A STEPHEN KING HORROR STORY. IS IMPERIAL BEDROOMS YOUR BOLD AND THE BEAUTIFUL -ESQUE POTBOILER?

"It's my screenwriter novel. When I sat down I was thinking about this novel, and how it was going to be written and what it was going to be about, I imagined it like a screenplay – one of Clay's screenplays. He writes big studio movies, so I thought, 'okay, I'm in the mind of a screenwriter, so how is he going to narrate the novel?'. Well, he's not going to narrate it like Patrick Bateman – he's not Patrick Bateman, and he's definitely not Victor Ward who's like a motormouth who goes on and on and on. And he's certainly not the Bret Easton Ellis of *Lunar Park* – the style of writing of *Lunar Park* is basically how I write emails and talk to friends, very much in my conversational mode. Then when I was getting back to Clay, I wanted to get back to minimalism because I hadn't written that way in 20 years. So I was like, 'what is his story, and how is he going to tell this story, and what are the elements that Clay is going to do this in?'. So yes, the pulpiness of it, the noirish aspects, the soapy elements, the way it's even written in short expository conversations all come from the mind of a screenwriter. They're short scenes, cinematic, with very over-the-top dialogue between people, the shadowy figures, the femme fatale, the lies, the reveals – in my mind there's an Act I, and Act II and an Act III to the book."

IF THIS IS A SCREENWRITER NOVEL, IS IT WRITTEN WITH A SCREENPLAY IN MIND?

"No no no no no, not at all. I doubt this will ever become a film. It's in development, but that that doesn't mean it will become a movie – IMDB is not to be trusted. There are so many projects on that, I don't think a lot of them exist. But *Imperial Bedrooms*, I don't know what will happen with that."

WHO: Bret Easton Ellis

WHAT: *Imperial Bedrooms* (Pan MacMillan)